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Wage Theft & the American Dream: Social Movements, Cultural Narratives, and Interpretation

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Abstract:

We are both surrounded by capitalist-influenced institutions and conditioned by capitalist culture and logic. How, in spite of this foregrounding, do activists become involved in organizations which seek to undermine these structures and which offer radically disparate interpretations of capitalism's most valued cultural narratives? This paper begins to examine the dialectic meaning making process of a group of activists involved in an organization which attempts to fight against Wage Theft in a midsized southern city. As a preliminary exploration, it attempts to distill research questions, variables, and theoretical frameworks for future research on the subject. Drawing and building on recent social movement scholarship around the roles of emotions, framing, and culture, I argue that social movement organizations (SMOs) construct collective action frames in dialogue with powerful cultural narratives, and that activists generate meaning and motivation in a dialectic process involving, personal experience, SMO frames, and subjective interpretations of culture and its narratives.

Introduction:

Classical Marxism holds that from the means and relations of production arises an economic base, and from that base arises a superstructure, including all of our social-structural institutions, such as education, religion, politics, family, and mass media; meaning that each of these institutions is fundamentally inseparable from that economic base. If this is the case, we are surrounded by capitalism, and it structures our access not only to our basic resources, but also to everything else, from human contact and comfort to spiritual fulfillment. Even if Marx is completely wrong, and our institutions have arisen entirely independent of the economic base, capitalism's current influence on the institutions which structure our lives is utterly undeniable.

Not only are we surrounded by capitalism's structure, but we are thoroughly steeped in its logic and ideology, as evidenced by our cultural fascination with efficiency and "weighing" costs and benefits. It is relatively easy to see how a system which controls our access to life's necessities could wield influence over our social structures, but how is it able to get into people's heads? How is capitalism able to become a ubiquitous fixture in our culture? It accomplishes this task with, arguably, its most powerful tool, and our most pervasive cultural myth: the American Dream. It is through the Dream, that capitalism insidiously gains entry into our hearts and minds. The American Dream ensures the continual reproduction of the logic and lifeways necessary for capitalism to function, such as competition, hard work, and the desire for upward mobility through material aggrandizement. Ultimately, the American Dream provides the mythical backdrop and cultural foreground from, and against, which capitalism can assert itself symbolically, subjectively, and structurally. Capitalism's long standing relationship with the American Dream is undeniable, and scholars representing a variety of fields have generated a wealth of data supporting and explaining this assertion (Tyson, 1994; Cannon, 2003, Cullen, 2003; Samuel, 2012; Levinson, 2012).

In spite of capitalism's pervasive and penetrating influence over our social structures and cultural narratives, there none-the-less remain countless people dedicated to ameliorating capitalism's deleterious effects, ending economic oppression, and fighting against exploitative labor practices. My question, then, is how does this happen? How is it that people who are immersed in capitalism's institutions, and who are steeped in its cultural logic, come to support organizations, which, in many ways, seek to challenge, change, or undermine it. What motivates these activists in their fight, and how do those motivations relate to the capitalist cultural matrix and the American Dream? Finally, what effect do other factors such as religious identity, previous experiences with exploitation, or prior involvement in other social movements have on activists' motivations? In the end, it is a question of meaning; how do activists make meaning of/in their lives relative to the culture in which they are immersed, the social movements in which they participate, and the lived experiences which make up their lives?

Research questions rarely materialize out of thin air, and these questions are no different; they grew out of several years of involvement with Workers' Justice United (WJU), a small, but growing, social movement organization (SMO) engaged in the fight against wage theft and worker exploitation in a large city in the southeastern United States.¹ In many ways these questions are even more personal than that. As a routine volunteer with this organization I have come, from time to time, to question my own motivations. My college is known for its commitment to "service" a term which I find somewhat paternalistic. None-the-less, I am surrounded by hundreds of peers who all seem heavily involved in a myriad of other 'worthy causes.' This current research project began with questions I had for myself about why I had chosen to volunteer with this organization and why I was interested in this cause rather than something else. This, in conjunction with a realization about WJU's framing, which I will explain below, were the dual forces which have given my research its focus and direction.

Workers' Justice United (WJU) utilizes a variety of tactics to fight against employee mistreatment and exploitation from coordinating with its parent organization on national workers' rights campaigns, to lobbying the state legislature for and against pertinent bills, to drafting and supporting various city and county worker protection ordinances. Perhaps WJU's most important service, however, is its Workers' Center which provides workers with information about their rights, and seeks to help them make claims against employers on the basis of wage theft, discrimination, or other forms of employee mistreatment. WJU supports many worker related causes including safer working conditions, living wages, and freedom from discrimination; however, a huge amount of WJU's time and resources is devoted to the fight against Wage Theft, and it is on this struggle that I shall focus.

Wage Theft, is term used by many workers' rights organizations to refer to a variety of exploitative labor practices which often include violations of many state and federal wage-and-hour laws including, failure to pay a minimum wage, failure to pay overtime, tip stealing, employee misclassification (payroll fraud) and total lack of compensation, and it affects low wage workers across the United States at epidemic rates. A groundbreaking study by the National Employment Law Project (NELP) estimated that as many as 2 in 3 low wage workers in the US are victims of wage theft during any given week. What is more, NELP found that wage

¹ In order to protect the privacy of the organization and its members, its name has been changed throughout this paper.

theft disproportionality affects certain demographics such as low income workers, women, people of color, and immigrants (Bernhardt, et al, 2008).

Although no systematic research has been done in the city in which WJU is located, based on its demographics, the city likely has extremely high rates of wage theft, as it has a high poverty rate (26%, compared with 15.1% nationally), and large African American (63.3%), Latino (6.5%), and immigrant (6.2%) populations, meaning that its citizens, as the NELP's study has shown, are exceptionally more likely to suffer wage theft and other forms of exploitation (U.S. Census 2010). Not to mention the city is located in a state which does not have a state minimum wage law; meaning, that there is very limited state-level enforcement, leaving the brunt of the responsibility on the incredibly overworked and understaffed Federal Department of Labor. The vacuum created by high levels of wage theft and low levels of enforcement is filled by WJU which helped more than 400 wage theft victims recover over \$800,000 in stolen wages in 2011 alone.

As a frequent volunteer with WJU, I was routinely surrounded by discussions of the cases and actions they were currently working on. One day while folding newsletters for a mailing, I was struck by the language used in the publication which appealed to supporters for donations by telling the story of a "hard working immigrant" who just wanted to make enough money to provide for his wife and children. This story was framed as the quintessential narrative of the American Dream, with two important exceptions. First, the piece never mentioned the phrase "the American Dream." Second, Juan, the worker in the story, was unable to provide for his family because the construction company he worked for refused to pay him the nearly \$700 in wages it owed him. Making this connection piqued my curiosity and I began looking at other publications and listening closely to the language used in office conversations, at rallies, and at other direct-action events for more examples of WJU utilizing the American Dream's conceptual language. What I found during the course of that informal ethnography was striking. In its appeals for support, WJU managed to draw on nearly every *positive* quality normally associated with the American Dream: hard work, dedication, fairness, equality, self-reliance, and even fair competition.

This pervasive use of the Dream's basic narrative structure and its ethical and cultural logic struck me as odd, knowing what I knew about the American Dream's prominent role as a capitalist cultural support structure. It even seemed quite possible that the very employers who were stealing wages from their employees could reasonably justify their actions based on the pursuit of their own American Dreams. As each of these details coalesced, my interest grew, and I decided that I needed to know exactly how and why WJU was utilizing this particular myth's form and logic as opposed to some other source. How was it that WJU and its supporters were able to interpret the American Dream in such a way that its meaning changed so thoroughly?

As a research fellow with the Rhodes Institute for Regional Studies, I conducted exploratory research including more focused ethnographic fieldwork, some limited content analysis, and eight semi-structured interviews with WJU's staff and several of its most active supporters. This preliminary fieldwork and content analysis helped to direct my literature review toward social movement theory, and especially towards frame analysis. The in-depth interviews were invaluable in beginning to understand activists' meaning making process and how this dialectic process relates both to social movement framing and to activists' subjective experiences especially relating to religious identity, experiences with prior labor exploitation, and experiences with other social movements.

Early Social Movement Theory

Scholars and laymen have been formulating social movement ‘theories’ for almost as long as groups of people have been forming movements, and variations in scope, scale, and emphasis among these theories have been almost as numerous as the myriad social movements they have attempted to explain. It is, however, possible to group the bulk of these movement theories into several broad historical trends.

Prior to the 1960’s, social movement theory was largely characterized by an overwhelming fear of social movements and those who participated in them. Much of early social movement theory centered on the various crowds which periodically sprang up in Europe’s cities during the 19th century, demanding such things as the right to vote or better working conditions (Goodwin& Jasper, 2009). To elite university professors, these social movements, often made up of lower and working class individuals, appeared to be dangerous mobs, which could be influenced by the ‘power of the crowd’ into doing dangerous and irrational things (Goodwin& Jasper, 2009).

During the 1960’s, however, with the emergence of a whole wave of social movements, not the least of which, the Civil Rights Movement, many scholar’s opinions on social movements shifted radically. For the most part, social movements were no longer characterized as angry mobs, and scholars began to recognize social movement participants as rational agents making reasonable decisions (Goodwin& Jasper, 2009). Early on, however, it was assumed that people’s rational decisions were driven largely by individualistic cost-benefit analyses (Goodwin& Jasper, 2009). Over time, this emphasis on the rationality of individuals transformed into an emphasis on the rationality of social movement organizations (SMOs). This trend, which has become known as *resource mobilization theory*, characterized SMOs almost as if they were businesses within a social movement industry of sorts. According to this model, SMOs essentially had to “sell” themselves to the public for support, and an organization’s success relied, in large part, on its ability to secure resources, not only in the form of money, but also in the form of capable staff members, and dedicated volunteers (Goodwin& Jasper, 2009). During this time, social movement theory also moved toward a more “political” understanding of social movements. Theorists, forming what would come to be known as *political process theory*, believed social movements were not only rational, but, in all actuality, were merely collective political actors with specific goals, which were expressed in interactions with the state, and were only able to arise do to “opportunities” and “openings” present in the state’s structure (Goodwin and Jasper, 2009).

Collective Action Frames and Tool Kits

By the mid 1980’s, however, other trends in social movement theory had begun to develop, ones which attempted to address social movements’ ‘cultural’ aspects. One analytic strategy, exemplified by Snow, et al. (1986), stems from Erving Goffman’s (1974) notions of “framing,” and attempts to highlight and analyze the process whereby movements become involved in the active meaning-making process and create conceptual frameworks through which movement actors come to understand the world. While Snow and others were beginning to work out their movement framing theories, Swidler (1986) was also looking at the culture’s effect on social movements, but in a somewhat different manner. Swidler posited that culture functioned as a sort of resource bank or “tool kit” from which movements could draw habits, skills, and

cultural resources in order to motivate and facilitate collective action. In later works, these two culture-based theories would be blended as scholars came to realize the ways in which movement frames rely on larger culture as a source of legitimacy and support (Snow and Benford 2000, Heart 1996, Williams 2002).

Later framing theories pushed further into discussions of the ways in which social movements innovated, amplified, and extended ideologies or components of them while simultaneously drawing on cultural resources for support (Snow & Benford 2000, Williams 2002). Williams (2002), for example, looked at the early civil rights movement in Arkansas and described the ways in which religion provided both source of cultural legitimacy, and an opening into which novel, yet culturally supported, ideas could emerge, provided they could be tied to the religious tradition in which they found cultural resonance.

Many early cultural social movement theories focused *ideologies*, which were seen as pervasive yet generally static systems of beliefs and values. Over time, however, as definitions of ‘framing’ progressed beyond the scope of ‘ideological innovations,’ and came to be defined, at least by Snow and Benford as, “an active, processural phenomenon that imply agency and contention at the level of reality construction” (Snow & Benford 2000: 614). According to Snow and Benford framing implies *agency*, in that it is active and intentional in nature, and it implies *contention* in that the frames it generates may differ from, and challenge, existing ideologies or cultural narratives (Snow & Benford 2000). Social movement scholars Charlotte Ryan and William Gamson (2006) provide an excellent definition of the concept,

A frame is a thought organizer, highlighting certain events and facts as important and rendering others invisible... Like a picture frame, an issue frame marks off some part of the world. Like a building frame, it holds things together. It provides coherence to an array of symbols, images, and arguments, lining them through an underlying organizing idea that suggests what is essential – what consequences and values are at stake (Ryan & Gamson 2006:13-14)

Frames not only provide movement supporters with the interpretive lenses through which to understand the world, but go beyond that, by calling for, motivating, and justifying collective action. Because these frames most often call movement supporters to *do* something, the frames generated in this active meaning-making process have come to be known as “collective action frames” (Snow & Benford 2000). A collective action frame’s task, then, is to allow movement participants to form a shared understanding of a social problem and the solution to that problem (Snow & Benford 2000).

Framing theories, however, are not without flaws, and even early on some scholars within the tradition critiqued them. Benford (1997), for instance, criticizes framing theories for tending to anthropomorphize social movements thereby neglecting the people within them, and for reifying frames as static and unchangeable rather than affirming their dynamic and dialogic nature. While I would agree with Benford’s criticisms, I would add that in addition to anthropomorphizing social movements and reifying their frames, social movement theory has also been far too dry and processural. The ‘high-theory’ within the tradition is too systematic and reductionist, and in many cases manages to strip passionate and complex social movements of their idiosyncrasy and their “life,” abstracting movements and their actors from complex reality and reducing them to formula. Furthermore, in focusing on social movement organizations and their *effects on* supporters, framing theory has often neglected to lend credence to the interpretive

meaning making work carried out by supporters who are not passively *acted upon*, but who generate their own meaning in dialogue with frames, culture, and personal experience.

My work attempts to do two things: First, to build on framing theory by searching for the presence of a specific cultural narrative in movement frames and discussing this in the explicit terminology of interpretation. Second, to attempt to explore the afore-mentioned subjective interpretive process whereby supporters create meaning and motivation in dialogue with movement frames, cultural narratives, and foregrounded personal experience. I see framing and subjective motivation as co-emergent properties in a cultural meaning making dialectic. Motivation, meaning making, and reality-in-general, are anything but clear cut, rather, are and always will be stunningly complicated, in light of this, I aim, to ‘muddy’ social movement theory, which all too often, tries to make the beautiful, the terrible, and the complicated overly clean and systematic.

Methods

For several years I have been a regular volunteer with WJU, and above all else, this steady contact allowed me to build strong relationships with many of the staff and regular volunteers at WJU. By building these relationships I generated trust and rapport with those most closely involved in the functioning of the organization and the construction of its collective action frames. By asserting myself more of a volunteer than a researcher I was hopefully seen as an insider and a group member rather than an outsider coming in to observe.

By acting as a volunteer and participant, rather than a mere observer, I was in routine contact with the data necessary for my content analysis: the material embodiments of WJU’s frames such as its publications, flyers, and newsletters. Furthermore, being at the WJU office put me in contact with all of the rich material culture present all around the office.

The most important function of ethnographic fieldwork, however, was its ability to generate a fuller and more nuanced understanding of the organization/movement’s ‘culture.’ Being involved in the daily functioning of the organization allows one to see much of the “backstage” behavior which takes place around the office that might not come across in more formal interviews. The majority of the active framing which takes place at WJU is generated in collaboration rather than individual action, and fieldwork the best method for studying this type of informal group meaning generation.

Fieldwork is also ideally suited for studying other movement activities such as protests, direct actions, rallies, and workers’ center meetings. These are the activities we generally associate with social movements, and for good reason, as it is in these types of activities that much of the affective work of social movements is carried out. Direct actions and protests serve as WJU’s main methods for accomplishing all sorts of immediate goals, and rallies and workers’ center meetings serve as some of the most salient externalizations of movement frames to supporters and potential supporters. As these type of activities are likely important sites for motivating movement supporters, it is absolutely vital that they factor heavily into my study, and ethnographic fieldwork is the best, if not the only, method for studying them.

Aside from fieldwork, my main method for defining and analyzing WJU’s collective action frames was content analysis. Much of WJU’s explicit framing is expressed in writing via newsletters, emails, and signs. My use of content analysis has thus-far been limited. However, in

future research I intend on taking a much more comprehensive and systematic approach in order to code and analyze these concrete expressions of WJU's collective action framing.

Although ethnography and content analysis are important methods for understanding WJU's collective action frames, as well as the framing process itself, my principle interest is supporters' motivations, and in order to explore that type of 'meaning question,' in-depth interviews are by-far the strongest method. Over the course of two weeks, I conducted eight semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of supporters including all of WJU's staff, as well as two of its board members, and several active volunteers and supporters. I intentionally selected a sample of the most 'involved' movement supporters, because I was interested in the development of meaning and motivation among those *actively* involved in the organization as opposed to the hundreds of less-involved members and supporters who may only donate a small amount or attend one or two actions per year. In attempting to explore *motivation* it only seemed fitting to talk to those supporters whose actions demonstrated a high level of it.

During these interviews I asked participants about their history with the organization, and their motivations for becoming, and remaining, involved. We discussed their interest in the workers' rights campaign, as well as the sub-causes they were most passionate about within the larger movement. We discussed their religious backgrounds and the extent to which those backgrounds and their religious beliefs had been a part of their involvement with WJU. I had them talk a little about what concepts such as "employment" and "hard work" meant to them. Finally, after completing the more formal interview questions we "debriefed;" I explained my project in greater detail, and we discussed it at length.

All of the interviews, but one, were carried out in person, usually at locations convenient for participants, such as their homes or places of work. Interviews ranged from thirty minutes to two hours, with most of them lasting about an hour. I took copious notes during all of them, and all, but one, were digitally recorded. After each interview I carefully listened to recordings and reviewed my notes. Although I did not transcribe my interviews or engage in any formal coding, I did attempt to find patterns among the testimonies, and have attempted to discuss these patterns in relation to the organizational framing data gained from ethnography and content analysis.²

Framing and Workers' Justice United

It is perhaps pertinent at this point to describe what I feel are WJU's two primary collective action frames; one of which can be characterized as an "interfaith community frame" and one which can be characterized as a "fairness and justice frame." It is important to note, however, that these frames are not separate but strongly interconnected and interdependent, in fact, it is possible to combine the two, and I think WJU would probably do so, as a "faith and justice frame." This frame not only guides the daily functioning of the organization, but is also used in its publications and rallies to draw in new supporters, call current ones to action, and provide legitimacy for those actions. Examples of this collective action frame's use abound, and will be incorporated throughout the following discussion; however, one rally in particular seems to exemplify the frame well and may help us begin to concretize our understanding not only of WJU's frames, but of the multi-dimensionality of frames in general.

² All names have been changed to protect the privacy and confidentiality of movement participants.

Last year, as WJU was trying to gain support for the passage of a local wage theft ordinance, they staged a rally on the steps of one of the city's more progressive churches in the hopes of attracting physical supporters, and more importantly, some potential media coverage for the issue. I was volunteering at this particular event and was told to hand out "I Support the Wage Theft Ordinance" stickers, which allowed me to 'get a feel' for the crowd. I have never seen such a diverse group, with supporters representing many different races and religious backgrounds ranging from white-haired aging hippies, to middle aged African American union members, to high school activists with protest patches sewn on their denim vests. The speakers at the rally were as diverse as the crowd: a local union leader talked about the peace-of-mind that comes with the security of a good job with fair pay and benefits, a young Hispanic Catholic Priest, bilingually led a prayer and quoted scriptural evidence of God's call for worker justice, Jennifer, WJU's Executive Director at the time, as well as an ordained Methodist pastor, also gave a speech and a prayer calling for justice, and several WJU staff members performed a humorous skit about the overworked and understaffed Department of Labor, but perhaps what best exemplified the "faith and labor" frame were the songs sung by a local union choir to both patriotic and religious melodies about the value of unity, collective action, and worker justice. In all of the examples from that rally, we can see movement leaders attempting to gain new support and media coverage and to motivate current movement supporters through the use of language which appeals to people's basic senses of justice and fairness, and through the use of religious authority figures and religious language to give those messages spiritual legitimacy.

Framing's Core Tasks

Snow and Benford (2000) break framing down into various "core framing tasks" towards which they believe most collective action frames are directed, including, "diagnostic framing," "prognostic framing," and "motivational framing" (Snow & Benford 2000: 615-617). While framing certainly performs all three of these tasks, I tend to see it as a much more organic, and much less compartmentalized and formal process. This is not, however, to downplay movement framing's *active* nature. Framing is certainly an active process, and one in which social movement actors often *do* generate intentional, and goal oriented, interpretive frames, but we must never forget that movement organizers, although they sometimes intentionally construct frames, are also deeply and emotionally committed not only to their causes but to their frames, and often generate those frames out of genuine, rather than engineered, cultural interpretations.

To assume that this is not the case is to fall into the reductionist trap of seeing movements through a purely rational lens, thereby denying the strong emotional component at the core of many movements. There is somewhat of a tension here, on the one hand we must affirm the active (read intentional) meaning-making process of frame construction, and on the other hand we do not want to go too far and assume that frames are made only to fulfill their rational roles. In some ways, however, this tension is premised on a false dichotomy because it assumes that reason and emotion are antithetical, which is simply not the case; many very rational ideas are strongly emotional, and many emotions arise from rational analysis. Despite their shortcomings Snow and Benford's (2000) "core framing tasks" *do* still provide a useful analytic tool for helping us to paint a more complete picture of WJU's collective action frames, and to begin to explore the interpretive process whereby those frames are constructed.

A frame's first task is to point out what exactly the problem is and who, or what, is to blame, a process which Snow and Benford (2000) have dubbed "diagnostic framing." WJU is

engaged in four main causes or campaigns: fighting against wage theft, fighting for living wages, supporting workers' rights to organize, and promoting occupational safety. As I identified above, WJU's master frame is one of "faith and justice," and this frame finds expression in all four of WJU's causes; each of which can be distilled down to the central "problem" of "worker exploitation" which serves as one half of WJU's "diagnostic frame." According to Snow and Benford (2000), however, a diagnostic frame must not only define the problem but must also point out who, or what, is to blame, and, this is somewhat more complicated in WJU's case.

Certainly a "worker exploitation" frame points to employers as *one* cause of the problem, but, as with any social problem, it is not that simple. Employers *are* the problem in the sense that it *is* they who steal wages, fail to pay living wages, fight against union organization, and fail to provide a safe working environment, but they are not the only source of blame. Also blameworthy, according to WJU, are the state and federal governments, which fail to adequately enforce current labor laws, and refuse to implement newer and stronger ones. Finally, WJU is acutely aware of one other source of blame: the capitalist economic system itself, which, in many ways, encourages and even justifies worker exploitation. Because social movements like the workers' rights campaign, and SMOs like WJU tackle such complex problems, it is often difficult to pin down exactly who or what is to blame, and I am not entirely certain that Snow and Benford's "diagnostic framing" adequately addresses this issue, it appears to assume a far more black and white view of social problems and the framing of those social problems than exists in reality. Certainly much social movement framing attempts to make problems seem clear cut, which is, I think, what Snow and Benford (2000) are getting at, but other social movement frames, such as WJU's are broad enough to leave the question of 'blame' open to interpretation.

Snow and Benford's (2000) second "core framing task," is, what they have labeled, "prognostic framing," whereby a movement frame lays out the solution(s) to the problem(s) it has just defined. This too cannot be easily mapped onto WJU because it does not focus its efforts on one specific task. In an obvious way, the solution WJU points out is to *end worker exploitation*, but the specific means by which this goal is to be accomplished are many and change with circumstances. WJU often frames Wage Theft not only as a problem of bad employers, but also as a problem of inadequate laws and poor enforcement. Therefore much of their prognostic framing is directed at changing employment laws and finding ways to increase the enforcement of current ones. Some of this energy goes into proposing and championing local worker protection ordinances, but WJU is also aware of the limitations of a framework based solely on legislative action, especially given the lax enforcement of current laws, and the lack of resources to enforce them in the first place. In fact, in light of recent failures and setbacks in the legislative sphere both locally and nationally, WJU is moving away from legislation as its primary prognostic frame, and is instead beginning to facilitate worker organization/unionization and "conscientious consumerism" whereby it attempts to put pressure on exploitative employers by publishing lists of so called "high road employers," who actually treat their employees fairly.

Regardless of its effectiveness, or lack thereof, legislative activity is hardly WJU's only focus, or even its most important method. As a workers' center, WJU is primarily engaged in direct worker advocacy, that is, attempting to recover stolen wages for individual workers, and the importance of this type of ground-level activism cannot be overstated. Although this may seem like a Band-Aid on a much more systemic problem, it is far more than that. Each worker WJU helps is not only encouraged to become a member and a supporter of the organization, but

also encouraged to spread the word, to encourage other workers to come forward, and to teach his or her peers about employment laws and health and safety regulations.

The final core framing task identified by Snow and Benford (2000), “Motivational framing,” is intended to provide a “call to arms,” that is, to recruit new supporters and to motivate current ones into action. This is, perhaps, the most important of the three core framing tasks. In fact, the other two core tasks, in many respects, play a supporting role for this one. Snow and Benfield claim that it is in addressing this framing task that social movements develop their specific vocabularies and symbolism, and WJU’s framing is rich with this type of meaning making. The very concepts of “Wage Theft” and “Living Wage,” themselves represent the sort of intentional diagnostic framing discussed by Snow and Benford (2000). Simply by lumping many exploitative employers practices together and labeling it Wage Theft, WJU, and other Workers’ Rights SMOs who use the term, are making a very intentional claim, namely, that failing to follow wage and hour laws is not something employers are doing out of ignorance, but an act of theft that they are actively and intentionally committing against their employees. The effectiveness of this frame is evidenced by the fact that some conservatives in business and the media are beginning to take issue with the term.³

WJU’s unique movement framing vocabulary also finds expression in its various slogans and mantras, such as the oft repeated phrase “All Religions Believe in Justice.” This phrase is not only spoken often, but also adorns at least one poster on WJU’s walls, and countless protest signs used at rallies and other direct action events. In addition to those signs, protesters also often carry, signs quoting the biblical commandment “Thou shalt not steal,” which further expresses the religious component of WJU’s collective action frame. The other prominent mantra, which I have heard many, many times while volunteering with WJU, and which I heard in every single interview I conducted in more or less words is “if someone works full time they should make enough money to meet their basic needs.” This mantra, even more than the other ones, represents a strong appeal to the notions of fairness and justice in which WJU’s frame is rooted. WJU’s framing not only finds expression in its specific vocabulary, but also in its material culture and symbolic representations.

WJU’s office is full of material representations of its collective action frame, from the giant painting of migrant-worker organizer Cesar Chavez and the numerous immigrant and workers’ rights posters on its walls, to the hundreds of newspaper clippings tacked on the wall chronicling workers’ rights successes. However, probably the most interesting piece of WJU’s material culture would have to be its “workers tree” which graces the wall adjacent to the entrance. This glossy painted cardboard tree has dozens of photographs of various workers WJU has helped to recover stolen wages, each with a big smile, proudly holding their check. This tree, with its prominent roots, and its leaves and branches of workers, is truly the material embodiment of WJU’s grass roots efforts. My favorite piece of material culture, however, has to be a small drawing tacked on one of the walls, which, in no uncertain terms, makes it clear that WJU represents the interests of society’s less fortunate, by portraying members of the workers’ center staff, in cartoon form, as Robin Hood and Friar Tuck.

³ One example of this comes from John Hyman, a writer for Workforce.com in an article titled “Taking Issue With the Term ‘Wage Theft’, in which he argues that, “Wage-and-hour non-compliance, however, is a sin of omission, not a sin of commission. Employers aren't intentionally stealing; they just don't know any better.”

WJU's Logo represents another example of explicit movement symbolism. The logo shows two arms interlocking to form its "W" one black, and one white, a nod to its interfaith and multicultural emphasis. The way these arms interlock is itself telling. They are interlocked "arm wrestling style" similar to the way two people would grab hands if one was helping the other up. These logos, slogans, and material cultural expressions all represent the sort of active and intentional meaning making Snow and Benford (2000) describe, yet, unlike signs and logos, things like the workers' tree are less intentional and much more sincere and heartfelt. Yes, the tree shows workers holding their checks, which is clearly an intentional statement, but the elated expressions on those workers faces, are not fabricated, they are real, and the care and patience with which WJU fights for those workers is real, and to characterize its framing simply as a ploy to gain sympathy and support is to turn it into a cold abstraction, which is certainly not in keeping with the work WJU does to ensure that workers are themselves seen as human beings rather than tools.

Again, by affirming the sincerity and candor out of which many interpretive frames are generated, I am by no means denying the fact that *some* frames *are* specifically and intentionally constructed, as are differences in the way existing movement master-frames are interpreted and expressed differently for different groups in different contexts. That is to say, many movements have master-frames based on the sincere and candid interpretations of culture by movement leaders, which are then re-framed with much more intentionality to meet the changing needs of various situations and circumstances. This dialectic process is most apparent in the case of so-called 'counter-framing' activities in which SMOs respond to rival frames.

WJU for example, engaged in several counter-framing activities in the course of this study, and in each case, it reworked its "faith and justice" master frame in order to better handle the situation. A prime example of WJU's counter framing came when many WJU staff and supporters journeyed to the state capital for the "people's day on the hill," better known as "lobby day" by WJU's staff. The state legislature was attempting to pass a bill that would have negated the Living Wage Ordinance that WJU had championed and that the city and county councils had passed four years earlier, and would have subverted any future attempts at passing a wage theft ordinance. We knew that there was little chance that our lobbying would actually affect the passage of the bill (the Republicans had a supermajority at the time). We were confident that the remaining democrats would fight the bill, but decided to send some supporters to lobby them just in case. Our real aim in going to the capital was to attempt to convince the conservative representatives from our city's suburbs that if they were going to pass the bill they should at least afford our city an exemption. We ultimately failed to achieve these goals, and the bill passed without any exemptions, but what we can take away from this experience is the ease with which WJU was able to reinterpret its master-frame in response to its audience. When we met with those conservative representatives we did not talk about the interfaith nature of our organization, in fact, we avoided even saying we were with an organization at all, and instead framed ourselves as "concerned constituents" and "members of the faith community."

During our scheduled meetings with representatives we attempted to appeal to conservative distrust of "big government," claiming that, if passed, the bill would infringe the rights of local governments to govern their own affairs. Second, we appealed to popular notions of 'fair competition,' claiming that these wage theft and living wage ordinances like the ones this bill would have negated/prohibited were actually supported by honest businesses because they

helped to level the playing field. Although neither of these attempts was met with much success, they none-the-less demonstrate WJU's ability to respond with custom-tailored frames when circumstances arise.

In each of these framing battles we can clearly see the interpretive nature of framing. Not only were movement leaders constructing frames from their own emotional and rational interpretations of the world through the lenses of their individual cultural foregrounds, but they were actively responding to the specific circumstances of a given situation. These counter-frames are not simply a product of rational forethought on the part of movement leaders; rather they were formed in dialectic with other sources. To take a note from Hegel, WJU put forth a *thesis*, other groups an *antithesis*, and WJU responded with a *synthesis*, one which still retained the spirit of its original thesis while countering the opposing frame with its own terms/logic. It is easiest to see this sort of dialectic frame development in the case of counter-framing, but this is the process by which not only counter-frames but *all* frames (including master frames) are generated. However, in the case of non-contentious (or at least less contentious) frames, this dialectic is carried out not with opponents but supporters, other SMOs, and culture at large.

Framing, Resonance, and Cultural Narratives

Benford and Snow (2000) claim that in order for collective action frames to “work” they must “resonate” with their intended audiences, and they claim that two factors: “consistency” and “credibility” facilitate this resonance. By *consistency* they mean that a frame must not lead to any level of cognitive dissonance. Put in different terms, frames must “align” with the claims SMOs make and the actions they take. WJU's faith and justice frame would lack consistency, for instance, if its actions, in some way, failed to live up to its claims, like if WJU did not pay its employees fair wages, or refused to work with a particular religious group.

Consistency is, in many ways an obvious necessity, less obvious, however, is how SMOs must make their frames “credible.” This task is a little more difficult, because, unlike consistency which can be empirically demonstrated, credibility is highly subjective. For something to be credible it must resonate with one's previous experiences and one's cultural foregrounding. We can certainly come to believe new things, but this does not happen right away. Things which we take to be true at face value are almost always things which are supported by our cultural foregrounding, whereas, entirely new ideas take time to sink in as we accumulate more experiences of them and they become incorporated into our ‘experiential bank,’ and eventually into our cultural foreground. This is why upon hearing something surprising, i.e. something with no precedence in our bank of experiences, we often look to other sources for corroboration. This process is sped up, however, if we happen to “know” the teller is “trustworthy,” but the notion of trustworthiness is, itself, a value judgment based on prior experience. Because credibility is subjective, social movements must appeal to something which is present in large numbers of people's subjectivities: enter culture. In order to appeal a broad base of individuals for support, social movement frames often utilize broadly applicable or deeply held cultural narratives and ideas, which is why Snow and Benford (2000) describe a frame's credibility in terms of its “cultural believability.” In order for a frame to resonate with people, it must first resonate with their culture, and it is this dialogical relationship between social movements, individuals, and culture that this paper aims to explore more deeply.

Snow and Benford (2000) propose an understanding of framing which takes into account that culture provides the “resource bank” for the framing process; that is, the “extant stock of meanings, beliefs, ideologies, practices, values, myths, narratives, and the like,” which can be utilized by SMOs in the construction of their frames (Snow and Benford 2000:629). According to social movement scholar Stephen Heart, although social movement theory has begun to take culture into account, it has yet to provide an adequate definition of the concept (Heart 1996). He claims that current views of culture have largely been social-psychological and have looked at culture as beliefs, values, and motivations characterizing individuals, and have therefore neglected the culture found in received codes and structures (Heart 1996). Heart argues, instead, for an “analytical” approach to culture which allows us to elaborate on the reciprocal nature of culture and action, and to see the influence of social structures on symbolic forms as well as how those structures and forms inform individual activities (Heart 1996). I would like to propose a slightly different interpretation of the culture concept.

Although I tend to agree with Heart (1996) that our analysis of culture often neglects the powerful structural forces embedded within it, I feel that it would be a mistake to focus too strongly on the structural at a loss to the symbolic. We need understand the ways in which culture acts through individuals, interactions, and groups via narrative and symbolic expressions such as material-culture, literature, television, etc., to form ‘systems of values and norms’ which condition actions without determining them. This paper mainly focuses on the phenomenon of the “cultural narrative”: the archetypal expression of a powerful set of norms and values as expressed in a narrative form. More specifically, I am interested in perhaps, America’s most deeply held and highly valued cultural narrative, the American Dream, and how this narrative and its system of norms and values finds expression in every conceivable type of cultural externalization and ultimately becomes incorporated into the type of structures Heart (1997) speaks of. I am primarily interested in how this cultural narrative and its structure, values, and ideals find expression in the framing and subjective motivations of WJU and its supporters respectively. Movement framing is an active meaning making process, but it is also an interpretive process in which larger culture is absorbed and transformed into practical frames, which when successfully championed by social movements, can become incorporated into the larger cultural dialogue from which they originally drew inspiration. In other words, SMO frames must draw inspiration and credibility from larger culture, but once those frames become widely accepted they can act back upon and even change that larger culture. In the interest of better understanding the ways in which WJU’s frames and its supporters subjective motivations draw on the American Dream’s language and logic, let us take a closer look at the American Dream as a cultural narrative.

The American Dream: Myth and Interpretation

Few ideas in history have had such a profound effect on so many people, without ever being precisely defined (or perhaps over-defined?), and in many ways, it is that lack of definition that has afforded it a place of such power and prominence. The Dream is what bonds us together as Americans; one of the few beliefs we all share, yet it is precisely The Dream’s versatility and ambiguity that have allowed for its incredible scope and applicability. The dream holds a special place within the discipline of sociology, as the narrative expression of the “myth of meritocracy” and is therefore almost always discussed in negative terms. While this interpretation of the Dream’s socio-cultural role is absolutely valid, I wish to propose a somewhat different way of

thinking about it. When I first began to see glimmers of the Dream in WJU's framing activities, I was admittedly hostile towards it. It seemed counterproductive for an organization committed to ending capitalist worker exploitation to be using capitalism's cultural tool for its own purposes, but what I have come to realize in conducting this research is that, although, the Dream has *most often* been used to provide cultural legitimacy for capitalism, it is, on its own, not inherently tied to it, but is rather a concept radically open to interpretation.

The phrase itself is relatively new, and was not coined until 1931 by writer, James Truslow Adams. The ideas associated with that term, on the other hand, have deep roots stretching back at least as far as the enlightenment and the protestant reformation and philosophically much further than that. In spite of my hesitancy to define the term, there do seem to be certain continuities which span most, if not all of its myriad definitions. These continuities are not surprising in light of the fact that The Dream, like any great cultural framework, is rooted in a shared history and in the shared experiences of its various expressions in all facets of American life.

If one is looking for it, it is not difficult to find little glimmers and outright expressions of The Dream in every form of American cultural expression. Truly, it is all around us, expressed in academia, art, literature, television, film, and music; and although each expression puts forth a slightly different view of it, all of them seem to share some similar characteristics. As we begin to discuss some of these similarities, let me quote quite possibly the Dream's most famous externalization: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

This timeless quotation, the first sentence of the second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence, is in no way the first or most authoritative statement of The Dream, it is, like any expression of The Dream, simply an interpretation, but it is also a useful tool for understanding some of The Dream's most salient continuities. Arguably the most important, most intriguing, and most ambiguous, portion of this quote is Jefferson's inclusion of the "pursuit of happiness" in his list of "unalienable rights," and it is that phrase which, seems to me, to most fully embody The Dream, which, above all else, represents what we might call "the hope of a better life," but the 'devil is in the details' and what exactly constitutes "a better life" is truly the source of The Dream's radical interpretability.

If it is difficult to imagine the Dream being anything but a cultural expression of capitalism, this is probably because the overwhelming majority of the time it functions as such. The Dream serves as the cultural narrative that supports capitalism's "achievement ideology" a.k.a., the "myth of meritocracy." It provides the cultural support structure for ideas such as the "equality of opportunity" which are central to capitalism's continuance. According to Literary Analyst, Louis Tyson (1994), The Dream is how capitalism "gets into our heads." He claims that in order for complex systems such as capitalism to resonate with us they need the support of ideologies which in turn need the support of cultural narratives (Tyson 1994). Stories of Americans 'achieving The Dream' provide invaluable evidence that it is an attainable possibility. Stories of pioneers moving west and hacking out an existence in the 'untamed wilderness' support ideas about the importance of hard work and self-reliance, which are central to capitalism. Stories of the poor boy pulling himself up by his bootstraps and becoming a successful business owner show us that anyone can achieve 'The' Dream if only they try hard enough and get a little lucky along the way. These stories fill an immensely valuable role for capitalism by supporting and legitimating ideas about the equality of opportunity which drive

people to take risks and try to ‘make it big’ or to ‘achieve success.’ These narratives serve an even more important role, however, by convincing millions of Americans facing structural barriers relating to race, gender, and socioeconomic status that these barriers do not exist, or that they can be overcome with hard work and determination.

Were it not for these illusions, whole sections of society might realize the injustice of the system and rise up against it. The Dream is the thing that keeps those at the bottom of the social and economic hierarchy treading water, hoping to someday make it to the top. Likewise, it is one of the principle ideas which allow people at the top not only to remain there, but to believe that they have *earned* their place. It does this so well, in fact, that it becomes a sort of logical justification for inequality. Since stories of success transform the equality of opportunity from a myth into an assumed reality, the burden of actual equality falls on the individual. If one is not “making it” it is one’s own fault, and it is evidence of some character flaw or cultural/biological deficiency. With The Dream’s emphasis on “hard work” it manages to moralize failure; if someone fails to be “successful,” since all else is assumed to be equal, it must be because that person is lazy. Whereas unfortunate circumstances and bad decisions, whether in the form of an isolated mistake or recurrent stupidity, are pitiable offenses, laziness is not. In moralizing failure, capitalism is able to blame persistent inequality on those suffering from it, and to justify and maintain the status quo.

At the heart of The Dream is the “myth of success,” which according to film scholar Julie Levinson is characterized by, “its fervid conviction that the opportunity for material attainment and spiritual fulfillment is every individual’s birthright and is within each person’s power,” and this characteristic, she believes, is what makes it so central to the American national identity (Levinson 2012: 1). She characterizes The Dream as a “success *myth*” in the sense that it, like all myths, represents “shared beliefs conveyed in the form of narrative and endowed with cultural authority and validity” (Levinson 2012: 2). As a myth, she claims, The Dream does not gain its power by proving itself to be true, rather by its “repetition, variation, and adaptability.” Levinson goes on to quote Anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski’s understanding of the function of myths in society:

Myth fulfills {...} an indispensable function: it expressed, enhances, and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces morality; it vouches for the efficiency of ritual and contains practical rules for the guidance of man. Myth is thus a vital ingredient in human civilization; it is not an idle tale, but a hard working-active force; it is not an intellectual explanation or an artistic imagery, but a pragmatic character of primitive faith and moral wisdom.

Malinowski’s functionalist view of myths maps out onto The Dream very well as I see it. Throughout America’s history, people making all manner of claims have used The Dream in the most practical sense, to provide deep cultural legitimation for whatever claim they happened to be making. Furthermore, the mythical American Dream has the unique ability to legitimize dramatically divergent and even opposite claims. To make this point, Levinson quotes Anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss:

The constitution of the myth... rests on the sociocultural need to dramatize the ambivalent desires and conflicting goals that are part and parcel of personal and social growth, or, more accurately, the performing of a particular subject position... The paradoxical power of myth lies precisely in the fact that it engages specific psychological and social conflicts even through it cannot resolve them. Nor is this engagement an act of self-delusion, an escapist ritual that addresses

ineffable mysteries beyond the reach of a culture's descriptive power. The contradictions can be unmasked and experienced as contradictions. A cultural myth is no more and no less than an effectively constructed, rhetorical enactment of the social and psychological conflicts that it embodies. (Levinson 2012: 175)

Essentially it is the paradoxical, and possibly false, nature of myths which make them alluring in the first place. They both allow for the legitimation of conflicting interpretations and also point to solutions for the problems they define.

Although myths have that amazing and paradoxical ability to at once be contextual *and* general, to define and legitimate both the problem *and* the solution, and to act as forces of both social cohesion *and* social upheaval; they must have at their core, some central idea, something which is powerful and compelling yet open to interpretation. I have argued above that this core is the "hope of a better life," and with that as its core the dream becomes radically open to interpretation.

Human beings are amalgamations of our experiences, and because our experiences exist within social and historical contexts, they become our cultural foregrounds, and the lenses through which we make meaning of the world. With this understanding, The Dream is both the object of our contextual interpretation, and a component of our contextual interpretive resources (our foreground). That is, it both *arises from* our interpretive context, and *acts as* an interpretive context. Because this is the case, the Dream can shift shapes. By in making it culturally advisable to 'dream of a better life,' and to pursue that goal, the Dream lends cultural credence to whatever may be our subjective, foregrounded understanding of a 'better life.' The meaning of 'a better life' is radically different for the budding entrepreneur than it is for the aging CEO, and both of these dreams are even more removed from the dream of the social movement activist, and these differences, at the base level come down to differences in experiences, cultural foregrounds, and interpretive meaning making processes. I argue that the social movement activist's interpretation of the American dream, then, is constructed in a dialectic process involving not only foregrounded personal experiences, but also a SMO's collective action frames.

Congregations, Unions, and Networking

Above, I characterized WJU's frame as one of "faith and justice," which I claimed could be split into two sub frames: "interfaith community" and "fairness and justice." WJU's master-frame and its sub-frames all gain their "resonance," "cultural believability" and even legitimacy from powerful currents, narratives, and social networks present in American culture and society. WJU's "interfaith community" sub-frame, for instance, is able to draw on several valuable cultural resources. First, WJU taps into a powerful social network of churches, synagogues, mosques, and other religious congregations. Although, the majority of WJU's funding comes not from religious groups, but from individual donations and grants, tapping into a network of congregations benefits WJU in other ways. By reaching out to religious leaders, WJU is able to spread its message to a wide variety of people from a multitude of denominations and congregations; these people not only provide donations, but also make up many of WJU's most active volunteers and supporters. Having the support of religious leaders not only helps to spread the word, but by having respected faith leaders speak at rallies and sign their names on petitions and letters of appeal, WJU is able to give added legitimacy to both its frames and its direct actions. Second, because WJU is interfaith, rather than affiliated with any specific religion or denomination, it is able to appeal to many different groups, and in traditional "interfaith dialogue" style it attempts to downplay differences and elevate similarities among various

groups' messages. However, the city's religious history and location in the Bible belt region mean that its religious climate is dominated by Christianity, and although WJU does appeal to some synagogues and mosques, most of its religious supporters and its religious messages tend to appeal to a predominantly Christian audience.

WJU cooperates heavily not only with an interfaith network of congregations, but also with a network of labor organizations. In fact, it shares an office with the AFL-CIO and works very closely with them and with other local union chapters. Local unions are an invaluable source of support for WJU, because they link WJU with large groups of potential supporters who already share similar ideas. Although WJU works closely with local unions, it is by no means a union, and its faith component is one important part of that differentiation. Faith and labor are not two things we generally associate with one another at least not in recent history, although the two have had strong ties in the past.

Since the 1980s the American right wing, as a social movement in its own right, has been framing itself as *the* voice of Christianity in politics. The ascendance of evangelical Christians as a powerful political group, has led many people to identify conservatism with religiosity and liberalism, and therefore labor, with secularism. This tension came out very clearly in an interview with Mitch Throm, a local union leader, who was raised in a conservative Baptist church, and who now attends a church he describes as nondenominational, but which he says is basically still Baptist. We spoke at length about his strong religious faith and how important it is in his and his family's lives. Mitch had a clear tension between two of the most central parts of his identity; his job and his faith. He claimed that there is no way that he could be open about his job (as a union leader) to his pastor or to his fellow parishioners. He described the incomparability of being a Christian and being in a union as if it were somehow a self-evident fact. By claiming to represent religious ideas, especially Christian ones, WJU is able to challenge this supposedly self-evident link between conservatism and religiosity, and in essence make it "ok" for members like Mitch who struggle to find meaning in a contradictory world.

The American Dream, Framing, Motivation, and Meaning

WJU's moral judgments about wage theft are given added legitimacy when set in the context of religious ideas; however, not all of WJU's appeals are based on religion, and even the ones that are, are still also based on secular ideas about fairness and justice which are common to most Americans. The fact that ideas such as fairness, justice, and equality are so ubiquitous in American culture is, in my opinion, attributable to the prevalence and power of the American Dream as a cultural narrative. The dream is literally all around us, in every major form of media and virtually every form of cultural expression, and it functions as our both our mythical history and our vision of the future, both the lens through which we explain and understand our past and present achievements, and the impetus for our future progress as a society. It is to these ideas, and the incalculably powerful cultural narrative from which they spring, that WJU's frames appeal, but frames never merely passively draw from culture, rather they actively interpret it and then put forth those interpretations as new and meaningful reality.

The American Dream, as a myth and cultural narrative, is very much open to interpretation therefore it makes an ideal candidate for a source of inspiration and legitimacy. WJU primarily attempts to interpret the Dream through a *community* lens, and although it does not often explicitly appeal to the myriad examples of other groups who historically have

maintained similar interpretations⁴, WJU's frames do embody the spirit of that interpretive tradition. The dialectic process in which this interpretation takes place gets even more interesting when we break down the equation. In essence, we have a somewhat *self-interested* worker who wants to get the money he or she is owed by a *self-interested* employer through seeking the help of a *community-oriented* organization which bases its collective action frames on a cultural narrative that is often used to justify individualistic and even exploitative ends (the American dream) and to another cultural resource which is largely assumed to be incompatible with liberalism (faith and religiosity). It is precisely the paradoxical nature of WJU's cultural resources which make them both powerful and limiting, and in both cases, WJU seems to be providing a counter-framed interpretation: a communal American dream and a liberal religiosity respectively.

Culture provides a resource bank and legitimating force for social movement frames, but by tapping into that resource bank, frames become inherently limited by it. WJU has re-conceptualized a preexisting and widely pervasive idea; therefore, it is necessarily constrained by the conceptual limits of that idea. For instance, WJU can only elevate the dream's community aspect to a point, and to go beyond that point would potentially stretch the Dream too far from its accepted/acceptable meaning. WJU must work within an overarching logic of the dream in which ideas about self-reliance, individualism, and competition, must still remain present to some extent. WJU must find a way to deemphasize those values without entirely stripping them away. If it strips those traits away entirely the interpretation of the dream which results will no longer resonate with its accepted meaning and it will appear ridiculous. The trick, then, is to keep all parts present and elevate some while deemphasizing others. The power of cultural narratives, such as the American dream, make them excellent sources of legitimacy for movement frames, and their openness and interpretability allow movements to have a considerable amount of agency and creative freedom; however, the possibilities are not limitless, and the agency can only go so far. SMOs must work within the structural bounds set by broader social understandings of those narratives. For instance, the dream's longtime relationship with capitalism means that the dream cannot be easily interpreted in such a way as to support completely doing away with capitalism; however, it *can* be used to support a capitalist system with a greater emphasis fairness and justice.

The Social Movement Cultural Dialectic

The interpretive process in this case is carried out by three principle players, individuals, social movement organizations, and society at large. Although the first two players do most of the meaning making work, society plays a huge role in setting the interpretive 'thresholds of acceptability' as suggested above. The framing process discussed above at length represents the main interpretative role for social movement organizations; however, SMOs are comprised of individuals, each with their own cultural foregrounds; therefore, the framing process is not only a dialectic with society at large, but with individual activists and supporters' subjective world views. By shifting the focus from social movement framing to the individual interpretive meaning making process, I also hope to avoid the sort of anthropomorphizing tendencies which Benford (1997) warned are often endemic to framing discussions. The end result of this process

⁴ One notable exception being the parallels WJU often draws to the ideas of Rev. Dr. King and the Civil Rights Movement.

is that SMOs' collective action frames are generated in a dialogue between individual actors, and gain resonance from, and respond to, larger cultural narratives. When these frames are externalized in word and action they act back upon individual supporters providing newly foregrounded interpretive experiences, which then reverberate back into larger culture and can even come alter the interpretive thresholds of acceptability which had originally constrained them if they come to be accepted by a significant number of people.

This interpretive process, which I will refer to as the *social movement cultural dialectic*, seems much more complicated than it really is. Let us look at an example in order to elaborate a little. Take, for instance, Mitch, the local union leader who we discussed above, He was raised and continues to be a practicing Southern Baptist, and his religious tradition tells him that unions are bad, and that liberalism, in general, is incompatible with his faith, yet the messages he hears in church, and from the Right Wing, are incompatible with his lived experiences as someone who knows the truly amazing things that union membership can do for workers. He has experienced first-hand exploitation by employers who treated him terribly, “worked [him] like a dog” in unsafe conditions, and paid him meager wages. This experience rubs up against the messages he hears from his faith community. This is where WJU comes in; WJU’s “faith and justice” frame allowed him to make sense of this tension. It was inspiring to hear the utter relief in his voice when he talked about first hearing a speech from one of WJU’s staff members at a building trades meeting. For the first time, he saw faith leaders using biblical evidence to support worker justice, fair pay, and even organized labor. In Mitch’s example, all three actors were at play. On the one hand cultural ideas about religion and conservatism were present in his cultural foregrounding, as were subjective experiences which negated those cultural ideas. As an individual, he was involved in the interpretive process of making meaning out of these two conflicting experiences, but WJU’s framing helped him to do this by providing an interpretation of *both* of his experiences that managed to subtly change his view of both of them, allowing him to keep his religious beliefs and to keep his beliefs in the importance of worker justice. This dialectic process is easy to see in Mitch’s case, but this same model applies to other supporters as well.

Unlike Mitch, Gelene Thomas, a long-time supporter and former WJU councilperson, did not have to overcome contradictory experiences; rather, her faith provided her with an overarching framework through which to interpret everything.

The Lord said feed my sheep, and feed them with whatever they need, he didn't start off saying, "let me tell you about this and that." First, he said sit down and let me feed you, then we will see about everything else. People can't learn anything on an empty stomach.

She did not need WJU’s frame to help her overcome any tension as her lived experience already squared with her religious beliefs, instead, WJU’s frame merely strengthened and crystalized views she already had, by introducing her to a community of like-minded individuals committed to the same things she was. She was already interested in issues of justice, but before becoming involved with WJU she did not know about living wage or wage theft issues, WJU’s framing helped to define a problem and to provide the symbolic vocabulary to discuss that problem. She did, however, have preexisting views of what hard work meant and how employment ought to be a calling as opposed to an obligation. In our interview, she told me the story of her uncle who had worked with concrete his whole life, something which most people

would see as an incredibly strenuous and not particularly fulfilling career. According to Gelene, however, he loved it; she said he would take her around town and explain with pride that he had laid the foundation for his whole community. He was able to do what he loved: work with his hands, and to feel pride in having done a good job. Her uncle's experience and her own experience with a fulfilling job as a teacher have shown her that it is possible to work hard and feel like that work means something, and having had those experiences and interpreting WJU's frames and messages through them acts as a strong motivational force pushing her to get involved and stay involved with the workers justice movement. As a former board member and an active volunteer with the organization, she is then in-turn able to contribute to the construction of WJU's collective action frames, and ultimately the interaction of those frames with society at large.

Like Gelene, Carlos, a longtime member and volunteer with WJU, also sees WJU's frames and its actions as conformations of things he already knows and does. Carlos is the quintessential community man, and acts as the "go to guy" for members of his community: if they have a problem, he finds a solution and works to resolve it. Carlos' own struggles and the struggles of those he helps represent a huge part of his cultural foreground, but one which WJU's frames, and the network of support WJU provides, have helped to coalesce. For Carlos, WJU provides less of an interpretive role than a supportive one, WJU is just one more resource among many in his arsenal; it is a place where he can refer people who need to know more about their rights or need help recovering their wages. He has this sort of a relationship not only with WJU but also with his church, he claimed not to be very religious, and then several sentences later said he attends church regularly, acts as lay leader, and even sings in the choir. His modesty on the subject seems to indicate that his religious practice acts more as a social networking tool than an interpretive lens in his life. For Carlos, the church represents a vessel of the community, a place where his services can be marketed to members of his community, and one which connects him to systems of resources and a platform from which to offer his help.

Like Carlos, Monica, the assistant director of the workers' center, feels very much tied to the city's Hispanic community, and acts out these ties in her daily life. She often spoke in her interview of her strong desire to help members of her community to better understand their rights. Monica's cultural foregrounding draws not only from her Hispanic background but from the work she has done with Christ Community Health Center, another nonprofit in the area, which helped bring the notion of "service" into her experiential bank. Christ Community had a strong emphasis on *servicing* others. To serve, according to Monica, is to be actively engaged in others' struggles and to support their struggles on their own terms. This notion of serving others has been an important part of her foreground and has helped to inform her actions as a staff member at WJU. WJU's frames, for their part, have added the "worker justice" component to her foregrounding, and as a SMO, WJU has provided her with a platform to help others. Although she claimed not to have really discussed her religious beliefs or the concept of service with her coworkers at WJU, Monica has undoubtedly incorporated these concepts into her construction and externalization of WJU's collective action frames in her daily life and work.

Alberto, WJU's interregnum Executive Director, has possibly one of the most interesting lives of anyone at WJU, he is a 3rd generation Mexican-American from a border town in Texas, and more than any other WJU staff, has experienced firsthand the exploitation many low wage workers experience, and the discrimination many immigrants face daily in America. Alberto's

extensive experiential resource bank reinforces his work with WJU in a profound way. Like all of WJU's staff members, Alberto is committed to ending workplace injustice, but his personal experiences with exploitation have given him much insight not only into Wage Theft's economic and social costs, but also the psychological and emotional trauma wage theft and exploitation can cause. Unlike other WJU staff members and supporters who described their motivations in terms of a more general anger about injustice, Alberto's anger was especially focused on the way workers are made to feel.

When asked what employment *should* mean all of WJU's supporters thought work should be rewarding, should involve giving back to community, and obviously should provide an income which would allow a worker and his or her family to live a comfortable life. Employment meant this for Alberto too, but he coupled his discussion with firsthand accounts of what employment *could* mean in the worst circumstances. Alberto repeatedly talked about the way employers would not only exploit their workers by failing to pay them adequately and forcing them to work in unsafe conditions, but he also described the verbal abuse, and utter dehumanization that many workers also face on the job. He claimed that employers saw workers as tools: "objects which have no value outside of their usefulness." He claimed that employers not only exploit their employees, but actively disparage them, telling them both explicitly and implicitly that their "lives are meaningless" and that they "will never amount to anything." Without ever having used the term, Alberto demonstrated that he is motivated to support WJU by nothing less than a desire to fight against the dehumanization encountered by immigrants and workers whose existences are *defined for them* as "meaningless" by employers' words and actions. He claimed that workers come to believe these things, and see their own existence merely as a daily struggle to survive, thinking not about their distant futures or the potential that lies within themselves, but only about their immediate concerns, their next pay check, and their next rent payment.

Alberto's life has been one of unbelievable upward mobility; he went from working all manner of low wage jobs, to being the executive director of an important social movement organization in a major city. He was quick to decry the American Dream as "A lie which dupes immigrants into coming to this country only to work terrible jobs in bad conditions," but, in discussing his own upward mobility and the ambition and drive which have allowed that mobility, it was not difficult to see how, even if he thinks The Dream is a sham, he still abides by its values. Unlike The Dream's promises, which, in all honesty, *are* unrealistic and which he outright rejects, some of the Dream's most important values such as an emphasis on the value of hard work *have* resonated with Alberto's lived experience. Perhaps more than with anyone else, in Alberto's testimony, we can see the value of WJU's frames as interpretive tools. Alberto lived his entire young life bouncing around from exploitative job to exploitative job, working hard and having some success, but it was not until coming to WJU and interpreting his life's experiences through WJU's frames that he came to view his experiences in the way he currently does. However, as a long time staff member at WJU, the former director of its workers center, and its current interregnum director, Alberto's experiences have been absolutely vital to the construction of WJU's frames in the first place and even more importantly to the spread of those frames to the thousands of workers he has connected with over the years.

Alberto's view of the American dream is fairly characteristic of most of the interviews I conducted. On the whole, the members of WJU's staff and its supporters tended to view the

Dream of upward mobility as be a shame at best and a motivator for the exploitation of workers at worst. One exception to this trend was Pastor Daniels, a longtime supporter and WJU board member, who claimed that WJU functions as the “dream’s protector,” a guardian of the dream of upward mobility, homeownership and material, spiritual, and psychological fulfillment. Daniels’ middleclass background probably lent itself to a more positive interpretation of the dream than many other WJU supporters, this is not to say she was uncritical of it, but she was much less critical than Alberto, or Mitch who scoffed at the very idea that the dream could act as a motivator WJU’s supporters.

According to Mitch, the union leader, the Dream unequivocally represented the unlimited acquisition of wealth at the expense of others. Yet for all his criticism, Mitch championed the ability of unions to provide a “comfortable middle class lifestyle” for their members. He spoke with pride about the “value of getting ones hands dirty” and about the awful fact that many people today “look down on working men.” Finally, in his view, employment ought to mean that an individual can provide a comfortable life for oneself and one’s family, that one can own a home and have the security and peace of mind to *enjoy* it, and that “[one] can have enough time for [one’s] faith and family.” Mitch may see the dream as a goal for people bent on accumulating wealth at the cost of others, and in many respects he is right; but, his alternative to that dream, his middle class dream of home ownership, security, and sufficient leisure time to enjoy one’s “faith and family,” as he puts it, is *also* deeply and abidingly present in the cultural history of the American dream whether he identifies with it or not. Although nearly all of WJU’s supporters were critical of Dream in one respect or another, *all* of them none-the-less held views and beliefs which were deeply rooted in the Dream’s cultural history and which appealed to its cultural power as sources of legitimacy. Every supporter I interviewed held the same basic understandings of fairness and justice as they related to workers’ rights, and almost all supporters I interviewed shared similar views about both the intrinsic and extrinsic values of hard work. While they rarely attached these beliefs to the actual phrase itself, and certainly did not talk about historical figures who embodied the Dream, their views about work and fairness are held in common by many Americans and few cultural sources can explain their prevalence better than the American Dream.

Conclusion

The American Dream is reliant the concept of *fairness* for its plausibility and legitimacy. The Dream cannot even exist as a concept, much less function as a powerful cultural narrative without an assumption of equal opportunity, which, at its core, is about fairness. In essence, the very fact that many of the people I interviewed saw the dream as a sham proves this point. Why did they not believe in the dream? Because their lived experiences have shown that, at least the dream of upward mobility, is not a true possibility for many people because there is no true equality of opportunity, i.e. the system is not fair. In no small way, WJU’s “faith and justice” frame, like these peoples experiences, not only draws heavily on some of the Dream’s most central concepts, but the contentious nature of that frame is also deeply critical of some of the Dream’s conventional interpretations.

Capitalism badly needs the cultural support of American Dream; it elevates values which are central to capitalism’s proper functioning. Capitalism’s entire logic relies on ideas such as competition, individualism, and private property. Without those components capitalism simply

could not exist, and the American Dream, in many ways, reinforces those concepts in American's minds. The Dream, as it is sometimes interpreted, is a dream of upward mobility with no limits and one which is to be achieved at any cost. This Dream is one of unlimited wealth acquisition, and one which can easily become a cultural justification for paying employees meager wages, and when taken to extremes, can even come to justify breaking labor laws. As far as the American Dream of upward mobility is concerned, anyone can "make it big" with hard work, meaning that those who have "made it big" have earned it and should be praised for their thrift, ingenuity, and work ethic, and alternately, that those who have not "made it" have failed to do so due to a lack of intelligence or initiative.

Chances are, were we to ask employers why they break employment labor laws they would probably mention neither the American Dream, nor the pursuit of their own self-interests, nor even would they say that their employees "deserved" to be exploited. Most likely, they would point to their own financial struggles and discuss employees' "freedom" to change jobs. They might highlight the excellent services and products their businesses provide for the public, or they might emphasize how they are doing employees and society a "favor" by providing jobs, they might even talk about how they built their businesses from the ground up, how hard they have worked, or how much they have sacrificed to keep those businesses afloat. Even if all of these things are true, and regardless of other appeals they might make, those employers would always be appealing to a basic set of ideals such as fairness, hard work, and self-reliance, all ideas present at the core of the American Dream.

What is interesting is how similar these sentiments are to the statements made by WJU's supporters who also appeal to ideas of hard-work, fairness, and equality. Somehow the American Dream is able to simultaneously provide justifications and cultural legitimations for these two diametrically opposed groups. This is possible only because the American Dream is utterly open to interpretation, and this quality coupled with its immense power make it a culturally-available source of legitimacy for almost any group or practice. However, because of The Dream's historical role as capitalist cultural support structure, WJU's frames are inherently reactionary.

WJU is, in essence, using the logic of capitalism to critique it from within. Feminist theorist and poet Audre Lorde's now famous aphorism, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" applies well to third wave feminism's realization that the lives of women of color and of non-normative sexual orientation cannot be embodied by a straight white women's framework. However, it is far less applicable to WJU's framing techniques. WJU's frames appeal to the capitalism's cultural "power tools" which, because of their power, can prove useful in dismantling the master's house's "frame" and the physical, cultural, and psychological structures which keep it standing. WJU is not attempting to tear down the house as much as undermine its structures from within. Its frames work within the system by *reinterpreting* its ideology, rather than subverting it entirely, by using the logic and language of the American Dream and the symbolism, and social networks of organized religion to push for a broad change in society's understanding of workers' rights.

Appealing to cultural ideas means appealing to interpretations, and interpretations are necessarily bounded by experience. Because cultural ideas such as the American dream and religiosity are both interpreted in light of experience, and provide an interpretive lens through which to understand experience, they also both provide powerful cultural legitimation, and form bounded cultural limitations. While it is not difficult to see the connection between culture and

movement framing, this is not the only dialectic process afoot. Not only do social movement frames draw inspiration and legitimation from cultural narratives such as the American dream, but in the active interpretive meaning making process of movement framing, SMOs are also *creating culture*.

Although frames are bounded by, and derive their legitimacy from, culture, if they become widely accepted by the public they can act back upon thresholds of cultural acceptability, widening them, and ultimately creating a sort of feedback loop. As frames change culture, new, broadly accepted, interpretations of cultural narratives come to influence social movement actors. Social movements not only generate interpretive lenses for use by their supporters, but are important sources of experience and meaning supporters' lives. Because human consciousness develops out of experience, and social movements act as powerful sources of experiences in the lives of their participants, especially when the frames they use resonate with larger cultural ideas, social movements, in essence, become active participants in the development of their supporters' consciousness. To the extent that they provide powerful and culturally connected experiences and interpretive frames which define norms and values and aid in participants' comprehension of the cultural environment, social movements and their organizations serve as important sources of meaning in the development of supporters' identities.

In the same way movement frames both influence and are influenced by individual agents. Individuals make meaning in their lives out of a dialectic relationship with other individuals, institutions (including social movements) and tangible and intangible expressions of cultural narratives. People's agency comes from their specific interpretation of things around them through the lenses of the amalgamation of their prior experiences. No two people will have the same experiences, so no two people will have the same interpretation of their cultural and experiential circumstances. People do, however, have shared experiences, such as common exposure to social movement frames or to cultural ideas such as the American Dream which are omnipresent in people's lives. This whole process comes together when we realize that social movement frames are not constructed by social movements at all, but by individuals who construct frames and create meaning and culture in the process. Culture is not real; it only exists, and persists in people, it is learned through shared experiences, and it is externalized by individuals who, in their interactions with others, spread ideas, and reinforce norms. The dialogue between the cultural narratives, social movement organizations, and individuals is an evolving and continual one carried out in the interactions of leaders, supporters, and outsiders, as well as, and possibly more importantly, in the minds of movement participants as they try to make meaning of not only those interactions but of society, culture, and reality at large.

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