REVIEW ESSAYS

The Commercialization and Digitization of Social Movement Society

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In Western democracies, popular political radicalism declined in the wake of the protest cycle of the 1960s and 1970s. What appeared instead is a ''social movement society,'' where protest becomes increasingly institutionalized and ''civic'' rather than disruptive. As the editors of the volume *The Social Movement Society* put it, ''although disruption appears to be the most effective political tool of the disadvantaged, the majority of episodes of movement activity we see today disrupt few routines'' (Meyer and Tarrow 1998:20). A study of over 4,000 events in the greater Chicago area from 1970 to 2000 finds that ''sixties-style'' protest decreased while hybrid events combining public claims-making with civic forms of behavior increased (Samson et al. 2005). Although researchers have since expanded on and revised the ''social movement society'' thesis, Ramos and Rodgers (2015) find it to be still applicable to contemporary society in a new edited volume that aims to reassess the thesis.

The Commercialization of Activism

What the social movement society thesis does not consider, however, is the extent to which social movements have been commercialized. Several important books have already shown that the commercialization of activism is a notable trend since the 1990s (Fisher 2006; Dauvergne and LeBaron 2014; Walker 2015). Caroline Lee's *Do-It-Yourself Democracy* broadens this scholarship by presenting a beautifully written ethnography of an important new phenomenon—the public engagement industry. Defined as ''facilitation services aimed at engaging the public and relevant stakeholders with organizations in more intensive ways than traditional, one-way public

Expect Us: Online Communities and Political Mobilization, by **Jessica L. Beyer.** New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. 192 pp. $29.95 paper. ISBN: 9780199330768.

Do-It-Yourself Democracy: The Rise of the Public Engagement Industry, by **Caroline W. Lee.** New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. 304 pp. $29.95 cloth. ISBN: 9780199987269.

The Coming Swarm: DDOS Actions, Hacktivism, and Civil Disobedience on the Internet, by **Molly Sauter.** New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014. 192 pp. $19.95 paper. ISBN: 9781623564568.

outreach and information'' (p. 56), the public engagement industry developed in the 1980s and 1990s as a solution to declining citizen participation. Yet, ironically, as Lee shows, it has produced more professionalization and less public participation.

At one level, *Do-It-Yourself Democracy* is about the passions, energies, and creativity of the individuals involved in a quest for new methods of democratic participation and inclusion. Three of the seven chapters of the book are devoted almost entirely to the stories of these individuals, who are ''process evangelists'' committed to ''spreading the gospel of deliberation.'' Especially fascinating are the ''origin stories'' in Chapter Three. Lee finds that although the engagement field is young, the practitioners are not as young, and many had prior activism experience in the 1960s. Their attitude toward 1960s-style radicalism, however, is ambivalent. They maintain a sense of pride in the

1960s experience but put more emphasis on their personal journeys from being adversarial and anti-institutional to being cooperative and willing to work within institutions. In fact, banishing 1960s language ''was seen as necessary to be taken seriously'' (p. 79). Yet as some sociologists (Whalen and Flacks 1990; Whittier 1995) have argued and as the Occupy Wall Street protests have shown, 1960s-style radicalism persists among some members of that politicized generation. Exactly how it has come to be banished from the public engagement industry is an interesting question worth further elaboration.

Chapter Five of the book, titled ''The Arts and Crafts of Real Engagement,'' offers a Bourdieusian analysis of how engagement practitioners construct a non-market and anti-commercial professional identity. They shun the terminology of ''profession'' and ''industry'' in favor of ''a community of practice.'' They cultivate the appearance of a homemade and caring artisanal craft for their work. Abhorring the logic of rational calculation, they describe a compulsion to share their knowledge and services.

At another level, however, *Do-It-Yourself Democracy* subverts its own story of non-calculating individual passion by charting the growth of public engagement as a new business and its disempowering effects on citizen participation. The book begins by describing the varieties of sponsors of the public engagement industry. The author finds in her survey that a full quarter of the sponsors are local and regional governments, followed by local nonprofits at 22 percent, and business, industry associations, and chambers of commerce at 17 percent. Questions about why the for-profit sector and local governments have embraced public engagement are taken up in Chapter Six, which shows that it is less about empowerment than about ameliorating the harsh results of contemporary capitalism and legitimating decisions to cut services and raise taxes.

Aiming to understand ''how public engagement can be authentically real and disempowering at the same time'' (p. 29), Lee is unequivocal, and at times meditative and philosophical, about the tensions and contradictions in the public engagement industry. It is the disempowering aspect that comes across more powerfully. In the concluding part of the book, Lee argues that although deliberation processes have positive short-term and individual-level effects, in the long run, they function as a new mechanism of social control. This is because in these deliberative processes, individual citizens are trained to empathize with decision-makers while institutions become collaborative stakeholders ready to ''subsidize'' individual actions in processes of co-creation. In essence, then, deliberative processes individualize problems and solutions while creating a spirit of authentic sacrifice. This is what Lee calls the spirit of deliberative capitalism in a DIY democracy.

The Rise of Online Activism

Even as the social movement society was taking shape and before its commercialization had begun in earnest, activists were already turning elsewhere for possibilities of rejuvenating grassroots activism. A natural place to look was the newly but rapidly developing Internet. The result was the birth of cyber-activism, now often called online activism, internet activism, or digital activism.

The earliest practices of cyber-activism started in the 1980s, but it was only in the 1990s that cyber-activism began to catch on. Initially, computer hacking was associated with efforts to bring computing power to the people and thus had a radical politics to it (Jordan and Taylor 2004:13; Lievrouw 2011). Online electronic bulletin boards were used effectively by revolutionaries like the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (Wolfson 2014). During the Tiananmen student protests in 1989, Chinese students in North America and Europe used newsgroups on Usenet to mobilize support for protesters in China (Yang 2009:28–29).

Early online activism thus had a radical side, but it also had a moderate, civic side. In the United States and other western democracies, online activism was born into a well-established civil society of nonprofit, community, and social movement organizations. A notable feature of online activism at that time was the use of the Internet by civic associations for carrying out routine organizational activities (Burt and Taylor 2000; Bach and Stark 2002; Hick and McNutt 2002). Although one of the most influential

books on web activism published by sociologists (Earl and Kimport 2011) shows how the low cost of online participation and the possibility of online organizing reduce the roles of traditional social movement organizations, the four main e-tactics studied in their book—online petitions, boycotts, e-mail campaigns and letter-writing—are on the civil side of the spectrum of online protest. The examples in that study also fall on the more institutional end of activism rather than the more extra-institutional and radical end.

Meanwhile, public discourse has produced a binary image of online activism. While the Arab Spring protests are called Twitter or Facebook Revolutions, a discourse of ''clicktivism'' and ''slacktivism'' denies that online activism can be meaningful political action. Against the background of this confused public discourse, Jessica L. Beyer's *Expect Us: Online Communities and Political Mobilization* and Molly Sauter's *The Coming Swarm: DDOS Actions, Hacktivism, and Civil Disobedience on the Internet* are forceful statements that online activism is not at all about the clicking of a mouse.

The Suppressed Online Radicalism

Molly Sauter studies distributed denial of service (DDoS) actions, which she defines as ''concerted efforts by many individuals to bring down websites by making repeated requests of the websites' servers in a short amount of time'' (p. 2). She calls them *actions* rather than the more common name of DDoS *attacks* in order to avoid any negative connotations. Many of the cases examined in her book, such as actions by Anonymous, have been studied by others (Downing 2001; Coleman 2013, 2014). Yet unlike other studies, Sauter's book is a focused analysis of one single tactic. By tracing the history and politics of DDoS as a tool of protest, Sauter's book serves as a strong and timely reminder of a nearly forgotten history of Internet radicalism and a reclamation of DDoS as a legitimate tool for civil disobedience.

In seven short chapters, Sauter presents a spirited and vigorous argument that DDoS actions can be a meaningful and powerful form of civil disobedience consistent with the principles of democratic politics. She cites theorists and practices of civil disobedience from Henry Thoreau and Hannah Arendt to Martin Luther King, Jr. and the American Civil Rights movement to show that DDoS actions, like acts of civil disobedience in the street, use public disruptions to challenge power. Because power has moved online in the digital age, acts of civil disobedience have to go online as well in order to have any efficacy.

The most interesting chapters of the book examine examples of major DDoS actions and show how they are stigmatized by mass media and criminalized by states and corporations. Chapter Two studies several cases of DDoS actions since the 1990s, starting with the publication of the Electronic Civil Disobedience (ECD) manifesto by the Critical Art Ensemble in 1994. The chapter also examines DDoS actions in Spain in 1997 to force the Institute for Global Communication (IGC) to stop hosting the Basque publication *Euskal Herria Journal*, the DDoS action by the British organization *the electrohippies* against the WTO in Seattle in 1999, and the ''Deportation Class'' DDoS action against Lufthansa airlines for letting the German government use its flights to deport immigrants. Both in the scale of participation (easily tens of thousands) and their impact, these cases stand on a par with ''traditional'' forms of street protest. Although Sauter points out that not all DDoS actions are legitimate political protest and many are criminal activities, she is explicit about the moral legitimacy of DDoS actions as a method of civil disobedience.

Chapter Seven shows how states and corporations criminalize DDoS actions. For example, the activists of *the electrohippies* involved in the protest against the WTO in 1999 were declared terrorists. The main activist in the ''Deportation Class'' action against Lufthansa airlines in 2001 was arrested on charges of coercion and found guilty by a lower court in Frankfurt in 2005 (the verdict was later overturned by a higher court).

Sauter notes there is no such precedent-setting case in U.S. courts, but there are several cases where individuals pleaded guilty after being arrested for DDoS actions. For example, two individuals were arrested in connection with Anonymous DDoS actions against the Church of Scientology in 2007

and 2008. They were sentenced to serve a year in prison and to pay $37,500 and $20,000 respectively in restitution to the Church of Scientology. In another case, Wisconsin truck driver Eric J. Rosol participated in a DDoS action against the Koch Industries website in 2011. In 2013, Rosol pleaded guilty to one misdemeanor count of accessing a protected computer and was sentenced to two years' probation and ordered to pay $183,000 in restitution to Koch Industries. Anonymous's Operation Payback DDoS actions against MasterCard and PayPal and other firms in 2010 resulted in 14 individuals being charged.

Sauter explains that DDoS actions are prosecuted as fraud under Title 18, Section 1030 (a)(5) of the U.S. Code, also known as the CFAA. In 46 of the 50 U.S. states, defendants may be subject to joint and several liability, meaning that one individual may be held liable for damages caused by large numbers of individuals. This is an effective method of suppressing online collective action.

The Forgotten Online Community

In what Wellman (2004) calls the ''first age of Internet studies,'' online community was a new phenomenon of great research interest (Rheingold 1993; Wellman 1997; Calhoun 1998). The views about online communities were sanguine, reflecting both optimism about the new technologies and the actual conditions of online communities in the 1990s. While research on online communities continues to appear, more attention has since shifted to the study of the relationship between information technologies and political activism (Castells 1997; Earl and Kimport 2011; Lievrouw 2011). In focusing on how internet technologies link individual voices into collective action, however, the connections between online activism and online communities have not been systematically studied.

In this context, Jessica Beyer's book *Expect Us*, an ethnography of four online communities, bridges a major gap. Two of the communities, the massive, multiplayer, online role-playing game World of Warcraft (WoW) and the posting boards of IGN Entertainment, are communities of entertainment. The third community, Anonymous,

according to Beyer, had been mainly a community of entertainment before it launched a protest movement against the Church of Scientology in 2008. The fourth one, Pirate Bay, is a popular file-sharing website where people exchange music, movie, and TV show files. Beyer finds that political conversations take place in all four communities, but political mobilization occurs only in two of them.

Beyer argues that this disparity is due to the structural features of the four online communities. She finds that the two communities where mobilization took place had higher levels of anonymity, lower levels of formal regulation, and minimal access to small-group interaction. These features result in distinct communities with their own norms and behavior expectations. When community norms conflict with offline norms and realities, normative conflict results, leading to mobilization. Beyer's analysis shows that website ownership and management significantly influence the nature of online participation.

Although Beyer suggests that community norms and beliefs are the result of the structural features of the websites, at times she notes that the values that community members bring to the community also influence the nature of the communities (p. 104). Thus it is not entirely clear whether it is external or internal norms that shape mobilization. Whether and how the goals of online communities may influence mobilization is another question of interest left unexplored. In a sense, it is not surprising that the two cases of mobilization took place in Anonymous and Pirate Bay and not in WoW or IGN, because the former two are more politicized communities than the latter in the first place.

Expect Us is most fascinating in its ethnographic narrative of the operations and interactions in the individual online communities, a narrative that can only come from long periods of immersion. For example, it illuminates the otherwise dark and mysterious social world of WoW by providing a clear sense of the hierarchies of its complex group structures as well as its internal culture and the importance of reputation to WoW players. The analysis of the long conversation threads in IGN shows clearly the

politicized topics on IGN posting boards. The riveting ethnographic details present a strong argument that meaningful civic engagement takes place in online communities, including in nonpolitical communities. *Expect Us* leaves readers with no doubt that there is serious and impassioned politics to be expected of online communities.

The Future of Social Movement Society

The three books under review convey mixed messages about the future of social movement society. Caroline Lee's book suggests that the institutionalized social movement society of the 1990s has undergone significant commercialization, to the extent that even civic engagement has become a profitable industry. Initially, online activism offered some new hope of repoliticizing the social movement field, but as Molly Sauter shows, the radical wing of online activism, represented in her book by the use of DDoS actions for civil disobedience, has been tamed through criminalization by the state and stigmatization by an ideological media discourse. Jessica Beyer's book directs our attention back to a taken-for-granted aspect of online space to reveal both impassioned political conversations on a daily basis and occasional contentious political mobilization. While *Expect Us* conveys a note of cautious hope in everyday political participation and *The Coming Swarm* reclaims the moral legitimacy of radical protest, *Do-It-Yourself Democracy* offers a deep and sensitive critique of the contemporary conundrum between achieving individual authenticity and collective social change in American society.

Of course, three books that landed rather randomly on my desk for review cannot be expected to represent the complexity and diversity of political activism, civil engagement, and social movements in contemporary American society. I have suggested, however, that they have each captured an important trend. Together, they delineate an image of contemporary social movement society as commercialized, digitized, and nostalgic for a bygone era. Although the digitalized social movement society has a radical side (such as in the use of DDoS actions), the broader trend is one of containment and moderation.

The conundrum of contemporary activism was revealed thoroughly in the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement. One of the most radical moments of contemporary protest, OWS brought forth a new form of "political disobedience"—"a type of political as opposed to civil disobedience that fundamentally rejects the ideological landscape that has dominated our collective imagination, in the United States at least, since before the Cold War" (Harcourt 2013:46). Harcourt continues:

> The Occupy movement rejects conventional political rationality, discourse, and strategies. It does not lobby Congress. It defies the party system. It refuses to align or identify itself along traditional political lines. It refuses even to formulate a reform agenda or to endorse the platform of any existing political group . . . . Occupy Wall Street is politically disobedient to the core—it even resists attempts to be categorized politically. (Harcourt 2013:47)

Nothing can be more radical than a complete rejection of the existing system, and for this reason alone, OWS was radically revolutionary. Yet it is supremely ironic that the political disobedience of OWS had to be expressed in non-conventional forms in order to resist attempts "to be categorized politically." It is ironic that it had to be non-political in order to pronounce a new politics. The full implications of this irony begin to unravel in the three books under review. It is the same kind of irony that is captured in Caroline Lee's analysis of "how public engagement can be authentically real and disempowering at the same time."

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A Collective Object for the Sociology of Morality Project

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Gabriel Abend's *The Moral Background* is the most important book in the sociology of morality published since the field has been ''rediscovered'' in the wake of the "new sociology of morality" movement that emerged in the last few years. Abend's intervention in this book is both theoretical and meta-methodological, and his contribution is both empirical and substantive. At the level of theory, Abend provides a stimulating and, at most points, convincing argument

The Moral Background: An Inquiry into the History of Business Ethics, by **Gabriel Abend.** Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014. 416 pp. $29.95 cloth. ISBN: 9780691171128.

for the substantive importance of a new object of social-scientific inquiry that he refers to, not surprisingly, as *the moral*