



---

## POSITION PAPER:

# WHO ARE THE INSIDERS? FACULTY AND STUDENTS AS ACTIVISTS

Mikaila Mariel Lemonik Arthur, Department of Sociology, Rhode Island College

FOR “MAKING CONNECTIONS: MOVEMENTS AND RESEARCH IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT” THEMATIC SESSION ON CAMPUS  
ACTIVISM, UNIVERSITY OF NEVADA LAS VEGAS, AUGUST 19, 2011

---

For most social movements scholars, one essential part of the definition of a social movement is the fact that it occurs outside of institutionalized power structures—that its participants or those whose interests it claims to represent must not have access to politics as usual, for if they did they would have organized as an interest group and lobbied their way to change rather than choosing the rougher road of activism. And scholars of movement impacts have argued that where political regimes are supportive of activists’ claims, they are better served by choosing assimilative forms of activism rather than taking to the streets (Amenta and Caren 2004). Scholars of campus activism have made just these same arguments, focusing their attention on student activists as excluded from the core of campus decision-making and thus forced to turn to disruptive action as a way to give voice to and seek change regarding their claims, and when we think about student activism, our minds still turn to the sit-ins and marches of the 1960s (Bradley 2009; Foster and Long 1970; Smith 1970) and their more recent but equally disruptive cousins (Soule 1997; Walker, Martin, and McCarthy 2008).

But perhaps an examination of campus activism can point to a different set of possibilities. After all, in many cases students are not truly outsiders to their institutions. Indeed, many colleges and universities provide formal opportunities for students to become involved in decision-making, whether through student government or representation of students on faculty and administrative committees. At a minimum, students can vote with their tuition and financial aid dollars, which gives them arguably a stronger voice than many of the disenfranchised groups we typically associate with social movement activism. Furthermore, students are not the only activists on campus. Though most scholars of campus activism concentrate their attention on students, faculty (Bayer 1972; Hefferlin 1969) and staff also participate. Though faculty and staff—particularly though without tenure or union-based job security (Kirkpatrick and Robinson 2005; Riesman 1973; Tirelli 1996)—may face significant risks from their participation in campus activism, and though the faculty role in academic governance is undoubtedly diminished in recent years (Gumport 1997; Willis 2002), faculty and staff do remain insiders to their colleges and universities. As Katzenstein argues, their financial accountability (paychecks), organizational accountability (reporting structure), and in many cases discursive accountability (identification with the campus) place them squarely in the insider camp (Katzenstein 1998). Despite the changes in academic governance, at least some faculty at some institutions still maintain their primary decision-making role over at least the academic aspects of the campus, and faculty senates or administrative committees tend to preserve some role for faculty and staff in decision-making more broadly.

Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, though. Despite the fact that the students, faculty, and staff who participate in campus activism can be seen in many ways as insiders, social movements on campus may retain more of an outsider presence that one might at first suspect. These groups can instead be

structurally marginalized (Grossman 2009), or positioned as insiders while being denied access to decision-making processes, especially when they represent interests or identities that are disfavored by the organization at large.

Scholars of organizational change from across many disciplines have argued that a sort of hybrid position, an insider who still feels accountable to external constituencies or an outsider who has somehow gained access to the means of organizational power, is most properly situated to be able to create change (Arthur 2008b; Wilde 2004). These hybrids have variously been called “organizational catalysts” (Carle 2007; Strum 2006), “mediators” (Moore 1999), the “outsider within” (Collins 1986; Watson 2009), “inside agitators” (Eisenstein 1996), “institutional activists” (Santoro and McGuire 1997) or “tempered radicals” (Meyerson and Scully 1995; Meyerson 2001). Why is this beneficial? Well, the activist who truly becomes an insider may find that his or her activism is tamped down so much that it actually disappears. Insiders face many demands to comply with the expectations of the organization (Grant 1990) and may find themselves bought off or sold out to the point that they become, in Carle’s words, “little more than institutional hacks” (Carle 2007:336). It is the ongoing connection to outside communities that can enable activists to resist the temptations of cooptation (Meyerson and Tompkins 2007).

Sucheng Chan, in her first-person account of activism in and for Asian American studies (Chan 2005), details her practices of “guerilla warfare” that look on the surface like normal organizational practices but upon further inspection become clear examples of challenge. For instance, she used strategic and behind-the-scenes threats of disruptive action to compel support from campus administrators, a tactic I also found evidence of in my own research on campus activism for curricular change (Arthur 2011). Similarly, both Chan and the activists I studied used standard campus approval procedures, but in abnormal ways, to manipulate outcomes towards her goals. Sometimes, these strategies might take the form of “covert conflict” (Morrill, Zald, and Rao 2003); sometimes, they might for a time look like lobbying and politics as usual. But the thing that is special about insider activists is that they maintain the option to disrupt.

Yet disruptive action for campus activists may take on different characteristics than disruptive action in the broader political sphere. For example, Katzenstein describes organization activism by feminist activists:

I use the term protest despite the fact that the women whose activism I describe are far from lawless, rarely use civil disobedience, and never resort to violence. Less lawbreaking than norm-breaking, these feminists have challenged, discomfited, and provoked, unleashing a wholesale disturbance of long-settled assumptions, rules, and practices....When activism inside institutions turns into protest, it is almost never, in the sense of escaping public notice, unobtrusive. When institutional routines are disrupted and the norms of an organization contested, it is almost always because the public gaze has been focused on these institutions and institutional elites feel exposed (Katzenstein 1998:7, 9).

What this means is that disruption is in the eye of the beholder. Indeed, in my own research I have found a case in which a building occupation barely disrupted the day-to-day activities of a university administration—and one in which a simple Take Back the Night march was experienced as a major

disruption (Arthur 2011). And to a corporate target, even a run-of-the-mill protest can be a disruptive tactic when it impacts the target's ability to carry on its daily business (King and Pearce 2010). One of the best examples of this sort of organizationally disruptive action took place when activists at the University of Illinois Chicago sought a campus child-care center—and held what they called a “baby-in” (Strobel 2000). Would we ordinarily consider the presence of a bunch of babies in an administrative building a disruptive protest?

So, then, what works? After all, that is the question we are really interested in—how activists on campus (or anywhere else) can manage to make the impacts they seek. This is, as always, a tricky question. Of course, we could focus on the role of resources (Jenkins 1983) and on strong and resonant frames (Benford and Snow 2000), but it is simple to argue that movements with resources and good discourse are more effective—and in any case, the insider/outsider dichotomy is not quite as relevant to these issues. The political mediation model (Amenta, Halfmann, and Young 1999) and other politically-focused models (Kitschelt 1986; Kriesi 2004) focus instead on the match between strategy or tactics and some aspect of the political environment. The political mediation model predicts that assimilative strategies can work for activists who face favorable political conditions (and that assertive strategies may backfire in such circumstances), while those who face less favorable conditions will be forced to use assertive strategies in order to have an impact. Political models were developed to explain movements targeting the state, not movements targeting organizations like universities, but still there is something worth attending to here: perhaps movements of insiders face different political contexts than movements consisting of outsiders and thus have different choices about tactical efficacy.

What if we turn our attention more specifically to research that considers the outcomes of movements within colleges and universities? Fabio Rojas, in his study of the emergence of Black studies, finds that what he calls nondisruptive protest (rallies and demonstrations) increases the likelihood of the adoption of Black studies, while disruptive protest (sit-ins and vandalism, for example) do not have such an effect (Rojas 2006; Rojas 2007). Indeed, his results show that one nondisruptive protest multiplies the odds of program creation by thirteen. However, as I have argued elsewhere (Arthur 2008a), there are limitations to Rojas's conception of the nondisruptive protest. Indeed, his measures include only protests significant enough to find their way into the national news, which he then categorizes by type of protest action into his disruptive and nondisruptive categories. To Katzenstein, then, some of Rojas's nondisruptive protests might have really been quite disruptive. Imagine, for instance, a fairly calm and composed rally accusing a campus of profiting off of slavery that happened to be staged on the day that prospective students visit to check out the campus.

And others, including myself, who have looked at social movements in the academic sphere have found that disruptive protest can indeed play an important role (Arthur 2011; Moore 1999; Walker, Martin, and McCarthy 2008). In fact, I argue that for campus activists, *more* assertive strategies may be required in those organizational contexts that are favorable to the movement. Why? Well, if the organizational context is favorable to the movement and yet politics as usual has been unable to make a difference, there must be some greater roadblock and assertive action is needed to surmount it. On the other hand, where the organization context is not so favorable to the movement, highly assertive or disruptive action might be going too far. Unlike in the democratic state considered by Amenta, where the

disruptive (but law-abiding) activist typically faces little more threat than a night in jail or a dose of pepper spray, the activist who goes too far on campus faces expulsion from their academic program or the loss of their livelihood. Perhaps these sanctions are not as severe as those faced by activists who risk their lives in the struggle for democracy in the Middle East, but they do feel severe to the activists who face them. These risks change the calculus around assertive activism.

Yet despite the fact that assertive strategies may sometimes pay dividends for campus activists, they are still better off if they are able to act as insiders. Indeed, in my research I found that any group of campus activists that plausibly could position itself as a group of insiders did so. Even when activists began by positioning themselves as outsiders, often for ideological reasons, they soon realized that their outsider position was holding them back and transitioned to insider strategies. So how does this distinction work in practice? The insider, as Katzenstein argues, is one who is accountable to the organization. This means that in some cases activists actually had to work to increase their organizational accountability. They did this primarily by discursive means, throwing their lot in with the campus community as a whole and limiting the involvement of non-campus activists in their campaigns. Oddly, this means that despite the claims discussed above that organizational insiders will be the most effective activists when they maintain ties to communities outside of the organization, communities that can help them resist the pressure of cooptation, some groups of insider activists must in fact minimize these ties in order to maximize their claims of insider status.

Of course, even within a particular activist campaign, some activists are more plausibly able to position themselves as insiders than others. On campus, faculty are often better able to claim insider status than students due to faculty members' financial accountability to the organization and their typically longer-term affiliation with it. Students are typically freer of organizational oversight—in some cases even when they are using organizational funds as resources for their activism—and in any case have moved on in four to six years, a short time span in the life course of a social movement (Linders 2004). Yet faculty who participate in activism, particularly when they do not have job security, face much more profound risks than do students. So what does this mean for social movement strategy on campus? Well, perhaps it means that those movements that will be most able to have an impact are those that have a balance of both faculty and student participants. I have not found a strong indication that any particular balance, whether faculty activists who draw on student support as they work on issues related to student interests, student activists who seek behind-the-scenes faculty sponsorship (Riesman 1973), or a more equal balance of participation, is more or less likely to result in a movement's desired impacts. However, of the cases I have considered, those with the most enduring outcomes are those in which both faculty and students participated.

Like all activists, campus activists need to think carefully about movement strategy. But there are several additional questions that campus activists face that add complexity to their decisions. First of all, campus activism takes place on a different sort of time scale than do other sorts of social movements. On many campuses, the entire population of student activists turns over every four years or so, and faculty and staff mobility is sometimes high as well. Where there is churn amongst administrative personnel or where funding and other regimes change frequently, the organizational context itself may be strikingly impermanent. Activists must remain attentive to the fluctuation in their environment and

ready to adapt to new circumstances. Without these adaptations, campaigns—which can persist for decades—may find their impacts and even their lifespans limited. At the same time, even given a more consistent organizational context and set of personnel, campus activists face other decisions. The complicated coalitions of students and faculty, and sometimes staff and non-campus activists as well, can be difficult to maintain. As discussed above, the continued participation of activists from multiple groups is important to the outcomes of campus activism, but these different groups may have different and even contradictory interests. Similarly, activism is more able to have an impact when activists are able to convincingly position themselves as insiders, but for those who do not begin their campaign as insiders the push inside can be accompanied by other kinds of losses. Insiders are less able to make truly radical demands on their organizations and face considerably more risk from participation in activism.

This discussion has additional implications for the state of social movement theory. Examining campus activism highlights some of the limitations of definitions of social movements that insist that their participants must be outsiders to politics as usual. There are other ways for individuals and groups to be excluded from access to power, to be forced to use disruptive or non-institutionalized tactics to press their change agenda, even when they are organizational insiders. Looking at the college or university context, then, allows analysts a chance to reexamine our taken-for-granted perspectives on the very nature of social movements themselves.

## WORKS CITED

- Amenta, Edwin, Drew Halfmann, and Michael P. Young. 1999. "The Strategies and Contexts of Social Protest: Political Mediation and the Impact of the Townsend Movement in California." *Mobilization* 4:1-24.
- Amenta, Edwin and Neal Caren. 2004. "The Legislative, Organizational, and Beneficiary Consequences of State-Oriented Challengers." Pp. 461-488 in *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, edited by David A. Snow, Sarah A. Soule, and Hanspeter Kriesi. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Arthur, Mikaila Mariel Lemonik. 2008a. "Review of *From Black Power to Black Studies*." *Mobilization* 13:117-8.
- . 2008b. "Social Movements in Organizations." *Sociology Compass* 2:1014-30.
- . 2011. *Student Activism and Curricular Change in Higher Education*, Edited by Hank Johnston. Surrey, UK: Asghate.
- Bayer, Alan E. 1972. "Institutional Correlates of Faculty Support of Campus Unrest." *Sociology of Education* 45:76-94.
- Benford, Robert D. and David A. Snow. 2000. "Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment." *Annual Review of Sociology* 26: 611-39.
- Bradley, Stefan M. 2009. *Harlem vs. Columbia University: Black Student Power in the Late 1960s*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Carle, Susan D. 2007. "Progressive Lawyering in Politically Depressing Times: Can New Models for Institutional Self-Reform Achieve More Effective Structural Change?" *Harvard Journal of Law & Gender* 30:323-52.
- Chan, Sucheng. 2005. In *Defense of Asian American Studies: The Politics of Teaching and Program Building*, Edited by Roger Daniels. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. 1986. "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought." *Social Problems* 33:S14-S32.
- Eisenstein, Hester. 1996. *Inside Agitators: Australian Femocrats and the State*, Edited by Ronnie Steinberg. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Foster, Julian and Durward Long. 1970. "Protest! Student Activism in America." New York: William Morrow & Company.
- Grant, Wyn. 1990. "Insider and Outsider Pressure Groups." *Social Studies Review* 5:107-11.
- Grossman, Frank D. 2009. "Dissent from Within: How Educational Insiders Use Protest to Create Policy Change." *Educational Policy* XX:1-32.
- Gumport, Patricia J. 1997. "Public Universities as Academic Workplaces." *Daedalus* 126:113-36.
- Hefferlin, J.B. Lon. 1969. *Dynamics of Academic Reform*, Edited by Joseph Axelrod and Mervin B. Freedman. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Jenkins, Craig. 1983. "Resource Mobilization Theory and the Study of Social Movements." *Annual Review of Sociology* 9:527-53.

- Katzenstein, Mary Fainsod. 1998. *Faithful and Fearless: Moving Feminist Protest inside the Church and Military*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- King, Brayden G. and Nicholas A. Pearce. 2010. "The Contentiousness of Markets: Politics, Social Movements, and Institutional Change in Markets." *Annual Review of Sociology* 36:249-67.
- Kirkpatrick, Jennet and Ian Robinson. 2005. "Fighting to be Fired (But Only with Just Cause): The Unionization of Nontenure-Track Faculty." *Dissent Magazine*.
- Kitschelt, Herbert P. 1986. "Political Opportunity Structure and Political Protest: Anti-Nuclear Movements in Four Democracies." *British Journal of Political Science* 16:57-85.
- Kriesi, Hanspeter. 2004. "Political Context and Opportunity." Pp. 67-90 in *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, edited by David A. Snow, Sarah A. Soule, and Hanspeter Kriesi. London: Blackwell.
- Linders, Anulla. 2004. "Victory and Beyond: A Historical Comparative Analysis of the Outcomes of the Abortion Movements in Sweden and the United States." *Sociological Forum* 19:371-404.
- Meyerson, Debra E. and Maureen A. Scully. 1995. "Tempered Radicalism and the Politics of Ambivalence and Change." *Organization Science* 6:585-600.
- Meyerson, Debra E. 2001. *Tempered Radicals: How People Use Difference to Inspire Change at Work*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
- Meyerson, Debra E. and Megan Tompkins. 2007. "Tempered Radicals as Institutional Change Agents: The Case of Advancing Gender Equity at University of Michigan." *Harvard Journal of Law and Gender* 30:303-322.
- Moore, Kelly. 1999. "Political Protest and Institutional Change: The Anti-Vietnam War Movement and American Science." Pp. 97-118 in *How Social Movements Matter*, edited by Marco Guigini, Doug McAdam, and Charles Tilly. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Morrill, Calvin, Mayer N. Zald, and Hayagreeva Rao. 2003. "Covert Political Conflict in Organizations: Challenges from Below." *Annual Review of Sociology* 29:391-415.
- Riesman, David. 1973. "Commentary and Epilogue." Pp. 409-74 in *Academic Transformation: Seventeen Institutions Under Pressure, Carnegie Commission on Higher Education Sponsored Research Series*, edited by David Riesman and Verne A. Statdtman. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Rojas, Fabio. 2006. "Social Movement Tactics, Organizational Change, and the Spread of African-American Studies." *Social Forces* 84:2147-66.
- . 2007. *From Black Power to Black Studies: How a Radical Social Movement Became an Academic Discipline*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Santoro, Wayne A. and Gail M. McGuire. 1997. "Social Movement Insiders: The Impact of Institutional Activists on Affirmative Action and Comparable Worth Policies." *Social Problems* 44:503-19.
- Smith, G. Kerry. 1970. "The Troubled Campus." in *The Jossey-Bass Series in Higher Education*, edited by Joseph Axelrod and Mervin B. Freedman. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Soule, Sarah A. 1997. "The Student Divestment Movement in the United States and Tactical Diffusion: The Shantytown Protest." *Social Forces* 75:855-882.
- Strobel, Margaret. 2000. "Collective Practice and Multicultural Focus." Pp. 155-69 in *The Politics of Women's Studies: Testimony from Thirty Founding Mothers*, edited by Florence Howe. New York: The Feminist Press.
- Strum, Susan. 2006. "The Architecture of Inclusion: Advancing Workplace Equity in Higher Education." *Harvard Journal of Law & Gender* 29:247-333.
- Tirelli, Vincent. 1996. "Adjuncts and More Adjuncts: Labor Segmentation and the Transformation of Higher Education." *Social Text* 51:75-91.
- Walker, Edward T., Andrew W. Martin, and John D. McCarthy. 2008. "Confronting the State, the Corporation, and the Academy: The Influence of Institutional Targets on Social Movement Repertoires." *American Journal of Sociology* 114:35-76.
- Watson, Ellwood. 2009. *Outsiders Within: Black Women in the Legal Academy after Brown v. Board*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Wilde, Melissa J. 2004. "How Culture Mattered at Vatican II: Collegiality Trumps Authority in the Council's Social Movement Organizations." *American Sociological Review* 69:576-602.
- Willis, Ellen. 2002. "The Post-Yeshiva Paradox: Faculty Organizing at NYU." *Social Text* 20:11-25.