For What Do We Cheer? Taking Stands and the Study of Social Movements

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Once, when I was lecturing at a bookstore, a political scientist in the audience asked why researchers typically sympathize with the movements that they study. In his opinion, scholars should be emotionally detached from, if not critical of, the political phenomenon that they investigate. I responded by arguing that the criticism was based on an exaggerated claim: from the end of World War II until the early 1970s, many scholars in the United States decried social-movement politics.[[1]](#footnote-1) Still, my colleague’s observation merits reflection because it contains a kernel of truth. Since the late 1970s, most students of social movements have implicitly or explicitly shown sympathy toward the movements that they study.

My first inkling of this tendency occurred during a 1992 social-movement conference at the University of California, San Diego. The featured speaker at one of the plenary sessions was a political sociologist. Before describing the evolutionary stages of a protest in New York City, he stated that we researchers obviously side with the movements that we studied. Otherwise, he reasoned, we would not invest our limited time and energies to study the disruptive political actions of everyday people, a topic that seldom yields significant external funding or leads (at that time) to publications in top disciplinary journals. Neutrality, he declared, is anathema to our intellectual outlook. The speaker’s remarks were met with numerous appreciative smiles and nods of approval. At a subsequent break-out panel, the moderator, who was a political scientist, made a similar declaration about the political allegiances of social-movement scholars. Once again, the audience and the panel participants expressed their agreement through smiles, nods, and other types of body language.

 The conference, sponsored in part by the American Sociological Association, may not have been representative of all currents of present-day social-movement research. Clearly, some scholars (especially in the subfield of terrorist studies) today disapprove of the movements they study. Typically, such movements condone violence against unarmed people, are religiously inspired, or promulgate a reactionary ideology. Authors of such works often mention that dangerous movements merit analysis because of the threats they pose other movements that the authors consider defensible and desirable. Such “know-thy-enemy” research does not necessarily contradict the sentiments being expressed at the conference in California because today’s “critical” scholars seldom denounce movement politics in general. They, instead, sympathize with a particular range of movement politics and, in some cases, even hope that activists in healthier movements will be able to use the research on dangerous ones.[[2]](#footnote-2)

My own position is one of ambivalence. Part of me applauds the sympathy that permeates most contemporary social-movement research. Perhaps because I repeatedly read C. Wright Mills’ *The Power Elite* and *The Sociological Imagination* in college and graduate school, I often fret about political, economic, and cultural pressures towards deference, conformity, and excessive self-control. I therefore admire most movements and movement activists, in part because they manifest a spirit of independence and defiance that, according to Mills, may one day disappear. I nonetheless feel ambivalent because, as Freudians like to point out, seemingly innocent expressions of sympathy may disguise more problematic worries and desires that merit investigation.[[3]](#footnote-3)

To clarify the sources of my ambivalence and to suggest alternative ways that I and other scholars who study social movements might channel our political enthusiasms, I will draw upon Friedrich Nietzsche’s reflections on the values and dangers of different “useful” types of history. This will lead me to note some risks to the moral positions common in social-movement research today. It also will lead me to notice some constraints that the discipline of political science places upon social-movement researchers.

Prior to the discussion of Nietzsche and history, I will distinguish a few common moral orientations that characterize social-movement research today. In characterizing these orientations, I will not apply classic typologies of ethical reasoning (for example, Kantian deontological reasoning versus modern utilitarian reasoning) by academic philosophers, such as William Frankena, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Henry Sidgwick.[[4]](#footnote-4) Nor will I mechanically employ standard typologies from sociologists in the 1980s that reported three successive waves of social-movement theorizing, often dubbed “system-strain” theories, “political-process” theories, and “identity-formation” theories.[[5]](#footnote-5) Instead, I will present my own account of moral outlooks through a more inductive reading of post-World War II social-movement literatures across multiple disciplines. My classification will be informed, of course, by classificatory traditions in philosophy and social-movement literature (one cannot escape one’s cultural milieu); but it also will arise from a conscious attempt to look at writings afresh and at their moral orientations as surprising.[[6]](#footnote-6)

1. Three Types of Ethical Orientation in Social-Movement Research

As I look over the various scholarly writings on social movements that have appeared in the United States over the past four decades, I discern at three basic types of moral commitments. First, some scholars want to help historically marginalized populations obtain a larger voice in government policy making and to be heard by state elites. I dub this group of social-movement scholars “democratic-advancement theorists” as they wish to increase the quality and amount of democratic participation in all existing states, including so-called polyarchies.[[7]](#footnote-7) Second, there are scholars who find the distribution of goods, honors, and life chances within societies to be profoundly unjust and who study social movements in the hope of one day redistributing material and non-material goods (shelter, food, health care, education, and so on) among classes, sexes, ethnic groups, legal and illegal residents, and other analytic divisions within society. For these writers, movements acquire their importance primarily from their potential ability to reduce and eliminate undeserved inequality, not from their ability to increase a group’s access to government policy-making. I call this set of researchers “social-justice theorists.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Finally, some scholars study movements because their apparent effects on beliefs, interests, desires, and outlooks of onlookers. Movements, according to these writers, can increase the political imagination, stir the political passion, and intensify the political interest of both movement participants and the public at large. I call researchers who engage in this type of research “cultural-transformation theorists.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

The categorization of three moral goals – democratic advancement, social justice, and cultural transformation – is a first approximation and should not be used to pigeonhole scholars partly because some scholars are driven by multiple ethical impulses. The late-Charles Tilly, of course, seems to have been almost exclusively a democratic-advancement theorist throughout his career. But Robin Kelly, Michael Denning, and Temma Kaplan oscillate between social-justice and cultural-transformation goals in most of their writings.

It is important to remember that this initial classification is an attempt to characterize scholarly orientations only. It does not refer to the ways that movement participants view themselves. Arguably, classifying moral outlooks among movements is a more challenging task, because many movements are organizationally decentralized and ideologically motley, as the sociological pioneer Luther Gerlach noted nearly a half century ago.[[10]](#footnote-10) Because of their internal heterogeneity, movements can interest researchers inspired by almost any of the three types of moral orientation. The Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), for example, included activists who wished to increase the political rights of a broad swath of non-rich US residents – a goal which obviously would interest democratic-advancement scholars. But there were other activists, especially in the Midwest, whose primary goal was to redistribute economic power within the country; and still other SDSers who were, first and foremost, proponents of workplace democracy and other forms of participatory decision-making that could offset the mind-numbing habits of America’s consumerist and bureaucratic culture.[[11]](#footnote-11)

But differentiating the goals motivating social-movement scholarship is merely a first approximation of scholars’ moral reasoning. Each moral orientation is far more than an abstract principle. Each orientation is rooted in a broader world view; it both reflects and reinforces a scholar’s often unexamined presumptions about political possibility and about the working of modern society. Phrased differently, each moral orientation is a component of an intellectual syndrome, because the orientation is embedded that web of interconnected beliefs structures thinking and guides the analyst. The following synopses highlight distinctive characteristics of each syndrome.

* Vision of Democratic-Advancement Theorists

Most scholars who engage in democratic-advancement research do not prejudge specific movement tactics – say, local boycotts or building occupations or noisy street marches – as beyond the pale. Instead, they judge tactics instrumentally, in terms of their effectiveness in increasing a population’s clout within government. So long as a movement’s activities help the wishes of a previously ignored population acquire greater weight in the thinking of government leaders, the movement (in these scholars’ opinion) has been successful and merits commendation.

Most democratic-advancement theorists conclude, nonetheless, that movements should not behave too militantly or talk too belligerently in either pluralist or authoritarian states. They, instead, should cultivate allies within the political system and should formulate demands in a manner that does not offend or alienate the public at large. Moderation has its place in movement politics, for there are openings in the political system and potential friends in civil society that can help a movement achieve its aims. Therefore a new movement, desiring to increase its voice in conventional politics, should shrewdly combine unauthorized forms of action (such as occasional disruptions of public ceremonies) with normal types of politicking within existing political institutions and with rhetoric that resonates with the citizenry at large.

Not surprisingly, scholars with this moral outlook often foreground the political context of a movement – in particular, the state’s constitutional arrangements and the feuding within the government’s elite. Such political circumstances (democratic-advancement theorists argue) determine what tactics will work and what actions will prove futile or counter-productive. The societal origins of deprivation and grievances are secondary themes in terms of understanding movement politics. The governmental process is the center of attention.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Critics of this type of analysis sometimes insist that democratic-advancement theorists neglect “agency” in their representations of reality.[[13]](#footnote-13) Allegedly, they focus only on objective opportunities that the political environment poses and to which movements respond. Critics say that this institutional focus elides the amount of creativity on the part of movement activists and the amount of tactical and cultural innovation that movement politics entails.

The accusation of deterministic thinking is difficult to sustain, however. Democratic-advancement scholars almost never portray movement activists as reacting mechanically or predictably to constitutional conditions and intra-elite rivalries. To the contrary, democratic-advancement scholars pay considerable attention to the ingenuity and resourcefulness of movement leaders (often dubbed “movement entrepreneurs”) who constantly rethink strategies, coin slogans and programs, mobilize normally reluctant followers and bystanders, and patiently win over allies for battles against opponents who wish not to expand the points of political access. As one highly regarded democratic-advancement writer puts it, *“social movements depend heavily on political entrepreneurs for their scale, durability, and effectivenes*s.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

* Vision of Social-Justice Theorists

Most scholars who view movements as collective struggles for greater social equality also consider the reorganization of society as both possible and desirable. They therefore devote considerable portions of their studies to describing the social problems that spawn a movement, recounting the movement’s substantive proposals for social change, and assessing the social consequences of the movement’s efforts to advance equality. This does not mean that “politics” in a narrowly governmental sense is entirely ignored. Like democratic-advancement researchers, social-justice researchers typically describe political tugs of war, coalition formation, and efforts at bridge building. Nonetheless, social-justice theorists examine at length the social context and consequences of movements, while formal government institutions and elite politicking fall outside the analytic spotlight.

Moreover, social-justice scholars see movements as fairly disorganized and led in only transitory and superficial ways by identifiable “movement entrepreneurs.” Movements, instead, are understood primarily as comprising innumerable members of disadvantaged populations who are furious over palpable and seemingly perpetual injustice. Some members of these populations decide to rebel, and usually do so without a long-term strategy or a blueprint for building a future social order. Social-justice theorists view such decentralized, small-scale, and wild-cat acts of disruption and noncompliance as normal features of a movement’s politics. Marching through the system and patiently working within conventional political institutions are, conversely, viewed as evidence of a movement’s deterioration and decline.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Perhaps the most noticeable difference between social-justice scholars and democratic-advancement scholars involves their understandings of conventional politics. Social-justice theorists typically depict state officials contemptuously, as indefatigable champions of the economically privileged. The theorists likewise view seemingly democratic political processes (say, elections and congressional hearings) fairly cynically, less as “windows of opportunity” that can be exploited by astute movement entrepreneurs and more as traps for the naïve and unwary who do not know that political deals are made in secret places and outside public limelight. According to many social-justice researchers, negotiations between the nominal leaders of a movement and the government elite are seldom are made in good faith. The wealthy and their political servants, as soon as they safely can do so, will ignore promises that require sacrifice of plutocratic privilege and power.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Because they tend to see conventional political processes (even in liberal democratic states) as a series of traps for the poor and as a series of masks hiding powerful scoundrels, social-justice theorists analyze confrontational behavior and disruptive tactics – such as the occupation of a business or the obstruction of street traffic – that will compel resistant elites to dispense a particular good. For these researchers, the most important forms of movement politics take place in the streets, and not within governmental processes, because they make officials nervous, uncomfortable, and fearful. For these movement scholars, there is an obvious difference between extra-institutional/disruptive politics and conventional/cooperative political activity. And upon this distinction between types of political action lies the difference between a genuine social movement and an interest group that claims to be a movement.

Partly because of their judgments about the possibility of working productively with state officials diverge, democratic-advancement scholars and social-justice scholars perceive the sweep of history differently. In general, democratic-justice theorists adopt a Whig interpretation of history. They interpret every movement struggle as part of a steady progression toward a more democratic future, in which long-time political insiders learn to co-exist and cooperate with previously marginalized populations. The typical social-justice theorist, in contrast, sees political history an ongoing Sisyphean boxing match between economic bullies (aided by a fixed political system) and desperate, scrawny underdogs whose moxie is almost the only thing in their favor.[[17]](#footnote-17)

* Vision of Cultural-Transformation Theorists

The third type of social-movement analyst focuses inwardly, on the subjective experiences of movement activists. And it rests on a dynamic view of human psyche. Allegedly, there is something about participating in a social movement that can help people see themselves as more creative, daring, and effective than they previously had thought possible. In theory, when one participates in a movement, inner shackles of self-doubt disintegrate, and a new political actor emerges who confidently links personal concerns to public arrangements and who sees social conditions as malleable. Rosa Luxemburg described the conversion that the labor movement (in her opinion) can initiate:

In the storm of the revolutionary period, the proletarian is transformed from a provident family man demanding support into a “revolutionary romantic” for whom even the highest good, namely life – not to speak of material well-being – has little value in comparison with the ideals of the struggle.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Such transformations of personality are not fortuitous, say cultural-transformation theorists. Allegedly, movements are schools in self-advocacy and personal pride. When their internal decision-making process is egalitarian, they subvert the culture of deference that predominates in modern industrial society and that would pollute a liberal democratic constitutional regime. Therein lies the primary reason to study them. As Francesca Polletta puts it,

Democracy in social movements does not produce dutiful citizens. It produces people who question the conventional categories and responsibilities of citizenship – and who question the boundaries of the political, the limits of equality, and the line between the people and their representatives. Just as a movement that is democratic but without internal conflict sacrifices political creativity to stability, so a democracy without movements would foreclose critical avenues of progressive change.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Typically, researchers in this tradition juxtapose the uppity curriculum of movement schools with the stultifying cultural effects of daily life. It is said that hierarchical workplaces, patriarchal family structures, unimaginative primary schools and higher education, mind-numbing mass media, and frustratingly impersonal government bureaucracies foster excessive passivity, deference, self-doubt, and fear in modern societies. As a result, most studies of cultural transformation include detailed discussions of the stultifying effects of non-movement popular culture. These critiques of mainstream culture (alongside biographical information about everyday activists) are seldom found in democratic-advancement and social-justice accounts of movements.

In addition, scholars of cultural transformation often explore the steady fragmentation of movements, as previously quiet members of a member start to think for themselves and, consequently, dare to express their own ideas about pressing problems and their own visions of alternative futures. Movements, in this sort of research, lack fixed identities and long-term agendas. Cultural-transformation scholars perceive movements to be endlessly mutating ideologically and constantly splintering organizationally. As a result, the notion of movement leadership is largely emptied of substantive meaning in this literature. Because followers soon start spouting off their own ideas, the nominal leaders are soon left behind as participants explore new ideological possibilities. The initial organizers of a movement become inconvenient elders, who vainly try to keep the movement committed to its original program (or what democratic-advancement theorists sometimes call the movement’s “master frame”).

A typical democratic-advancement theorist sees movement entrepreneurs as crucial in providing direction, coordination, and day-to-day leadership to a sprawling collective effort to make politics more democratic. As a result, such a scholar tends to worry about a movement that lacks revered leaders and to criticize a movement that is replete with anarchy and mutinous behavior. After all, such intra-organizational disagreement and general rowdiness can jeopardize the movement’s efforts to negotiate and extract concessions from the state.

Cultural-transformation theorists, however, interpret intra-movement rebellions and fragmentation as a sign of health. It shows that members of a movement are rethinking critically about their options and grievances. Perhaps, due to the visions anarchically competing within a movement, social equality is not advanced and the political system is not made more inclusive and democratic. But, say cultural-transformation theorists, another good – the spirit of intrepidness and exertion – is being cultivated and disseminated.[[20]](#footnote-20)

II. Nietzsche and the Moral Costs of Social-Movement Research

All three types of ethical orientations can be heuristically valuable for scholars. Not only do the moral goals motivate scholars to undertake research, but the accompanying beliefs about politics and society can help scholars focused their limited research time on particular movement documents, movement organizations and events, and government institutions and decisions. These moral visions provide horizons within which scholars can work.

Yet, might there be downsides to these ways of perceiving movements? Nietzsche’s criticisms of useful forms of historical analyses can help us wrestle with this question.

In *The Use and Abuse of History*, Nietzsche distinguishes three types of useful historical writing (even as he lambastes the triviality of modern scientific history, which willy-nilly collects disconnected facts without thought to their relevance to human action[[21]](#footnote-21)). First, there are monumental histories that record the daring deeds of individuals whose intrepid actions led to new ways of collective living.[[22]](#footnote-22) Nietzsche deems such great-person histories valuable because they inspire exertion, imagination, creativity, and boldness – distinctively human traits that modern society stifles. Second, there are antiquarian histories that explore the distant, complex, and highly contingent origins of current social orders.[[23]](#footnote-23) Such histories are valuable because by highlighting the functionality of social arrangements, they foster affection for the remarkableness of one’s intricate milieu and foster a desire to enhance and protect it. Finally, there are critical histories that disclose the lies, violence, and cruelty that originally motivated and currently sustain the current social order.[[24]](#footnote-24) These are valuable because by fanning feelings of righteous anger, they can ignite efforts to reform society and replace oppressive arrangements with more humane ones.

Nietzsche values each type of history because it facilitates mankind’s capacity to act, yet he also detects dangers. Each type of historical analysis also promotes a certain type of moral blindness or insensitivity. Antiquarian history, for instance, can promote undue reverence for current social arrangements by hiding the violent roots of today’s status quo and by ignoring the daily political oppression that every social order inevitably entails. In Nietzsche’s opinion, continual attention to the exceptional confluence of circumstances that has led to the existing social arrangement can muffle, if not smother, justifiable feelings of discontent and a desire to break with the present and remake the world. The status quo can thereby be fetishized.[[25]](#footnote-25)

The danger of monumental history is that by celebrating the creativity and boldness of great leaders, often inadvertently exaggerates an individual’s ability to foresee the outcome of her or his actions. The role of unanticipated forces in human affairs – or chance – is forgotten. Monumental history, moreover, can predispose consumers of such history to defer to the alleged talents of great persons. Arrogance (on the parts of leaders) and idolatry and submissiveness (on the parts of followers) are the downsides of this style of reasoning.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Finally, critical history, by profanely noting the many shortcomings, sufferings, and injustices of existing societies and polities, plants the seeds of both cynicism and righteous rage in citizens’ souls. Both propensities, if not leavened with hope, are dangerous.[[27]](#footnote-27) Cynicism can lead to bitter withdrawal from public affairs, and intense outrage can lead to a desire to blindly shatter and destroy. According to Nietzsche, when a social order is shown to be thoroughly unjust, there is a powerful temptation to put “the knife to its roots, and all the ‘pieties’ are grimly trodden underfoot. The process is always dangerous, even for life…”[[28]](#footnote-28)

Nietzsche’s warnings about the moral costs of useful types of history (again, the only totally useless type of history is the morally neutral “modern” type) are worth remembering when engaging in any of the three types of morally informed social-movement research. Democratic-advancement theory, for example, resembles antiquarian history. Both types of scholarship highlight the functionality of extant political orders, and turn away from moments of oppression in a polity’s past and current forms of institutionalized violence. Democratic-advancement scholars, instead, devote many pages to describing how excluded groups in the past could points of leverage in a political order and work within the political system. The moral of the story is that other excluded groups can act likewise. Working within the system seems reasonable, while radical dreams and revolutionary projects appear unnecessary, rash, and foolish. The thrust of both antiquarian history and democratic-advancement theory is, institutionally speaking, conservative.

Research by social-justice theorists, similarly, bears an affinity to Nietzsche’s notion of critical history. Both types of scholarly writing presume that current political orders, whatever their proclaimed ideologies and avowed constitutional principles, rely heavily on oppression and generate immense suffering. The political status quo appears a swindle. The conclusion is that it is time for non-elites to disrupt and to treat invitations from elites to cooperate and consult as sly attempts to disarm and hoodwink those without power. Disorderly politics is condoned while compromise is besmirched.

Finally, cultural-transformation theorists, like authors of monumental histories, champion activism, initiative, and boldness as inherently good. As Nietzsche puts it, the lessons of such studies are to speak out and persevere to “fight the great fight” and to “bear steadfastly the reverses of fortune.”[[29]](#footnote-29) The downside, as Nietzsche notes, is that activism today is often inextricably linked to troubling character traits – such as impatience, cruelty, and heartlessness. This is not because of personality traits inherent in people but because of the nature of authority in modern societies. As Nietzsche, Freud, and their recent progeny – for example, Slavoj Žižek and Michael Rogin[[30]](#footnote-30) – note, within modern societies, humans are constantly subjected to discipline and punishment and are taught to keep a tight rein on passions and pleasures. As a result, resentment, envy, and fury bubble. This contributes to a non-generous type of political activism, in which the compassion, patience, and self-restraint that a healthy democratic politics requires are largely absent. A combative, self-assured, and intolerant style of interest-group politics becomes the norm. Both cultural-transformation theory and monumental history ignore the sicknesses of the soul that make activism problematic.

III. Overcoming the Discipline’s Discipline

If every major, morally informed orientation in contemporary social-movement research entails a politically dangerous type of thinking – in which one is either overly trusting of existing political orders (the conservative danger of democratic-advancement theory), overly condemnatory toward about the status quo (the nihilistic danger of social-justice theory), or overly blind to the resentments and desires to dominate that accompany individuals’ confidence in their ability to reshape political history (the romanticist danger of cultural-transformation theory) – what should a committed social-movement researcher who wishes to take a moral stand to do?

Nietzsche at times suggests that humans don’t have much choice in the art that they are drawn to. Humans, he suggests, gravitate toward the type of historical thinking to which their personalities, shaped by grueling experiences with issuing and receiving commands, threat, and orders, are best suited. Typically, a bold soul who for many years has been “active and striving” will be inspired and energized by monumental history. A cautious, reverential soul will be attracted to antiquarian history. A scholar who has been repeatedly and deeply scarred by oppression and who, therefore, “suffers and is need of liberation” will often find succor in critical history. If one accepts Nietzsche’s line of reasoning, one might argue that those social-movement scholars who have been scarred deeply by past injustices will be attracted to social-justice research; those who have learned to appreciate the benefits of the liberal democratic status quo will be drawn toward the democratic-advancement studies; and those who have learned to be bold and assertive will tend to pursue cultural-transformation interpretations.

Applied to social-movement theorizing, this argument about personal attraction means that scholars will be drawn to the sort of moral orientation that suits their evolving outlooks, which is determined in part by their own experiences with the promise and costs of prevailing power relations. Broadly speaking, a researcher of social movements who in the past has found the state to be accessible will likely write a type of democratic-advancement study in which the political status quo seems on the whole benign and too valuable to destroy. A researcher who has repeatedly suffered from government oppression will be more likely to adopt a social-justice approach that discloses the inequities of society as well as the subterfuge and injustices of the political status quo. Finally, a scholar who, over his or her lifetime, has had multiple experiences launching innovative collective projects will be drawn to cultural-transformation studies of social movements. In all three cases, scholars gravitate toward the type of social-movement research that match their own histories with power.

So far, this seems very understandable and compatible with a liberal vision of education, in which multiple views are tolerated and compete, on relatively equal footing, for audiences in the free market of ideas. The fly in the ointment is that political scientists who are employed in academies in the United States are pressured, through institutionalized rewards and punishments, to think about social movements in only one way: in terms of protecting the liberal-democratic state. Proponents of democratic-advancement approach edit journals in the United States that focus on social movements – for example, Mobilization – and university-press series that are devoted social-movement research (for example, the contentious politics series produced by Cambridge University Press and the University of Minnesota Press). The vast majority of work published in these venues focus on mechanisms for influencing public officials, analyze rhetoric that resonates with currently widely held beliefs, and recommend alliance building with state elites. The dangers of cooptation and instances of betrayal by elites are seldom mentioned (and then, usually mentioned only in passing). The potential value of hybridity and novelty in a movement’s cultural claims is also ignored.

Cultural-transformation and social-justice studies tend to be written outside political-science circles by cultural anthropologists, social historians, constructivist sociologists, and Marxist social scientists who write for their own journals (such as the International Journal of Urban and Regional Research and Social Movement Studies) and for university-press book series for anthropologists and historians, and who give scant attention to the notions of “political opportunities,” “political mechanisms,” and “political processes” that are routinely used by American political scientists. In a sense, there are parallel scholarly universes in the United States when it comes to the study of social movements. There is the type of research that political scientists mainly pursue, in which the constitutional workings of the state are highlighted and in which movement activists are encouraged to avail themselves of the multiple opportunities that their extant political systems offer. Then there is the research that scholars in other disciplines pursue, in which the state is treated less respectfully, in which government officials are portrayed less benignly, and in which movements’ cultural activities are analyzed for their potential subversion of dominant social discourses.

The promotion of a democratic-advancement outlook is probably not simply a result of a strategic decision by aspiring leaders within the political-science profession. There are also structural causes that relate to the discipline’s traditional defense of the American state.[[31]](#footnote-31) As other scholars have argued and documented, political science, since its founding, has been funded by government agencies and rewarded with honors and personal favors in exchange for policy analyses that legitimate government policies.[[32]](#footnote-32) By the time political scientists leave their graduate-school apprenticeship, they have learned (through myriad carrots and sticks, such as job placements, research assistantships, and invitations to submit research for edited books) to be awed by the state and to admire colleagues who know how to obtain government funds, arrange interviews with high-ranking public officials, and win prestigious appointments to task forces and at state-supported research centers.[[33]](#footnote-33) Because of the discipline’s ties to government, younger political scientists have been taught to discipline their thinking and to not stray off professional condoned paths of inquiry. As a result, professionally harmful ways of seeing the world are *de facto* censured during academic apprenticeship.

Nietzsche’s writings, again, are useful because they draw attention to how one’s moral reasoning does not arrive autonomously but is shaped by the cultural history of one’s society and the corresponding system of diffuse punishments and threats.[[34]](#footnote-34) Knowledge of the genealogy of a moral universe can be liberating because as a person becomes more aware of the ways her or his moral thinking is shaped, she or he can consider ways of reshaping the society environment that is producing a particular culture.

In terms of the present investigation, awareness of the origins of moral judgments about social movements can inspire social-movement scholars who are political scientists by occupation to refashion their discipline. The refashioning could be small-scale and local (broadening the range of social-movement theories taught in one’s courses); it could larger and more collective (creating more interdisciplinary conferences devoted to social-movement research); or it could be quite ambitious and even disruptive (working for legal changes in rules about research funding by government agencies). The point is that by noting how our discipline shapes our moral reasoning – as opposed to adopting the romantic view that our beliefs and commitments are either self-generated or caused by ahistorical moral impulses – political scientists can more readily contemplate the redirecting their collective project of understanding politics. They can resist being unwitting victims of their discipline’s past political history, and they can then grapple in a forthright manner with the type of complex moral reasoning that they believe should inspire and guide their studies.

1. See, for example, William Kornhauser’s *The Politics of Mass Society* (New York: Free Press, 1959) and Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* (Riverside Press, 1949). For contemporary criticisms of fearful analyses of movement politics, see Michael Paul Rogin, *The Intellectuals and McCarthy: the Radical Specter* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1967); and Sandor Halebsky, *Mass Society and Political Conflict: Towards a Reconstruction of Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See, for example, Susan C. Stokes, *Cultures in Conflict: Social Movements and the State in Peru* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Kathleen M. Blee, *Inside Organized Racism: Women in the Hate Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Tina Fetner, *How the Religious Right Shaped Lesbian and Gay Activism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Of course, a scholar need not feel ambivalent about his or her political commitments. As Douglas Bevington and Chris Dixon put it, “The researcher need not and in fact *should not* have a detached relation to the movement” (emphasis added). Douglas Bevington and Chris Dixon “Movement-Relevant Theory: Rethinking Social Movement Scholarship and Activism,” *Social Movement Studies* 4:3 (2005), p. 190. See also David Croteau, “Which Side Are You On? The Tension between Movement Scholarship and Activism” in David Croteau, William Hoynes, and Charlotte Ryan, eds, *Rhyming Hope and History: Activists, Academics, and Social Movement Scholarship* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), pp. 20-40; and Sarah Waters, “Situating Movements Historically: May 1968, Alain Touraine, and New Social Movement Theory,” *Mobilization* 13:1 (2008), pp. 63-82. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. William K. Frankena, *Ethics, Second Edition* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1973); Alasdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics* (New York: MacMillan Publishing, 1966) Henry Sidgwick, *Outlines of the History of Ethics, Sixth Edition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Jean L. Cohen “Strategy or Identity: New Theoretical Paradigms and Contemporary Social Movements,” *Social Research* 52:4 (1985), pp. 663-716; Doug McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); James B. Rule, *Theories of Civil Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. I intentionally say “more inductive” because, as students of interpretive methodologies often point out, a completely inductive study of a topic is difficult, if not impossible. This is partly because humans naturally notice what we are trained to see and to label (and, conversely, we constantly ignore what we have not been trained to notice and categorize). For example, having worked for decades as a social-movement researcher and having written for that audience of scholars, I naturally see political-process themes, mass-society themes, and identity-formation themes whenever I read scholarship about movements or observe movement activists. According to a number of methodological interpretivists, we can never escape our beliefs and assumptions (and that might not be desirable anyway – what would guide our research?). We can, however, be more sensitive to contradictions between experiences and expectations and engage in “abductive” reasoning – that is, become aware of our intellectual predispositions and then seek and respect observations that partially or wholly fall outside what we have learned to expect. That sort of Sisyphean effort to see reality apart from earlier expectations (a struggle that can never be fully successful) is the goal of the next section of the paper. For a convenient introduction to the philosophic paradoxes and psychological challenges of abductive reasoning, see Peregrine Schwartz-Shea and Dvora Yanow, *Interpretive Research Design: Concepts and Processes* (New York: Routledge, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See, for example, McAdam, *Political Process*; Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements, Collective Action and Mass Politics in the Modern State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Lee Ann Banaszak, *Why Movements Succeed or Fail: Opportunity, Culture, and the Struggle for Woman Suffrage* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); Joe Foweraker and Todd Landman, Citizenship Rights and Social Movements: A comparative and Statistical Analysis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Charles Tilly, *Social Movements, 1768-2004* (Boulder, Colorado, Paradigm Publishers, 2004); Roger Karapin, *Protest Politics in Germany: Movements on the Left and Right Since the 1960s* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007); and Brian Grodsky, *Social Movements and the New State: The Fate of Pro-Democracy Organizations When Democracy Is Won* (Palo Alto, C.A.: Stanford University Press, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See, for instance, Jeffrey Paige, *Agrarian Revolution* (New York: Free Press, 1975); Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Poor People’s Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977); John Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980); Manuel Castells, *The City and the Grassroots: A Cross-Cultural theory of Urban Social Movements* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); Aldon Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: Free Press: 1984); Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System III: The Second Era of Great Expansion of the Capitalist World-Economy, 1730s-1840s* (San Diego, CA: Academic Press, 1989); Ralph Miliband, *Divided Societies: Class Struggle in Contemporary Capitalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); Dale A. Hathaway, *Can Workers Have a Voice? The Politics of Deindustrialization in Pittsburgh* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993); Robin D. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1994); Michael Denning, *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds* (London: Verso, 2004); and Temma Kaplan, *Taking Back the Streets: Women, Youth, and Direct Democracy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. In the United States, Saul Alinsky’s *Reveille for Radicals* (New York: Vintage Books, 1946) is a seminal work in this tradition. Hannah Arendt’s *On Revolution* (New York: Viking Press, 1965) also has inspired many political scientists who study social movements as a potential source of cultural transformation. In addition, see Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Wini Breines, *The Great Refusal: Community and Organization in the New Left* (South Hadley, MA: Bergin and Garvey, 1982); Sara M. Evans and Harry C. Boyte, *Free Spaces: The Sources of Democratic Change in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986); Rick Fantasia, *Cultures of Solidarity: Consciousness, Action, and Contemporary* *American Workers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Begoña Aretxaga, *Shattering Silence: Women, Nationalism, and Political Subjectivity in Northern Ireland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); Jane Mansbridge and Aldon Morris, *Oppositional Consciousness: The Subjective Roots of Social Protest* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Francesca Polletta, *Freedom Is an Endless Meeting: Democracy in American Social Movements* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Charles Kurzman, *The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004); Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Ziad W. Munson, *The Making of Pro-Life Activists: How Social Movement Mobilization Works* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); and Edward J. McCaughan, *Art and Social Movements: Cultural Politics in Mexico and Aztlán* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2012). In Europe, a major source of inspiration for a cultural-transformation strand in social-movement research is Rosa Luxemburg’s *Mass Strike, Party, and Trade Unions*, published in 1906 and currently available in numerous English translations. See also Albert Soboul, *The Sans Culottes: The Popular Movement and Revolutionary Government, 1793-1794* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1972); Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution* (New York: Viking, 1972); Alain Touraine, *The Voice and the Eye: An Analysis of Social Movements* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); and Alberto Melucci, *Challenging Codes: Collective action in the information Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Luther P. Gerlach, “Movements of Revolutionary Change: Some Structural Characteristics,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 14:6 (1971), pp. 812-36. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See, for example, Todd Gitlin,  *The Whole World Is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980); Breines, *Great Refusal*; Peter B. Levy, *The New Left and Labor in the 1960s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994); and James Miller, *Democracy Is in the Streets: From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For reflections on the relative weakness of macroeconomic analysis in contemporary social-movement research, see Richard Flacks “The Question of Relevance in Social Movement Studies” in Croteau, Hoynes, and Ryan, *Rhyming Hope and History*, pp. 14-17. For an example of a scholar who argues that the objective social sufferings that an institutional arrangement produces are largely irrelevant for understanding social-movement politics, see McAdam, *Political Process*. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See, for example, the half-dozen essays criticizing the “political opportunity model” in *Rethinking Social Movements*. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Tilly, *Social Movements*, p. 152. Italicized in the original text. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. For a particularly systematic presentation of this argument, see Piven and Cloward, *Poor People’s Movements*. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. For examples of this profound distrust of conventional political processes, see Wallerstein, *Modern World-System III*; Hathaway, *Can Workers Have a Voice?*; and Frances Fox Piven, *Challenging Authority: How Ordinary People Change America* (New York: Rowen & Littlefield, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See, for example, Morris, *Civil Rights Movement*, Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness*, and Goodwyn, *Populist Moment*. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Rosa Luxemburg, *Selected Writings* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), pp. 246-47. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Polletta, *Endless Meeting*, p. 230. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See, for example, Goodwyn, *Populist Moment*; Evans, *Personal Politics*; and Aretxaga, *Shattering Silence*. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. According to Nietzsche, “scientific” history, in which scholars conscientiously and continuously collect facts solely for accumulation’s sake, is not only useless, but pernicious. Researchers are swamped by informational details that are unconnected to any human project. The research is not connected to moving society towards a particular future state. As a result, scientific historians become not public intellectuals trying to improve society but “wandering encyclopedias.” Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1949), pp. 22-25, 28-33, 37-49. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. *Ibid.,* pp. 12-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. *Ibid.,* pp. 17-19. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. *Ibid.,* pp. 20-21. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. *Ibid.,* pp. 19-20. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. *Ibid.,* pp. 14-17. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. *Ibid.,* pp. 21-22. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. *Ibid.,* pp. 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. *Ibid.,* pp. 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. See, for example, Slavoj Žižek, “Invisible ideology: political violence between fiction and fantasy,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 1:1 (1996), pp. 15-32; Michael Paul Rogin, *Ronald Reagan, the Movie and Other Episodes in Political Demonology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. For a discussion of the historical origins of U.S. political science and its pro-state predisposition, see Dorothy Ross, *The Origins of American Social Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 448-467. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. See, for example, S.M. Amadae, *Rationalizing Capitalist Democracy: The Cold War Origins of Rational Choice Liberalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); and Ido Oren, *Our Enemies and UU: America’s Rivalries and the Making of Political Science* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. For more on the impact of graduate-student training for the moral outlooks of political scientists, see Immanuel Wallerstein, “The Unintended Consequences of Cold War Area Studies,” and Ira Katznelson, “The Subtle Politics of Developing Emergency: Political Science as Liberal Guardianship,” in Andre Schiffrin, ed., *The Cold War and the University: Toward an Intellectual History of the Postwar Years* (New York: New Press, 1997), 171-231. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Of particular relevance is Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). [↑](#footnote-ref-34)