The Making of Oppositional Consciousness

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How can human beings be induced to give their lives—even one minute of their lives—for their group? This is a question every nation, every social movement, indeed every social organization, has had to face. One answer is somehow to arrange incentives so that in doing what is good for themselves, people also do what is good for the group. The market often works this way. So do Nobel prizes. Another answer is to convince people that because of the principles they hold or how they feel about the group, they should contribute to the group, even when this is not rewarding in other ways—and sometimes even when it will cost them their lives.

Successful social movements, like other successful social organizations, tap into as many kinds of incentives as possible. This book looks at one constellation of incentives that applies to historically subordinated groups—a constellation composed of the principles, ideas, and feelings that we call "oppositional consciousness." Although we will explore the meanings of the term at length in the last chapter, for now the easiest way to understand oppositional consciousness is to think about what people have meant with the words "class consciousness" and apply the same logic to other groups, such as women or African Americans. We say that members of a group that others have traditionally treated as subordinate or deviant have an oppositional consciousness when they claim their previously subordinate identity as a positive identification, identify injustices done to their group, demand changes in the polity, economy, or society to rectify those injustices, and see other members of their group as sharing an interest in rectifying those injustices. "Oppositional consciousness" is the umbrella term. Class, race, and other forms of group consciousness are specific instances.

Our project is fundamentally inductive. We present six cases from recent United States history, based on participant observation and interviews, that reveal in some historical detail how different groups actually develop and use what we call oppositional consciousness. Each of these cases features groups—African Americans, people with disabilities, sexually harassed women, Chicano workers, and gay men and lesbians—whose outrage at their situation had at one point been kept under
control by a dominant set of ideas that portrayed their situations as natural, normal, or in any case not unjust. Each group, and each case, demonstrates some complexity in the practice and theory of oppositional consciousness. In focusing on complexity rather than order, we try to follow the empirically oriented path blazed by E. P. Thompson, who detailed how the nineteenth-century English working class overcame the dominant ideas of its time and began to see itself as a distinct class whose interests conflicted with those of factory owners. We ask how versions of this process have applied to other subordinate groups and those who identify deeply with such groups.

By a subordinated group we mean a group subordinate in a system of social organization in which members of one group create and reinforce inequalities between themselves and members of another group through the exercise of power, that is, the threat of sanction and the imposition of constraint. That exercise of power may be conscious and intentional, as in the institution of slavery. It does not, however, require individual intent, as in many cases of gender inequality. Members of a group with the power to make a decision that affects others may, without conscious intent, simply not take into account the interests or perspectives of members of a group with less power. They may only choose a course of action that is in their interests with little recognition of how that choice affects others. Everyone has had the experience of harming others by “just not thinking.” When harm or disadvantage is imposed this way consistently over time, because the members of one group consistently have more power than the members of another, the process creates and reinforces a pattern of domination and subordination.

The essays in this book use the word “oppression” to describe the unjust exercise of power by a dominant group over a subordinate group. The concept of oppression as English speakers use it today derives in the most influential early instance from the experience of the Jews in Egypt. Although all the well-known Mediterranean philosophies and religions evince a strong concern for injustice, the Hebrew Bible carved out a special concern for a form of injustice that in English is traditionally translated as “oppression.” The Hebrew, indeed, has at least four separate roots for words that the King James Bible translates as “oppression.”

When these words appear (particularly in the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy), the context reveals that “oppression” involves the unjust use of power by the more powerful against those less powerful and more vulnerable by virtue of their social position. Conceptually, oppression usually applies to groups rather than individuals, and it is used when members of more powerful groups use their power to take advantage of members of more structurally vulnerable groups. The Jewish people’s slavery in Egypt is archetypal. Jewish tradition makes that experience central, in both the yearly Seder and many other group-defining references. In the Exodus story, God’s command forbids oppression:

“No shall neither vex [wrong] a stranger, nor oppress him: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt.” That command is strong and personal. It reminds the Jews of their own group’s past experiences in Egypt, and so may even ask for, or draw upon, some form of empathy for those vulnerable to oppression. The groups whom “thou shalt not oppress” include not only widows and orphans, for whom the New Testament and the Koran urge compassion and charity (without mentioning oppression), but also, more challengingly, the “stranger within your midst” and your “hireling.” Neither Christianity nor Islam suggests a particular care for either strangers or workers. The Hebrew Bible singles them out, along with widows and orphans, presumably because their weaker structural positions vis-à-vis the powerful make them vulnerable to others’ power.

This underlying meaning of oppression as the unjust use of greater power by one group against another, maintained without emphasis in the European Middle Ages, was picked up and used extensively both in the American Revolution and in the early antislavery movement. In Europe the concept then became much used in socialist and Marxist writing. In the United States it peppered abolitionist and populist thought. Christian slave spirituals preserved intact the meaning from Exodus: “When Israel was in Egypt’s land—Let my people go—Oppressed so hard they could not stand. . . .” Although the New Testament rarely uses words that are translated into English as “oppression,” Christianity nevertheless treats the Hebrew Bible as a sacred text. Thus in the Christian as well as the Jewish tradition the embedded heritage of God’s implacable opposition to oppression gave subordinate groups a strong claim for rectification of wrongs rooted in the unjust power that one group could wield against another.

A group is oppressed only if its position in a particular hierarchical system derives from unjust inequalities that result from the exercise of power (in the sense of threat of sanction or imposition of constraint). Injustice and power are central. But any conclusion that a particular group has been deeply affected by this form of power is subject to contest. So is any conclusion that a particular hierarchy is unjust. In any given system of inequality, those higher in the hierarchy will have an interest in claiming that existing inequalities derive not from the unequal exercise of power but from other causes; those lower in the hierarchy will have, to some degree, an interest in the opposite claim.
Yet those lower in the hierarchy also have incentives not to challenge the naturalness of inequality. Challenging the interpretation of the dominant group can result in punishment so severe or pervasive that subordinates will go a long way toward adopting the dominant interpretation. Inequalities in power have their most insidious effect when the dominant group has so much control over the ideas available to other members of the society that the conceptual categories required to challenge the status quo hardly exist. Ideological hegemony of this sort pervades every human society in ways that are, by definition, hard to bring to conscious awareness.7

We have only recently come to understand how hard it is to resist the dominant ideas of one's time. By the mid-nineteenth century, doubts had begun to emerge about the eighteenth-century vision in which the free play of ideas would eventually produce a rational world. Karl Marx and John Stuart Mill, who differed dramatically on many things, agreed that the distribution of power in society had a profound influence on its receptiveness to particular ideas. Marx wrote, "The ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of the ruling class." Mill's judgment was almost identical: "Wherever there is an ascendant class, a large portion of the morality of the country emanates from its class interests." More than a century later Michel Foucault carried this line of thinking to its logical conclusion. "Power," he wrote, "is already there. . . one is never 'outside' it. . . there are no 'margins' for those who break with the system to gambol in. . . . Power is co-extensive with the social body; there are no spaces of primal liberty between the meshes of its network."8

Foucault is also famous for recognizing that "there are no relations of power without resistance. . . formed right at the point where relations of power are exercised." But his own writings stressed the effects of power rather than the creation of resistance. When in one essay he encountered instances of such resistance he called them "curious," "strange," and "amazing."79 His theory of resistance—which he did not elaborate—seems to have assumed a given refusal to be subordinated rooted somewhere in every human being. This is where oppositional consciousness comes in. To form an effective basis for collective action, gut refusals need cognitive and emotional organizing. They need an injustice frame. They need ideology.10 They need an apparatus involving both reason and emotion that can trigger the switch from shame to anger.

Oppositional consciousness as we define it is an empowering mental state that prepares members of an oppressed group to act to undermine, reform, or overthrow a system of human domination. It is usually fueled by righteous anger over injustices done to the group and prompted by personal indignities and harms suffered through one's group membership. At a minimum, oppositional consciousness includes the four elements of identifying with members of a subordinate group, identifying injustices done to that group, opposing those injustices, and seeing the group as having a shared interest in ending or diminishing those injustices. A more full-fledged oppositional consciousness includes identifying a specific dominant group as causing and in some way benefiting from those injustices. It also includes seeing certain actions of the dominant group as forming a "system" of some kind that advances the interests of the dominant group. Finally, it can include a host of other ideas, beliefs, and feelings that provide coherence, explanation, and moral condemnation.11

It is not easy to describe a particular "consciousness." As we use it, the term implies some special sensitivity to certain features of the outside world rather than others. A particular consciousness draws one's rational and emotive attention to big and small things—big political events, reported in the media, and small inflections of voice, or the way of "owning the world" in which one person sits and the way of taking orders (or notes) in another's stance. Consciousness also transforms. Oppositional consciousness takes free-floating frustration and directs it into anger. It turns strangers into brothers and sisters, and turns feelings for these strangers from indifference into love. It builds on ideas and facts to generate hope. Cognitive and emotive processes mix together, as an emotion focuses a cognition and a cognition triggers an emotion. (Indeed, in such processes the very words "cognition" and "emotion" may impede our understanding if we take each to imply that it is the antonym of the other.)12

Although consciousness is, by definition, internal to an individual's mind, the kind of consciousness that we describe is inextricably derived from the social world. We learn who we "are" from the social world. We appreciate those who like us and "our kind," and we react defensively toward those who seem to attack us and our kind or seem not to have our interests at heart. We learn the meaning of justice from our own and others' interpretations of the social world. We develop particular forms of consciousness in particular historical moments when certain political opportunities, certain mobilizing institutions and certain repertoires of action and self-understanding become available.13

Our social settings and our particular needs and proclivities always give us both many forms of identity and many forms of consciousness
prompted by our senses of identity and our experiences. We make some identities more salient at some times, and events make some identities more salient at some times. Sometimes our identities articulate relatively harmoniously with one another; sometimes they conflict and we need consciously to insist on their multiplicity or craft social situations that reinforce their multiplicity; sometimes we can compartmentalize and emphasize our differences, perhaps conflicting, identities in different places. In all situations, when we give names to who we are we analogize ourselves with others and think of ourselves as members of a group. In many situations, however, this identity is not simply self-chosen; it is also partly given by others. When an identity at least partly given by others is a marker for social injustices imposed on members of one’s group, one’s consciousness will inevitably reflect those injustices, but not in predictable ways. Only in some historical situations will what we call “oppositional consciousness” arise. We cannot disentangle the individual and social elements in such a group-based consciousness, because the group-based element is irreducibly social, even more than other elements of the self.14

Just as the meaning of “class consciousness” is highly contested, so too must the meaning of “oppositional consciousness” be contested. Yet most scholars agree that such a consciousness, however hard to define, plays an important causal role in the motivation to work for those social movements that we call “liberation movements.”15 The last chapter of this book will explore further the components we have identified in the meaning of oppositional consciousness, while leaving the field open for further reflection, analysis, and observation. The examples in the substantive chapters will illustrate how a consciousness is based in part on defending oneself and one’s kind from domination differs in some important ways from other forms of moral commitment. Most importantly, we want to show that oppositional consciousness is not a single thing that one “has” or “doesn’t have.” We want to show that it is not one point in a binary but a loose continuum, not a unity but a congeries of competing elements, and not static but constantly changing in its content.

As this book describes the making of various forms of oppositional consciousness among several different groups in the United States, it aims to open up subtleties in the concept, helping us understand better the way oppositional consciousness is formed—through struggles among different oppositional traditions, clusters of both cognate and competing elements, divides and continuities in cultural strands, syntheses of previously disparate elements, borrowings from likely and unlikely sources, and the transmutation of new inflections into central themes, which then serve as the ideational source for further inflections and transmutations. Oppositional consciousness is not the same for different groups. It is deeply colored by the objective structural position of a group within a system of domination and subordination, the obvious injustices versus the presumed naturalness of its subordination, the degree of the group’s physical and cultural segregation from the dominant group, and the degree of voluntariness in its distinctness from the dominant norm.16

The pattern we see is not “the stronger the oppression, the stronger the oppositional consciousness.” That is true in some cases. But, as we stress constantly, consciousness is historically contingent. Oppositional consciousness requires ideational resources—ideas available in the culture that can be built upon to create legitimacy, a perception of injustice, righteous anger, solidarity, and a belief in the group’s power. It requires emotional involvement and commitment. It also requires institutional resources. The cultural materials required come in sedimented layers. Individuals in the subordinate group must be brought together by existing or developing institutions in order to help one another dig into those layers, recognize, borrow, modify, inflect, and selectively inflate and suppress elements from the existing culture to craft what then become new ideas.

Luck plays some role in the evolution of ideas. A catchy name, like a catchy tune, can carry an idea forward independently of its intrinsic merits. The existing schemas of all participants—dominant, subordinate, and mixed—also count heavily. As the chapters in this book will reveal, some religious traditions (such as the Judaic), some past practices (such as physical segregation), some legal and institutional settings (such as a law against discrimination), some geographical patterns (such as migration routes), some patterns of self-interest among the players (such as those of elected politicians), and some conscious strategies (such as those of movement activists) can greatly facilitate or impede the development of both oppositional consciousness and group unity.

As members of subordinate groups try to recognize, name, and challenge the structures of power that often underlie even the seemingly most neutral or benign of surfaces, they can usually draw on one or more of the following resources—as each of our chapters will indicate. An existing oppositional culture provides ideas, rituals, and long-standing patterns of interaction that overt political struggle can refine and develop to create a more mature oppositional consciousness. Other key resources include: a history of segregation with some autonomy, providing “free spaces” for the elaboration and testing of ideas; borrowing from previous successful movements; the synthesis of more than one oppositional strand, creating
more than the sum of its parts; mutually supportive interaction, bridging divides in emotional commitments, political opinions, and material interests; and conscious creativity by activists, drawing on the traditions and practices of everyday life. Each chapter in this book investigates at least one of these resources.  

Making Sense of the Patterns

The chapters in this book illustrate the complex patterns of negotiation, struggle, coalescence and division, borrowing, and crafting that characterize the formation of oppositional consciousness. Perceiving injustice, recognizing a need for collective action, feeling efficacy, and all the other components of an oppositional consciousness emerge (or do not emerge) from the warp and woof of everyday experience. These patterns are all undergirded by certain material relations, including, at the base, the underlying structures of historical domination with which each group must deal. Each chapter is grounded in a specific historical reality and shows how oppositional consciousness works in the concrete experience of a particular group. Each chapter illustrates a particular theoretical point about the character of oppositional consciousness.

Bringing Domination Back In

In chapter 2, "Social Movements and Oppositional Consciousness," Aldon Morris and Naomi Braine point out that symbolic and ethnomethodological approaches tend to underemphasize issues of domination and oppression. "Liberation movements," or movements based on historical structures of domination, differ in several important ways from movements based on concern about social problems. In movements based on historical structures of domination, like the civil rights movement, a group's segregation often plays a key role in generating oppositional consciousness. When segregation is minimal, as between men and women, subordinate groups need to create autonomous spaces in order to craft an oppositional consciousness. Consciousness-raising in small groups, for example, helped launch the "second wave" of the women's movement. This particular dynamic, of developing oppositional consciousness in "safe spaces" controlled by the oppressed groups themselves, does not apply to movements based on concern for social problems.

"Equality-based special issue movements," such as the pro-choice movement, address social problems that disproportionately affect a particular oppressed group. Some of the participants in these movements do not address the full struggle to reform or overthrow large-scale systems of human domination. They focus on the special issue in and of itself, while nevertheless appropriating the symbols and operating styles of liberation movements. Other participants have developed a commitment to the issue only because they see it as an integral part of the larger struggle. Such participants are members both of the larger liberation movement and the special issue movement. Equality-based special issue movements differ both among themselves and over time in how much their members are committed to the larger liberation movement and how much to the special issue.

"Social responsibility movements," such as the antinuclear movement, address social problems that affect humanity in general. Participants usually do not have a personal history, directly related to the movement, of being oppressed through the most obvious systems of human domination. They thus find it harder to draw from a long-standing oppositional culture as they try to create their collective identities and injustice frames.

This distinction between liberation movements and other forms of social movement draws attention to the particular challenges faced by groups that are subordinate in an existing system of human domination. It is they who develop oppositional consciousness and use it in their struggle to end that domination. As other groups face power structures that oppose their ends, their activists too must craft new identities as part of their commitments to their cause. Members of liberation groups, however, have both an easier and a harder task. They do not need to create almost from scratch an identity primed for collective action. They already have a deeply meaningful identity embodying the pride, strength, and hope collectively nurtured by their group since that group gained any consciousness of itself. But that identity is also already externally—and oppressively—described. The task of calling on past cultural resources in the struggle to redefine that identity often releases immense creativity, giving rise to symbols, rituals, strategies, and other cultural inventions that have lasting meaning and that, on occasion, other groups can fruitfully adapt.

All of the chapters in this book analyze facets of oppositional consciousness within liberation movements. The great diversity in the situations of the groups they describe is anchored by a strong common structural similarity: each of these groups is, or claims to be, subordinate in an ongoing system of domination. This structural position has major effects on the identities of the individuals in these groups as well as on the symbolic and cultural repertoires available to them for collective action.
Borrowings, Inflections, Continua, Synthesis: Oppositional Civic Culture in the Black Church

In chapter 3, "Religious Resources in an Oppositional Civic Culture," Fredrick C. Harris visits a prayer breakfast on the campaign trail of former senator Carol Moseley-Braun. In this breakfast, Moseley-Braun and her supporters draw upon an existing oppositional culture in the African American community to create a moment of political solidarity and inspiration. In the tradition of the civil rights movement, they freely borrow from both the Old and New Testaments. Familiar stories come out of this process inflected in new ways. David, of the David and Goliath story, becomes female. Moseley-Braun herself, working for the Black community in the halls of White power, becomes a "modern-day Esther," who saves the Israelites by standing up for her people. Passages from the New Testament urging on the faithful take on political overtones: "...for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not." Gospel hymns stress the power of the weak ("Little becomes much when you place it in the Master's hand"), as do New Testament prophesies that "the last shall be first, and the first shall be last." Each story from the Bible, now many times recounted over the centuries of African American slavery, the Jim Crow era, and the civil rights movement, undergoes one more iteration, one more inflection, one more subtle interpretation. The process brings into a moment of late twentieth-century politics strands of ideas forged by the civil rights movement, strands forged earlier in slavery, and some strands forged generations ago by the oppositional movements of Judaism in Egypt and Christianity in Israel.

Moseley-Braun's breakfast meeting and Harris's other observations from the politics of the Black church reveal the uses of biblical imagery to craft what Harris calls an "oppositional civic culture." That culture performs at one time the two seemingly contradictory functions of opposing the prevailing racial hierarchy and rooting its participants more deeply in the civic structures of the United States.

The chapter introduces the concept of oppositional civic culture and at the same time illustrates some of the differences between oppositional "culture" and oppositional "consciousness." Oppositional consciousness focuses on injustice. Leaders in the Moseley-Braun breakfast, working within both traditional electoral politics and social movement politics, brought together participants with varying degrees of oppositional consciousness. In the ceremony itself they did not draw heavily on the theme of injustice that is central to oppositional consciousness. Rather, reaching into the available oppositional civic culture, they drew on strands—such as the power of the weak against the strong—more appropriate to a mainstream electoral event.

Negotiations, Struggles, Clusters, Divides, Borrowing, Inflection: A Story of Physical Segregation and "Free Spaces"

In chapter 4, "Free Spaces: Creating Oppositional Consciousness in the Disability Rights Movement," Sharon Groch documents how activists in the disability rights movement consciously created images, slogans, literature, humor, rituals, and other cultural expressions by drawing from the deaf and blind cultures formed in segregated residential schools and from the legacy of the civil rights movement.

The oppositional consciousness of deaf people in the United States has traditionally been much stronger than that of blind people. Groch's nuanced history shows why. Segregation itself, she reveals, helps create collective identity, but only the control by members of some autonomous ("free") spaces, as in the history of deaf people in the United States, allows the development of the full counter-narrative and conviction of injustice necessary for oppositional consciousness. Blind people did not have as much autonomous control of their own spaces, and so developed a less thoroughgoing oppositional consciousness.

In contrast to segregation, integration permits developing the weaknesses that promote elite connections. Mobility-impaired people, who were far more integrated into nondisabled society than deaf or blind people, had these advantages of integration. Yet they had had no history of autonomous spaces in which to develop their consciousness. Accordingly, they attained oppositional consciousness only through interaction with the civil rights movement. Keeping the disability movement creative and nonhierarchical often requires careful negotiation between members of groups whose past and present segregation has brought them the advantages of forming an oppositional consciousness and members of groups whose past and present integration has brought them the advantages of elite contact.

The comparison among disability groups in this chapter gives powerful evidence for the effects of physical segregation and autonomy on oppositional consciousness.

Borrowing, Inflection, Continua, Synthesis: Movement Permeability, with Actors along a Spectrum of Oppositional Consciousness

For chapter 5, "A Spectrum in Oppositional Consciousness: Sexual Harassment Plaintiffs and Their Lawyers," Anna-Marie Marshall interviewed nineteen attorneys and four plaintiffs in landmark sexual harassment
cases. Based in the lives and choices of these different individuals, her analysis reveals how disparate are the incentives for participating in social change through legal action. Some of her attorneys and plaintiffs were steeped in the oppositional consciousness of the feminist movement and supported by movement institutions. Others were only distantly or not at all connected. One plaintiff, reporting an act of harassment, checked "sex discrimination" on the complaint form at her workplace only because she could not find a more appropriate box to check. That act helped her lawyer to think of the harassment as a form of discrimination and present it that way in court. One lawyer took what would become a precedent-setting case only because he needed work and some friends of his had given his business card to the waitress at a restaurant where they were having lunch. Yet each of these different actors borrowed the institutional machinery and interpretive frame of the civil rights movement, which had produced the concept and practice of antidiscrimination legislation. All also borrowed, in greater or lesser degrees, an interpretive frame introduced by the feminist movement.

This massive borrowing from a set of congruent conceptual frames and institutional guarantees made it possible for some individuals who had little or no oppositional consciousness to take steps that matched the steps of others who lived and breathed the work of the movement. Together, their individualistic and collective moves combined with the existing institutional machinery of the legal system to generate the interpretive and institutional outcome that we now know as sexual harassment law. This chapter introduces the idea of permeability in a social movement's boundaries. Most importantly, it illustrates how individuals can contribute to a social movement from different places on a spectrum of oppositional consciousness (including not having even a minimal oppositional consciousness). It reveals how social movements are brought forward by a mix of activists, steeped in oppositional consciousness, and nonactivists, influenced only indirectly in their ideas and actions by the movement.

Borrowing, Inflection, and Negotiation: A Story of Synthesis and Historical Contingency

In chapter 6, "Cristaleño Consciousness: Mexican-American Activism between Crystal City, Texas, and Wisconsin, 1963–80," Marc Simon Rodríguez locates the origin of the La Raza movement in the historically specific confluence of two originally separate strands of oppositional culture and consciousness. Mexican-American workers in Crystal City, Texas, had traditionally practiced many forms of resistance to the Anglo landowners and power holders of the area. They had also developed a rich linguistic and cultural apparatus for interpreting the injustice of their situation. This tradition encountered a second strand when the Political Association of Spanish-Speaking Organizations and the Pueblos began to integrate the town of Crystal City into the larger world of organized politics and labor. In 1963 these two organizations helped five Chicanos run for city council and win. But the crucial moment came when the traditional migration patterns of picking beets, corn, and tomatoes took the now politically primed Cristaleño workers to the states of Wisconsin and Minnesota and brought them together with the strong progressive "Farmer-Labor" culture and institutions in these states. Because many younger workers now had the high-school degrees required for employment in many industries, they could finally get union jobs and "settle out" in these new states, creating a political and union base on which the migrants could rely. The two traditions, from Crystal City and the progressive Midwest, created a heady synthesis made even more explosive by institutional and cultural interaction with the civil rights movement in Milwaukee. That synthesis resulted in several successes and the eventual creation of the La Raza Unida Party. This chapter illustrates vividly both the processes of synthesis and the historical contingency in the formation of oppositional consciousness.

Negotiation, Struggle, and Divide: Internal Differentiation within Oppositional Consciousness

In chapter 7, "Divided Consciousness: The Impact of Black Elite Consciousness on the 1966 Chicago Freedom Movement," Lori G. Waite details the problems the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. encountered when he brought the Freedom Movement to Chicago in 1966. All of the African Americans who actively struggled both for King's intervention in Chicago and against him were imbued with some form of oppositional consciousness, deriving from African American oppositional culture and from their identification with (although not always participation in) the recent civil rights movement in the South. Yet that oppositional consciousness did not bring them unity. The disunity that doomed King's intervention was rooted both in class divisions and in elite power divisions. King's forces were unable in the new circumstances of Chicago to find an issue that united African Americans across class. Most importantly, both the Black politicians of the Daley machine and many local Black ministers had material and ideological interests that differed from King's. They were not excluded from the polity, as in the South, but were in many ways participants in the polity. Thus although all elite participants in this
struggle partook in some ways in an oppositional consciousness, their differing structural positions, material interests, and strategic or ideological perspectives prevented political unity. Waite's interviews suggest that these structural positions and material interests rarely affected political stances directly, but instead worked through interpretive schemas that generated variations in oppositional consciousness that participants on both sides of the issue could use to defend their political stances to themselves.

This chapter introduces the concept of internally differentiated oppositional consciousness. It reveals how structural variations within a system of oppression—in this case different degrees of inclusion within the polity—produce dramatically different and conflicting visions of oppositional consciousness, resulting in this case in disunity that was for that moment politically disabling.

Borrowing, Inflected, Negotiation, Synthesis, and Conscious Cultural Creation: Fighting Oppression by the Oppressed

In chapter 8, "Forging a Multidimensional Oppositional Consciousness: Lessons from Community-Based AIDS Activism," Brett C. Stoddard chronicles the efforts of the AIDS movement in three U.S. cities to create a consciousness that opposes all oppression. As AIDS activists struggled within their own groups against dominance by sex, race, and class, they also found it crucial to build coalitions, devise strategies, and recruit activists in ways that drew upon the existing culture and institutions in Black, Latino, and Asian communities. Cultural forays on many fronts had the goal of creating both new attitudes toward sexuality and new, empowered identities for gays and lesbians of color. In the process, the activists found themselves fighting not only the power of the dominant groups but also the dynamics of the oppressed as oppressor.

This chapter introduces the concept of multidimensional consciousness. It also reveals both how the experience of one sort of oppression does not easily generalize to understanding another's oppression and how conscious cultural creativity can foster that process of generalization.

Definitions, Power, Problems

Our understanding of oppositional consciousness casts this mental state as the analogue of "class consciousness" extended to all groups subordinate in an ongoing system of human domination. Future scholars may, however, find it useful if we try to tease apart the different components of oppositional consciousness as we see it. Chapter 9, "Complicating Oppositional Consciousness," analytically distinguishes stages of realization that one's own group is different from another group, that the groups are unequal, that the inequalities are unjust and systemic, that only group action can eliminate the inequalities, and that group action can succeed. It distinguishes these stages from the other states of identification, warmth, opposition, and anger, which can enter at almost any time. It argues that the four components of a "minimal" oppositional consciousness—identifying with the group, recognizing injustice, demanding rectification, and seeing shared interest—all must center on the recognition of injustice. A more "full-fledged" or "mature" oppositional consciousness includes other elements, such as identifying some of the ways a dominant group systematically uses power to initiate and maintain its position, the moral condemnation of the forms of domination, and usually some set of strategies—historical, culturally derived, or borrowed—for ending the system of domination.

Our case studies and theoretical formulations, however, repeatedly make the point that oppositional consciousness is not one thing but many. It comes in a continuum, not a dichotomy—and a messy continuum at that. There are many points of entry and many cognitive and emotional features that differ from individual to individual. Oppositional consciousness is negotiated in particular cultural contexts, blending many historical and cultural streams.

Throughout we argue that a group’s structural position in a complex of power relations affects both its likelihood of developing an oppositional consciousness and how its movement will develop. The deaf had a different relation to the system of power in which they were embedded than did the mobility impaired. Martin Luther King’s followers had a different relation to the system of power in Chicago in 1968 than in Birmingham in 1966. The Cristalesinos developed a different relationship to Anglo landlord power when the Teamsters entered Crystal City, and a different relation still as their migrations introduced them to the ideas and institutions of the Farmer-Labor states of Wisconsin and Minnesota. Political opportunities affect the process, as do cultural opportunities.

A central theme in this volume is that cultural forms and institutions created for one purpose can be appropriated for another and differently inflected. So African American politicians appropriated and transformed ideas and symbols from the Old and New Testaments. So sexually harassed women appropriated and transformed ideas and legal forms that had developed from the civil rights movement, from an existing U.S. culture that gave rights a central place, and from legal institutions that had themselves developed from both the civil rights movement and that larger culture.
Activist intentions play a major role in the process of creating oppositional consciousness, as activists consciously decide to synthesize ideas, symbols, collective identities, injustice frames, and cultures of solidarity. The mobility impaired in the disabled movement, for example, engaged in conscious culture work. ACT UP and other organizations in the AIDS movement deliberately engaged the culture of the communities in which they were active.

In the emergence of an oppositional culture, by contrast, activist intentions play a far smaller role. Here the usual process is that incrementally throughout history members of a group, often unconsciously, select and play up some themes in the larger culture while they ignore and downplay others. Both in the creation of oppositional culture and in the maintenance of social movements, nonactivists play critical roles as they selectively adapt and use existing cultural themes or themes that activists have promoted.

Oppositional consciousness is not always good for the subordinate group. The cases here primarily chronicle successes, but in chapter 9 we look briefly at certain drawbacks. The problems inherent in oppositional consciousness include exaggerating both one's difference from the dominant group and the identity of interests within one's own group, a learned inability to process information that does not fit one's ideological context, and the dangers of essentialism.

In the analysis presented here, oppositional consciousness functions as an intermediate factor, or variable, that is caused by and also causes some of the important dynamics of social movements. When the members of some groups systematically exercise coercive power over the members of others, the resulting pattern of domination is the first, primal cause of the oppressed group's eventual liberation movement. To the degree that the coercive power is overt, it will be noticed. The coerced will form first an oppositional culture that simply resists, and eventually an oppositional consciousness that spells out the workings of injustice, the need to act collectively, and the possibilities of success in collective action. When political opportunities open and sufficient resources, including social networks, are in place, oppositional consciousness then acts as a cause, helping to bring an effective social movement into being.

Notes

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1. These terms need some explanation. A good broad definition of "power" is "the actual or potential causal relation between the interests of an actor or a set of actors and the outcome itself" (adapted from Nagel 1975, 29). By focusing on cause, Nagel's definition avoids imputations of intent and allows anticipations of future events to cause present behavior. As a broad conceptual umbrella, this definition also covers what Mary Parker Follett, William Connolly, and many feminist theorists have called "power to" or "power with" as well as "power over." (For "power to," Fong et al. 1992; Connolly 1994; "power over," see Follett [1924] 1942; Arndt [1965] 1965; Connolly 1974; Hartsook 1974; Starhawk 1987. For the positive uses of "power over," see Wartenberg 1990, Mансbridge 1996.) We adopt here a narrower meaning, covering only those kinds of power that derive from the threat of sanction and the imposition of constraint. These are kinds of "power over," or "coercion." (Note that this definition of power does not encompass positive inducement—an important form of power that, if asymmetries are great enough, may amount to coercion; see Barry [1975] 1991.)

2. By "threat of sanction" we mean an inducement produced by the perception of future harm conditional on nonperformance of a desired action or inaction. By the "imposition of constraint" (sometimes called "force," e.g., in Bacharach and Baratz 1963, Lukes 1974, Mansbridge 1996), we mean a method of causing B to act in A's interests that does not involve B's choice. If I carry you out of the room in such a way that your will on the matter is irrelevant, my action involves constraint (or "force"). By contrast, if I threaten a sanction, by telling you I will shoot you unless you leave, my getting what I desire (your leaving) involves, to a small degree, your will. You can always refuse to leave, and although I shoot you, I will not have gained your leaving. The imposition of constraint, which does not involve the will of the constrained, is implicated in many systemic attributes such as law. It includes building a set of structures in which some choices are not possible. It includes making decisions that preclude different later decisions. It differs from the threat of sanction in one important way. Although power as the threat of sanction always involves resistance or the possibility of resistance, power as the imposition of constraint is sometimes impossible to resist. Although Michel Foucault seems not to have recognized this distinction (see below, text and note 9 and 13), it compels us even to try to interpret his statement that "there are no relations of power without resistances" as applying only to power as the threat of sanction.

3. See Young 1990, 45, on intent.

4. Exodus 22:21. Although Cohen (1972) and others have argued that "empathy" is a modern phenomenon, these passages may suggest otherwise.

5. E.g., the Declaration of Independence (1776) refers to the English crown's unjust exercise of powers as "Oppressions"; in Federalist 10 (1788) James Madison warns against the majority's "oppression.

6. Young 1990, for example, identifies five "faces of oppression." Her analysis usefully helps identify the many ways in which dominant groups can exert their power. As a definitive set of criteria by which one can identify "oppression" it too has been contested (see Kymlicka 1995, 145).

7. This process appears, for example, in language that encodes subtle patterns of subordination but that all members of the society "naturally" speak, as when women express their solidarity yearnings with the word "fraternity" and English-speaking people of African descent describe an evil heart as "black.


9. Foucault [1977] 1980b, 141; [1976] 1980a, 80. Foucault also stressed what others might call "power to," both by pointing out the creativity and ubiquity of power and by making the many forms of power analytically inseparable from one another (see Fraser 1989; and McCarthy 1990 on the strengths and weaknesses in Foucault's analysis of power).

10. Early in the recent study of social movements, Snow et al. (1986) and Snow and Benford (1992) built on Goffman's (1974) concept of framing and Cramton, Fireman, and Rytina's (1982) concept of an "injustice frame" to show that one central function of social movements is to frame or reframe "objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences
of actions" to either "underscore and embellish the seriousness and injustice of a social condition or redefine as unjust and immoral what was previously seen as unfortunate but perhaps tolerable" (Snow and Benford 1992, 137; see also Snow et al. 1986 on frame bridging, frame amplification, frame extension, and frame transformation). As Goodwin and Jasper (1999) point out, and as the Moral, Marshall, and Snowtofild chapter makes very clear, many social movements involve individuals, both activists and nonactivists, leaders and rank and file participants, inconscious of themselves as members of any social movement—indeed the concept of ideology has been much disputed. We mean by it only a system of beliefs that frames and guides one's general understanding of, and interaction in, the world (Coburn 1999, 41).

11. Adapted from Morris 1990, 2002; see also Morris and Braine, chap. 2, this volume.

See Mansbridge, chap. 9, this volume, for a more detailed analysis. Note that this definition is intended to apply primarily to members of the oppressed group, as the challenges of reasserting consciousness apply primarily to those who have experienced the relevant processes of subordination, both blatant and subtle, triggered by membership in the group. (See also Conover 1988 and Conover and Sapiro 1993 for the effects of group membership.) Our experience prompts us, however, to include individuals who are not members of the group but who have come sufficiently to identify with the situation of members of the group to be thought of as having an oppositional consciousness themselves (see Kalmus, Gurin, and Townsend 1981 on "sympathetic consciousness"). When we enter the realm of a "subordinated consciousness" (Snowtofild, chap. 9, this volume), the identification across group boundaries becomes explicit.


13. For political opportunities, see Tarrow 1998; for mobilizing institutions, see McDermott 1982 and Morris 1984; for repertoires see Tilly 1995, esp. 392–395; for the continual interaction of "culture" and "structure," see Polletta 1999 and the need to develop an oppositional consciousness. In the political sense, we try to identify spatial, geographical, political, and organizational structures that have important effects on developing oppositional consciousness. "Free spaces" (Groc, chap. 4, this volume), legal structures (Marshall, chap. 5, this volume), and the positions of policy member versus challenger (Wate, chap. 7, this volume) all play key causal roles in our analyses. We could not investigate the relevant structural forces in these short chapters, and we may have neglected some extremely important ones. But this neglect will not have been due to a decision that such forces are not important.


15. Groups characterized by oppositional consciousness thus differ in their relations to existing systems of domination and subordination from those "new social movements" that are characterized as resulting from a "quasi" for identity (see Johnston, Laraña, and Gusfeld 1994, 22, 23, 29; and Johnston 1994, 267). The women's and gay rights movements are often listed among the new social movements because they are thought to involve the "emergence" of identities that, although not new, are at least "formerly weak" (Johnston, Laraña, and Gusfeld 1994, 7). McDermott puts the point better, however, by saying that "what is new about the new social movements—is the central importance they attach to the creation of new collective identities as a fundamental goal of the movement" (1994, 50). Members of groups embedded in a longstanding pattern of domination and subordination do not need to engage in a "quest" for identity. A central feature of their socially given identities is already recognized cause of their subordinate status. Yet, like workers in the era that E. P. Thompson (1963/1966) chronicles (an "old" social movement), African American, colonized peoples, women, people with disabilities, and gays and lesbians all have to forge new understandings of their identities as a means of resistance to the hierarchies of power and the rank and file participate increasement in these framing processes. The processes are emotional as well as cognitive (Taylor 1985, Tarrow 1998, Goodwin and Jasper 1999, McDermott 1999). For more on how injustices frames, see Garrison 1992, esp. 68, and, Mansbridge chap. 9, this volume, esp. 1, 5, and 6. The concept of ideology has been much disputed. We mean by it only a system of beliefs that frames and guides one's general understanding of, and interaction in, the world (Coburn 1999, 41).

17. Our analyses draw from many strands in the current debates among analysts of social movements. We stress both structure and culture, and assume that each of these factors determines and gives meaning to the other. We draw to some small degree from "rational choice" analysis. We think that we have embeddied the "collaborative meaning-making" that we describe here in the mix of relevant historical contexts that McDermott (1999, xi) prescribes, although we in no way claim to have produced a full analysis of the causal forces operating in any of the settings. We want to stress what Tilly calls "continuously negotiated interchanges among specific interlocutors with "constraint and mediation by historically-accumulated understandings concerning identities and relations of the parties" and "increasing modification of those identities and relations" (1999, 494).

To the degree that we emphasize cultural forces, this emphasis seems appropriate in a study of consciousness. We do not want to underplay the importance of structural forces. In the most overarching sense, our analyses are deeply structural, because they take the large structures of domination and subordination that cause a group's oppression as the primary focus and seek to develop an oppositional consciousness. In the political sense, we try to identify spatial, geographical, political, and organizational structures that have important effects on developing oppositional consciousness. "Free spaces" (Groc, chap. 4, this volume), legal structures (Marshall, chap. 5, this volume), and the positions of policy member versus challenger (Wate, chap. 7, this volume) all play key causal roles in our analyses. We could not investigate all the relevant structural forces in these short chapters, and we may have neglected some extremely important ones. But this neglect will not have been due to a decision that such forces are not important.

We have two primary goals within the field of social movements. The first is to make more salient in future analyses the distinction between "liberation groups," whose members are working to end their own subordination, and other groups, so that this does not get lost. Our second goal is to extend and underscore analyses that make consciousness (and its moral, psychological, cultural, and structural causes) a critical factor in the chain of causation that produces social movements. Charles Tilly's important early model of the causation of collective action differed from his model of Marx's theory of causation in several respects, one of which was the omission of "Common Consciousness" (Tilly 1978, 43, 56). McDermott's later model (1982, 51) put "Cognitive liberation" back in, as a third and last step (mutually interacting with "indigenous organisational strength") in a path whose final outcome was "Social movement." His more recent model (McDermott 1999, xix) put "Interpretive processes" first after the primum model of "Broad change processes," followed by four other processes before the outcome of "Sustained contention." In our emphasis on understandings interpretation, and other factors all along the causal chain. Notes in the specific chapters will indicate where we agree and differ with other interpretations by social movement analysts on more specific points.