EVADING THE IRON LAW:
CULTURE AND RITUAL IN SOCIAL MOVEMENT ORGANIZATIONS

Paul Osterman
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

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Abstract

Scholars interested in social movements and political organizations have long been pessimistic about the trajectory of mass movement organizations. The expectation is that they will fall into the trap of the iron law of oligarchy. The consequence is loss of membership commitment, “becalming,” and goal displacement. Although there is a literature that argues that these effects are contingent, most of that literature focuses upon organizations that are either very young or else not truly mass social movement organizations. This paper takes a different tack. It argues that it is possible to construct a mature mass movement organization that has a clear oligarchy and yet retains membership commitment and a clear focus on its original objectives. The key is building an adversarial culture within the organization and enhancing the membership’s sense of capacity and agency. These arguments are illustrated via a case study of the Southwest Industrial Areas Foundation.
Scholars interested in social movements as well as those concerned more broadly with political organizations have long been pessimistic about the trajectory of mass-membership organizations. One influential line of thought sees any formal organizing efforts as inimical to the interests of the groups that are purportedly represented (Piven and Cloward, 1977), but even scholars who reject this perspective still see formal social movement organizations as problematic in the long run. The basic source of this pessimism is the expectation that social movement organizations (SMOs) will come to be dominated by their leadership (Michels, 1911). There is an additional worry that, in an effort to survive and prosper, SMOs will gradually shift away from their original objectives of social change.

The scholarship on these themes is long-standing and substantial. Richard Scott writes in his review of the literature that “most unions, most professional associations and other types of voluntary associations, and most political parties exhibit oligarchical leadership structures; the democratic machinery…functions primarily as a feeble device” (Scott, 1998, p. 336). Other scholars read the literature in the same way. Voss and Sherman (2000, p. 306) report a consensus that only informal organizations can avoid the iron law of oligarchy. Lipset, Trow, and Coleman (1956, p. 403) say that “the functional requirements for democracy cannot be met most of the time in most unions or voluntary organizations.” Clemens (1993, p. 755) writes that “we have come to expect co-optation, conservative goal transformation, and the ‘iron law of oligarchy.’”

Recent research has taken a slightly different angle towards these themes, asking questions regarding how organizations which have succumbed to the iron law of oligarchy or which have been co-opted by their environment might revive themselves (Voss and Sherman, 2000; Isaac and Christiansen, 2002), how new perspectives and leaders drawn from different sources help maintain organizational vitality (Ganz, 2000), the determinants of whether SMOs alter their core strategy and “bend with the wind” (Minkoff, 1999), the impact of formalization of SMO internal operating procedures (Staggenborg, 1988), and the complexities of participatory discourse within SMOs (Polletta, 2002). In addition, Zald and Ash (1966) are clear that these tendencies are contingent, not inevitable, and some empirical research demonstrates that the tendency towards elite domination or conservatism is not inevitable (Lipset et al., 1956; Jenkins,
1977). Nonetheless, at the end of the day the dominant expectation regarding the trajectory of SMOs remains negative.

One of the core reasons these organizational tendencies discourage activists and researchers who are sympathetic to the objectives of many SMOs is that the consequence of oligarchical control appears to be loss of energy and commitment on the part of the membership, or what Zald and Ash characterize as “becalming.” In a similar vein, McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald (1996, p. 12) speak of “eventual decline” of energy of SMOs. The downward trajectory of the American union movement is frequently cited to illustrate the consequence of oligarchical leadership (Voss and Sherman, 2000).

In this paper I approach these issues from a different perspective, arguing that an oligarchical leadership structure need not lead to loss of either membership voice or commitment. I describe the case of an SMO which has a very strong and self-perpetuating authority structure but which, nonetheless, has maintained the commitment and involvement of its membership for many decades. In explaining the dynamics of this seeming paradox, I emphasize the role played by a strong organizational culture that builds an active and committed membership which is able to push back against the elite who dominate the organizations.

The case I utilize is the Southwest region of the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), a network of community organizations that address issues such as school reform, living wages, training programs, health insurance, and physical community infrastructure.

The Dilemma of Mass Organizations

The study of social movements encompasses a range of issues far broader than those raised by the emergence of formal SMOs. Most fundamentally, not all social movements result in SMOs. For example, Gamson (1991) describes the Vietnam teach-ins as a social movement, and there are many other examples of a movement without an enduring organization (although there are also social movements which appear spontaneous but which in fact are the product of formal SMOs (Morris, 1981)). In addition, many of the central questions of social movement theory deal with different concerns. These include questions about who is recruited into or joins social movements,
the role of the larger political and social environment in setting the stage for the emergence of social movements, and how social movements frame their issues in a way that enables them to deal effectively (or ineffectively) with the media and larger public.

An additional important distinction is between mass-mobilization SMOs and professional SMOs. The focus of this paper is on mass-mobilization organizations, not on professional social movement organizations of the sort emphasized by McCarthy and Zald (1977). The former rely on mass mobilization of beneficiaries, the latter on paid leaders, staff, and conscience constituents who contribute but are not active. While professional SMOs are clearly an important phenomenon worthy of research, scholarship regarding them does not address the trajectory of classic SMOs. In the remainder of the paper when I refer to SMOs, they should be understood to be of the mass-mobilization variety.1

While understanding mass-mobilization SMOs is only a subset of a larger agenda around social movements, it obviously represents an important topic. SMOs are a vehicle, perhaps the vehicle, through which a social movement can exert an ongoing influence. Given this, the consequences of becalming or losing energy are serious.

As already noted, scholars have long been skeptical of the capacity of social movement organizations to maintain the active involvement of their members in decision making and to continue to hew to the main tenets of their mission. Lipset et al. (1956) succinctly describe the dynamics that create a situation in which the leadership comes to dominate the membership. Leadership wants to maintain power, and the complexity of large organizations offers it the opportunity to do so. To this natural complexity, the elite add a degree of mystification that makes it appear that only they can manage the organization’s tasks. The leadership also maintains a monopoly on political skill, dominates the channels of communication, and controls resources. Over time, these tactics lead to low membership participation, which simply reinforces the pattern.

Scholars of SMOs argue that falling prey to the iron law has adverse consequences for SMOs. The most widely cited is loss of membership commitment, or what Zald and Ash call “becalming.” Zald and Ash (1966, p. 334) define this as when

1 Staggenborg (1988, p. 587) argues that in practice many organizations are a mixture of types.
organizations “have created or found a niche for themselves in the organizational world but their growth has slowed or ceased. Members do not expect attainment of goals in the near future, and the emotional fervor of the movement is subdued.” A more recent statement of this point is made by McAdam (1996, p. 340), who lists a social movement’s six tasks, of which two are maintaining energy and recruiting new members.

In thinking about how to avoid these traps, the standard approach in the literature has been to argue that the tendencies towards the iron law are contingent (Lipset et al., 1956; Clemens, 1993; Rothschild-Whitt, 1976; Jenkins, 1977). However, there are significant limitations to this contingency literature.

One difficulty is that much of the literature which has taken a contingency perspective has studied organizations that are not mass-mobilization SMOs. In one of the best-known cases of the contingent nature of the iron law (in this instance the contingency was that goal displacement was in the liberal, not conservative, direction), Jenkins (1977) studied a professional SMO, i.e., an organization that from the beginning lacked broad membership involvement. Rothschild-Whitt (1976) directly takes up the question of how organizations can avoid the iron law, but her cases are “alternative” institutions: a free high school, a free medical clinic, an alternative newspaper, and a food cooperative. Kanter (1972) also addresses a set of related questions about how dissenting organizations can maintain their mission and membership commitment, but her cases are nineteenth-century communes. Clark (1972) asks about how distinctive liberal arts colleges maintain their character, and Mansbridge (1983) examines the extent of membership participation in an alternative help-line and a New England town meeting.

A second problem is the tendency to study relatively young and not very well-established SMOs. For example, Polletta (2002) provides rich case studies of SMOs that are struggling to avoid the trap of the iron law, but these organizations are young and far from established. A more precise formulation of this distinction was provided by Gamson in his classic study of SMOs. In his study of fifty-three challenging organizations, Gamson defines the endpoint of a challenge to be the time at which an organization ceases to exist or exists in name only (stops activity), or else when “its major antagonists accept the group as a valid spokesman for its constituency and deal with it as such” (Gamson, 1990, p. 31). As an example of the latter, Gamson offers a
union that achieves the right to bargain a first contract for its members. For his own part, Gamson then engages in a rich analysis of the organizational traits that lead to success or failure, as defined above. However, whether the union achieves this initial success and then begins a drift in the direction of “becalming” is outside the scope of his analysis and frequently that of other researchers. By contrast, I am interested in the ability of the organization to maintain its energy subsequent to Gamson’s endpoint—that is, after it is well established.

This paper takes a different tack from that of most of the contingency literature, both with respect to the nature of the organization examined and the question asked. The contingency I ask about is how an organization can have an authority structure that would worry an observer concerned about the iron law yet still maintain membership commitment. The organization I study is clearly a mass-mobilization SMO and one that is mature. This organization has clear, and acknowledged, oligarchical characteristics but nonetheless has maintained its members’ commitment and energy. I ask how it has managed to achieve this seeming paradox, and, to answer this question, I focus on organizational routines and organizational culture.

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² To say that the contingency literature regarding classic SMOs is relatively thin is not, however, to argue that it is nonexistent. The best-known, and still most well-developed, argument regarding how mass-mobilization SMOs can avoid the iron law was made by Lipset, Trow, and Coleman in their study of the International Typographical Union (1956). Staggenborg (1988) provides textured information on 13 organizations, and while her characterization of internal operations is largely what might be termed “organization chart” variables such as decision-making structure and the characteristics of the leadership, she does relate these to the success of the organizations in recruiting and training new members. Clemens (1993, p. 764) argues that the turn-of-the-century women’s groups were “comparatively immune” to the iron law, and she proffers several explanations. Minkoff’s (1999) study of which organizations “bend with the wind” contains a rich and useful analysis of the impact of the environment on mass-mobilization SMOs. However, the bulk of the analysis emphasizes the impact of environmental considerations, and the variables which describe internal organizational functioning are limited to age, size, and number of professional staff. I will return to these contributions in the final section of this paper.
Organizational culture has been a rapidly growing research field (Barley, Meyer, and Gash, 1988; Martin, 1992) and has been used to understand a wide range of topics, such as the success (or failure) of mergers (Sales and Mirvis, 1984), systems of employee control (Kunda, 1992), and organizational performance (Sorensen, 2002).

Scholars who study culture do not always agree about what the concept means. In this paper I view culture as a set of norms which shape organizational behavior and a set of routines which channel action. This view is consistent with the definition of culture provided by Swidler (1986, pp. 273-276), who defines culture as a “tool kit” of “skills, habits, styles” that determine “the way action is organized.” This view is also consistent with O’Reilly and Chatman’s definition of organizational culture as “a system of shared values (which define what is important) and norms which define appropriate attitudes and behaviors for organizational members (how to feel and behave)” (cited by Sorensen, 2002, p. 72).

Although students of SMOs have recognized that culture is an important variable, it has not often been utilized to address the emergence, or absence, of elite domination. One example is Mansbridge, who describes how the staff at one of the organizations she studied, Helpline, resisted elite control. There were strong norms about how decisions should be made and about the diffusion of power. If these norms were violated, then “the less powerful voted with their energies: when they perceived deviations from the policies they would like to see pursued, they would simply be uncooperative” (Mansbridge, 1983, p. 230).

To make the discussion of organizational culture more concrete and to see how it may apply to SMOs, consider the argument developed by Lipset et al. in their classic discussion of the Typographer’s Union. According to these scholars, the union avoided the iron law of oligarchy because it contained within it two competing political parties, and this competition prevented domination by an elite. In part, as Lipset et al. demonstrate, the emergence of the political competition within the union was due to

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3 In contrast to Lipset et al., Zald and Ash (1966, p. 337) believe that a membership with competing factions is a recipe for organizational failure.
historical accident, i.e., to the peculiarities of that union’s development. However, the social structure of the union was also important. The members of the union were socially high-status and as such felt that it was appropriate to have a voice in the union’s decision making. In addition, they had the requisite skills to be effective political actors. There were too many people with high-level political skills and a sense of political entitlement to be incorporated into one leadership faction. Because of the members’ sense of their own self-worth, they resisted efforts by a leadership clique to dominate union politics (Lipset et al., 1956).

At first blush, the relevance of this formulation seems remote. Most SMOs lack political parties or overt leadership contests. The members of the organization are low-status and frequently poorly educated. However, it is possible to think about the Lipset et al. argument in different terms. An SMO’s culture may create the underlying conditions that make the Lipset et al. mechanisms effective. Training and socialization may transform peoples’ perceptions of their self-worth and develop their political skills. In effect, their subjective status can be changed. Second, one can imagine a process that creates an adversarial, or at least assertative, organizational culture that acts as something of a substitute for contested elections.

Organizational culture, nebulous as it might seem, can be an effective counterweight to more formal systems of authority. If viewed in purely formal terms, an organization can appear to be dominated by a self-perpetuating elite; however, the organizational culture can act as an important constraint on the behavior of this elite. Furthermore, the culture has the potential to maintain membership commitment and enthusiasm even though many of the formal channels of authority are closed. The suggestion here, then, is that it is possible to construct an organizational culture that acts as an effective counterweight to its own authority. This model points to a new understanding of the dynamics of elite domination, or lack thereof, in classic SMOs.
The Industrial Areas Foundation

The Industrial Areas Foundation is a national network of community organizations that had their beginning with the organizing of Saul Alinsky in Chicago during the Great Depression (Horwitt, 1992). Alinsky founded several organizations in Chicago as well as ones in New York and California. Today there are IAF affiliates throughout the nation, and the organizing model is fairly standardized.

In this paper I will focus on the network of organizations in the Southwest, defined in IAF geography as Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, Nebraska, and parts of California (the Southwest IAF or SWIAF). The first, Communities Organized for Public Service (COPS), was founded in 1974 in San Antonio, and there are now nearly thirty organizations. The Southwest network is more tightly bound together than is the national IAF network. There is a core of senior organizers and a central service organization, the Interfaith Education Fund, which provides training and supervises the organizations. For the purposes of this paper, it is fair to consider the Southwest network as a whole in studying the trajectory of organizational behavior (Osterman, 2002).

Research Methodology

The research underlying this paper began in 1995 with an initial visit to several of the Southwest organizations. Between this date and 2000, I traveled several times a year to Texas and Arizona, observing the organizations in action and conducting informal interviews with a range of members and organizers. Commencing in 2000, I undertook more systematic research and conducted formal interviews, which were taped and transcribed. During this period, in addition to continuing the informal observation, I formally interviewed 52 members and 6 organizers. Although the interviews were not drawn randomly from a list of members, an effort was made to diversify the interviews by length of membership, gender, and race/ethnicity. The interviews with members were conducted in three areas—the Lower Rio Grande Valley, San Antonio, and Dallas—and were conducted in both English and Spanish.
Local IAF organizations are organizations of organizations. Individuals do not join Valley Interfaith (in the Rio Grande Valley) or COPS (in San Antonio) or any other local IAF organization. Rather, the members of the IAF are institutions, such as churches and schools. Churches are the most common organizational affiliate, but increasingly schools are joining, and to some extent other organizations, such as labor unions or community groups (such as health centers), are members. Individuals get connected to the IAF through their institutions. To give a sense of magnitudes, Valley Interfaith has forty-five member churches and sixteen schools as members, and these represent over 60,000 people. When churches or schools or unions affiliate with the IAF organization, they commit to paying dues. The goal varies by organization, but a typical target is that congregations contribute two percent of their annual budget to the IAF organization.

There are several reasons for the IAF approach of organizing through institutions rather than directly signing up individuals. Institutions, particularly churches, are inherently more stable than are individuals. People may leave town, their life circumstances may change, or they might lose energy. Churches, by contrast, will normally always be there, and if a congregation is committed, then as specific people move through life’s transitions, new individuals will be available. In addition, since an obvious problem facing any organization is resources—money—by affiliating with institutions and requiring dues, the IAF partially solves this concern. This source of “hard money” financing is an important organizational innovation.

What does an IAF organization do? First on the list is leadership development and training. This is at the core of how the IAF defines its mission. Over the course of any week, organizers and many of the primary leaders (the IAF term for the most active members) will hold one-on-one conversations with people whom they contact through their churches or schools or other venues. These conversations are aimed at identifying

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4 Osterman (2002), Warren (2001)
5 In some ways this pattern of recruitment is what scholars of social movements term recruitment via multiorganizational fields (Fernandez and McAdam, 1989). However, unlike the patterns in this literature, the “external” organizations, such as churches and unions, join the IAF organization and contribute resources as well as members. In addition, the IAF works with these other organizations to help them with their own internal issues via a process known as institutional development.
people who might want to become active in the organization and also at learning what issues people are most concerned about. People who do become connected to the IAF then attend a variety of training programs, ranging from intensive ten-day training to shorter weekend or even evening programs.

The IAF also brings people together. On a regular basis the IAF organization conducts house-meetings, attended by ten to twenty neighbors, to talk about issues that are on their minds. Several times a year there will be conferences that people involved in the organization attend. Some of these are local while others are statewide or regional. Some conferences focus on specific issues, e.g., school reform or voter registration, and others are training sessions in IAF doctrine and organizing strategies.

Parallel to the ongoing identification and training of leaders, the IAF organization works on issues. Some of these are very local. For example, a regional subgroup of Valley Interfaith, consisting of half a dozen churches in Brownsville, might be working to convince the city to open a branch library in their area. Other issues are broader in scope. Most IAF organizations are active in school reform in their communities, and several are involved in living-wage campaigns that have implications for their entire community. Other typical issues concern establishing job training efforts, expanding eligibility for health insurance, and protecting local water supplies from overdevelopment. The organizations also cooperate with sister organizations on statewide issues, passing a specific piece of legislation on topics such as child health funding or school reform funds, or conducting a statewide voter registration drive.

The SWIAF has compiled a substantial record.\(^6\) It was instrumental in passing statewide bonding and regulatory legislation to clean up and limit the spread of colonias, which are residential areas along the U.S.-Mexican border that lack basic infrastructure. It has obtained passage of living-wage laws in many of its cities. In many cities the political balance of power has been transformed due to the organizations’ efforts, and they have also managed in some cases to enact legislation altering the form of local government in a way that enhances the power of previously underrepresented groups. The IAF launched a major school reform effort, and its Texas Alliance Schools program has received substantial state funding. In all of the cities in which it works, it has

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\(^6\) For elaboration of its record, see Osterman (2002), Warren (2001), and Shirley (1997).
achieved numerous local victories with respect to parks, police protection, sewers, housing, and the like.

How the IAF Fits into the SMO Literature

The IAF organizations in the Southwest have clearly passed the success-point criteria articulated by Gamson (1990). Founded in 1972, by the mid-1970s the organizations were established and were engaged in successful negotiations with city and state authorities on a wide range of issues.

The IAF cuts across the typological categories found in the SMO literature. It is a mass-mobilization SMO, not a professional SMO in the McCarthy-Zald sense. The beneficiaries of its activities are directly involved in the organizations. It is, however, a formalized organization in that it has professional staff and well-defined procedures (Staggenborg, 1988). Finally, in Minkoff’s (1999) language, the IAF is not a protest group in that it is not disruptive7 and it addresses a broad range of issues rather than being focused on a single grievance.8 It falls into the grouping that Minkoff describes as “institutional advocacy.”

Authority and Power in the IAF: Who Are the Oligarchs?

There are two groups of people who are part of an IAF organization: leaders, who connect to the IAF through their member institutions, and the organizers, who are full-time paid employees of the organization. “Leader” is the IAF term for members who are active in the organization (and who get connected via their churches, schools, and so on). Organizers are professional staff who work full-time on IAF business. A typical IAF organization has somewhere between three and five organizers, the most senior of whom is called the lead organizer.

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7 Although it is not disruptive, it is successful. In this sense the IAF is not consistent with the view that continued use of disruptive tactics is key to ongoing success (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald, 1996, p. 13).
8 Because it moves from issue to issue, it is inconsistent with the Gamson (1990) view that single-issue organizations are more successful than are multi-issue ones.
The IAF distinguishes among several levels of leaders (members). Primary leaders are committed to building the organization and to their own development and also have a substantial following whom they can deliver. They will typically sit on the executive committee of the local organizations. This executive committee, consisting of primary leaders and the organizers, is the forum in which the major decisions facing the local organization are discussed and resolved. Secondary leaders are committed to raising funds and building the organization but have somewhat less reach, while tertiary leaders have smaller followings and work on narrower issues, such as local schools, parks, or events at their workplace. Of course, over time many of these people may attend a training session or an issues workshop and deepen their involvement, and so the distinction among the different types of leaders is not permanent.9

With this distinction among types of leaders in mind, one clear danger point is that the so-called primary leaders hold on to their power. If there is no circulation of leadership among these members, then the organizations will have clearly fallen into the classic SMO trap. In fact, as a matter of organizational structure, this is less of a problem than it might appear. The IAF has strong internal incentives to bring new institutions (churches and other institutions) into the local IAF organizations. As this happens as a matter of course, new leaders emerge. Although it may take some time, these leaders climb the internal ladder of power within the IAF organization and become influential. In my interviews of primary leaders, 35 percent had been with the organization for five years or less.10

9 McCarthy and Zald (1977, p. 1227) distinguish between “cadre” members who are involved in the organization decision making and “transitory team” members who are involved in specific tasks.
10 An organizer reflected this when asked about what she saw as her core duties:

What we call looking for talent through individual meetings. We also make the discipline and practice of having individual meetings as part of all of our larger meetings. We hold leaders accountable to who they are talking to, what new people they are bringing in? Asking institutions why they are not talking to that Methodist church in your town? Or to the local public school? Who they are meeting in the city that’s interesting. Always challenging ourselves and our institutions to be thinking beyond their walls.

A similar process shows up in terms of the pressures that are placed upon senior leaders to recruit new leaders. A woman who is now a senior leader described how she first came in contact with the organization: a friend who was an active leader nagged her into attending a meeting:

So, as a result of her pining and pining and telling me to go to the meetings, I said, “OK, I’ll go because she needed to meet her quota.” But I kept going, but I wasn’t into the organization. I was always marginal. And studying them because I’m not exactly liberal always. Politically I’m not. But a lot of the stuff I was hearing was pretty liberal. But
A much more serious worry is the role of organizers. The IAF network in the Southwest employs roughly forty organizers. One of the distinctive characteristics of the IAF is that organizing is treated as a professional career. Organizers are paid respectable wages, there are frequently training sessions, and the organizers have strong peer networks. The skill and sophistication of the organizers and the fact that they are full-time while the leaders frequently have other more time-consuming commitments, such as earning a living, raises the natural question of whether the organizers in fact dominate decision making. Making the danger even more salient is the fact that among the organizers there is a clear hierarchy. In the Southwest, a small group of senior organizers, led by the charismatic founder of the network, Ernesto Cortes, has dominated the network for several decades. These organizers are personally close to each other and form a cadre within a cadre. It is easy for an observer of the network to believe that the organizers in general, and the inner core of them in particular, are the real decision makers in the IAF.

Examples of the power of the organizers are plentiful. For example, several years ago the Texas network forged an alliance with the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), and the decision to do this was made by the senior organizers and then sold to the leaders. Similarly, in the last statewide election, the network decided to invest a great deal of resources into voter registration (termed “sign up and take charge”), and again this was essentially a decision made by organizers. As a final example, the timing, themes, and content of the several network-wide conferences that are held each year are largely determined by organizers.

The Iron Law and Becalming: How Does the IAF Stack Up?

The foregoing section suggested that the IAF organizers are, in important respects, a self-perpetuating elite, and there is much evidence supporting this in the

then I started to see things that made a lot of sense that they were working on. And particularly of interest to me was the way that they were doing the accountability sessions with the local legislators, the state legislators that were from the area here and the commissioners and the board members and what have you. So I liked it.
decisions of the organizations. However, to stop here would miss much of the story. Despite the powerful role of organizers, the leaders (membership) of the IAF manage to retain a very substantial voice. Equally important, they do not feel as if they are dominated by the organizers, and there has been no loss of energy due to elite control.

We can begin by asking how issues are developed. One key source is house-meetings, where problems of concern to the leaders are surfaced. The early days of Valley Interfaith illustrate how this works. The two organizers at the time, Ernie Cortes and Jim Drake, had identified equalizing school finance and cleaning up Brownsville Harbor as the two key issues. COPS and the other IAF organizations had been very involved in school finance for several years, and the harbor was of considerable concern to some of the more middle-class parishes in Brownsville. In preparing for a visit by the Governor to the Valley, Cortes and Drake were surprised to discover that the energy in house-meetings was mostly about conditions in the colonias.11 As a result, the IAF decided to make this the centerpiece of the Governor’s visit.

Whether they emerge from house-meetings or are defined by organizers, what is decisive in determining which issues get the organization’s attention is the willingness of the leaders to work. The most common sentiment about the decision-making process had to do with energy. One leader commented:

[What]… plays into what we're going to do is where's the energy and who has the energy? Because you may identify many issues, but you have to identify what are the issues where more people have energy. And who has the energy to work with them.

Decisions in Valley Interfaith are made via a representational structure that aggregates upward from house-meetings through an intermediate body (the regional representatives) to the executive committee. This means, of course, that the broad base of the organization speaks its voice either in house-meetings or via their representatives; this is not an organization in which plebiscites or large assemblies make decisions. However, the structure of the organization forces the top level to listen to the opinions of the base.

11 Colonias are communities which are typically developed by large landowners and which, because they lie outside the jurisdiction of incorporated cities or towns, are not subject to zoning restrictions and lack infrastructure such as running water, electricity, and paved roads.
Are debates genuine? The answer seems to be yes. One type of debate has to do with what is, in effect, horse-trading within the organization. Each neighborhood or area within the organization might want the organization to go to bat for some particular local project, and the leaders have to sort this out. As another leader describes it:

North McAllen and South McAllen IAF leaders negotiate. For example, at a certain moment we had to talk about a north side and a south side library because both want one. We have public transportation system here. The north side wanted an extension of that. We said, fine.

Another kind of debate has to do with overall priorities. Recently Valley Interfaith had to decide whether it would get involved in helping people obtain their citizenship papers. In the words of a leader:

There was a discussion: is it something that we want to do? This is more in the line of social work. We normally do more building, working with people and educating and identifying leaders. It took a lot of energy and time to work with citizenship. And we decided we wanted to because there were people in our community that were afraid of losing benefits, because they were elderly and if they had worked in the fields there was no record of them ever working and their only source of money was a check that they got. So there was an interest. But there was some discussion on that.

In this example, after the debate the leaders decided to pursue the citizenship program because of the strong interest in it among the membership. This was a decision made by leaders, not by organizers. Another example was the Valley Interfaith campaign to pass a referendum requiring McAllen to elect its city council by neighborhood rather than at large. The pressure for this campaign came from Valley Interfaith leaders, and the idea was initially opposed by the organizers (on the ground that they would lose; in fact, they won).

In these debates about the broader mission of the organization, the voices of the organizers are obviously heard—for example, when they push local organizations to get involved in statewide issues. As a leader comments, “Sometimes from the perspective of a leader of a local region, there are periods when there's a lot of time and energy that's taken out by the statewide network.” And another leader, in describing the system, notes, “Well, there's a lot of studies. There's study. There's discussion. There's
recommendations by the organizers and then the committee that is in charge looks at the situation.”

In short, decision making within the IAF is complex. The ideas of the broad membership are voiced in house-meetings. There is a process of voting “by energy,” there are different levels of decision-making committees of leaders, and there is the role of the organizers. In the end, the broad membership feels that it is fully involved in the decisions which are made. In none of our interviews did members express serious dissatisfaction about the nature or openness of the decision-making process.

It is, of course, important not to be naïve about these patterns. Certainly organizers are very influential and certainly there are key leaders who have remained in place for many years. IAF decisions are not taken by plebiscite or even necessarily by voting of representative bodies. The point, however, is that IAF members feel they have an influential voice, and the evidence is that indeed they do. Furthermore, the organizations are open, and indeed eager, to recruit new leaders.

Goal Displacement

Another source of evidence regarding the ability of the IAF to evade the negative consequences of oligarchical control is the organizations’ ability to avoid significant goal displacement. Goal displacement is driven by the effort of organizations to adapt to a threatening environment or to obtain the resources that the environment offers at a price. The classic depiction is provided by Selznick (1984), who showed how the Tennessee Valley Authority shifted its mission in response to political pressures from its environment. Goal displacement arises because organizations exist in an environment populated by other organizations that are both resources and threats. Survival requires finding ways to draw on those resources and deflect the threats. One straightforward strategy is to transform the goals and tactics of the organization in a way that makes it more congruent with environmental demands and opportunities. Other more subtle changes involve transformations in operating procedures. Organizations may adopt formal bureaucratic operating procedures that convey the appearance of responsibility
and lend legitimacy to their actions. They try to blend in by mimicking the behaviors, rules, and procedures of the more powerful organizations in their environment (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). They find ways to include their potential rivals in the organization’s decision making, and this co-option provides a measure of security, although it also diverts the organization from its goals. In short, organizations take actions and adopt policies that, while not necessarily consistent with the original ideals and goals, seem to provide a measure of financial or political security and stability. The logic of the organization and of its survival and growth takes precedence over the logic of the founding ideals.12

Although the literature is not always clear about this, the link between goal displacement and the iron law of oligarchy arises because goal displacement is more in the interests of managers of SMOs than in the interest of members. The managers, or oligarchs, presumably have a strong interest in maintaining their position and prerequisites, and this goal can take precedence for them relative to the stated objectives of the organization. By contrast, members lack the incentive to maintain the privileges of leadership, since they do not have any, and therefore maintain a stronger interest in the nominal goals of the organization. With this logic in mind, an additional test of whether the IAF model has avoided the consequences of the iron law of oligarchy is whether, despite its oligarchical structure, it has avoided goal displacement.

In thinking about this, it is important to see that the risks are real. IAF organizations operate by mobilizing political pressure on local and state governments to improve services, engage in education reform, provide job training resources, and so on. In doing this, the IAF inevitably becomes entwined with government. This tight relationship is given additional weight by the fact that the IAF does not limit itself to election cycles but rather works hard to maintain pressure on elected officials and bureaucrats. This kind of relationship inevitably leads to a deep involvement in the day-to-day issues of government.

12 In the context of SMOs, goal displacement has a negative connotation; however, as a general rule, this need not be true. Some organizations that change their goals go on to considerable success, as, for example, Zald and Denton (1963) demonstrate for the YMCA, which shifted from an SMO orientation towards evangelical Christianity to broader social service objectives. Business organizations may also find that goal displacement is necessary for survival. Consider, for example, IBM’s success in shifting from a hardware to a consulting and computer services strategy, whereas Digital Equipment Corporation was unable to shift away from its strategy of closed proprietary systems.
When all of this is considered, it is certainly possible that the IAF might come to resemble just another pressure group. Its interest in maintaining good relationships with the politicians and bureaucrats with whom it works on a daily basis might well lead it to become less adversarial, less concerned with directly addressing distributional issues, more sympathetic to the “realistic” viewpoint of what is possible, and increasingly dependent upon the goodwill of government officials for the organizations’ continued success. All of this may add up to a recipe for goal displacement.

To a very large extent, the IAF has, despite these pressures and temptations, avoided goal displacement. One particularly dramatic example occurred in the spring of 2002 in San Antonio. COPS, the oldest IAF organization in the Southwest, had engaged in a variety of cooperative arrangements with the local business community, including a nationally known job training program, Project QUEST, which relied on firms making commitments to hire program graduates. In addition, COPs had for many years worked closely with city government in allocating funds to particular neighborhoods for improvements of one kind or another. The stage, therefore, was clearly set for goal displacement.

However, contrary to expectations, when the business community and the city government announced plans to attract a Professional Golf Association (PGA) golf tournament to the city by utilizing public funds to subsidize construction of a resort, COPS led the opposition. COPs organized a petition drive which collected over 100,000 signatures, and it waged a vigorous public relations campaign against the project. The business community reacted with fury, withdrawing its cooperation with the job training program and pressing the city to cut funding to that program by fifty percent (which the city did). In the end, a compromise was reached (which involved commitments to a living wage for resort employees and the use of a different source of funds to support the project), but the point here is that the organization was willing to risk its position in “business as usual” to maintain commitment to its original mission.
Similar stories can be told about other IAF organizations in the Southwest. Valley Interfaith, for example, challenged the political establishment and business community in McAllen, Texas by leading a campaign to change the election system from at-large to single-member districts.\textsuperscript{13} As in San Antonio, the political establishment and business community reacted angrily, yet Valley Interfaith was willing to run the risks involved.\textsuperscript{14}

Summary

I have shown that despite its oligarchical structure, the IAF has maintained membership commitment and avoided the temptations for goal displacement which oligarchy brings. In other ways the IAF organizations have also avoided becalming. For example, the organizations have been successful in maintaining tactical innovation (McAdam, 1983). As an example, with respect to labor markets, their initiatives have expanded from simple job training programs to living-wage campaigns, organizing employee associations, school reform efforts, and campaigns to shape the use of tax abatements.\textsuperscript{15}

Finally, the organizations have continued to grow. With respect to the number of cities organized, there is clear evidence of expansion beginning from the starting point of one organization in San Antonio to nearly 30 in Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, California, and Nebraska. Currently, new organizing efforts are under way in several additional cities. Within a city, hard evidence is more difficult to obtain, but conversations with organizers strongly suggest that in virtually all locations, the number of institutions that are affiliated with the local organization has increased in recent years, as have the number of leaders who attached via their institutions.

\textsuperscript{13} At-large elections put a premium on money in winning campaigns. Amy Bridges (1997) shows that civic reformers who promoted at-large elections during the progressive era in the Southwest were motivated by the desire to dampen voting in poor districts and to advantage well-financed citywide slates.

\textsuperscript{14} The business community opposition ran newspaper ads arguing, “This is not a campaign for power to the people. It is a campaign for power to Valley Interfaith” (McAllen Monitor, May 5, 2000).

\textsuperscript{15} For a description of the labor market programs of the SWIAF and of the expansion from job training to living-wage and union-organizing efforts, see Osterman (2002), Chapter 5.
In short, the SWIAF on its face looks very much like a classic SMO organization with just the kind of internal structure that skeptics point to when they speak of the nearly inevitable tendency of such organizations to decline. There is a powerful self-perpetuating elite (the organizers) which has more political sophistication than the membership base and which dominates the internal communication channels and access to resources. Despite this, members of the organization remain committed, involved, and influential. There is none of the sense of alienation, distance, or cynicism that one might expect to find among the membership of an organization that has succumbed to the iron law of oligarchy. The next section shows how the internal culture of the organization acts as a counterweight to the standard pressures of organizational pathology.

**Evading the Iron Law**

At the core of the IAF success in evading the iron law is its commitment to training members to develop their capacity and sense of agency and building an adversarial culture in the organization, which enables them to exercise these new skills and attitudes.

The IAF approach to organizing is centered on identifying and training leaders (members). One leader’s comment is representative: The IAF is “a university that educates us. We’re prepared for any event.” This training takes place via the individual relational meetings and through seminars and workshops. At a typical training session, organizers or outside experts run small-group workshops on particular topics, both substantive (e.g., new ideas about school curriculum, or water law, or the economics of living-wage campaigns) and organizational (e.g., how to run a house-meeting, or social doctrine in the Bible, or voter registration strategies). In addition, IAF leaders read material ranging from economics to theology. Several small groups often read a common set of articles, and one group then summarizes the material for the entire assembly while another discusses how the readings relate to ongoing concerns in their lives, neighborhoods, and cities. In addition, leaders attend more extended training which lasts (depending on the program) three, five, or ten days. These are extended introductions to the IAF’s philosophy of organizing and personal development.
The organizers are constantly prodding leaders to try new activities and to gain new skills. In the formal training sessions, leaders go through role-plays in which they perform core IAF activities, ranging from recruiting other leaders to talking with politicians and government officials. Prior to public actions, ranging from simple meetings with politicians to full-blown accountability sessions, leaders often practice and rehearse.

A description of this process is provided by a leader:

The organizer has been instrumental in helping me keep the fire lit and challenging me and putting me in situations where I can apply what I’ve learned. Putting me in leadership positions. She would say, “I need some help. I need a co chair. I need somebody to run this meeting and I need you to say a little bit about this. Talk about what you learned in training and share it with the other people. She would ask me to attend state rallies where we were focusing on a variety of issues and then come back and report to the group. Basically it was through action. Putting me in situations where I had to apply what I had learned. It has become very comfortable for me because I’ve done it so many times, and it’s become part of the fiber of who I am.

And another leader provides a similar story:

I think a turning point was a time when [an organizer] confronted me. She said, “What have you learned? You’ve been with us for a year, a year and a half. What have you learned?” And I had never thought about it. About myself. No, you don’t just know how to run a meeting. Not just about how to talk to people. What have you learned about yourself? And that’s when I just had to sit down and say, “Oh, O.K. this is what I’ve actually learned. What I’ve changed.” But it was her confrontation with me that made me dig deeper inside myself and find that spot. She gave me a couple of books to read and that helped also.

In our interviews we asked members (leaders) how they felt that they had changed as a result of IAF training. The following comments were typical in virtually all of our interviews: “When I got to know Valley Interfaith I was one of those persons who was never involved in anything.” Another: “When I began to train I didn’t know how to talk.” Another: “I was a timid person, ashamed. I couldn’t talk.” Another: “I was more like a shy person. I couldn’t talk to other people. I was like in my little shell, not speaking out.”
By the same token, the comments were all followed by descriptions of personal transformation. The most common reaction was that the IAF had given people the courage to speak. The people who made the comments above now say: “It is difficult to change these habits but in the two years I’ve been with the organization I have learned a lot and have changed a lot.” Another: “It gave me the courage to talk.” Another: “I’m not afraid anymore. Before I thought I’d be afraid to confront a political person of one kind or another.” Another: “I have changed a lot. I’m no longer afraid to talk.”

We asked leaders how they thought an old friend, who hadn’t seen them for some time, would perceive them differently if they were to meet that person now. This reply was typical: [She would] “probably say I’m more assertive. That I understand issues a whole lot better.” And in fact a friend said, “When I first saw [ ] she was a person very closed up in her house, doing nothing more than taking care of her husband and children. Now she’s involved in the problems of the community.”

Many of the people we talked to described personal changes that went well beyond the purely political. In one leader’s words:

Well it goes deep into you. I mean you go deep inside. You just don’t go a little bit into the surface. I mean you go deep into the soul and you really look into yourself. Because often we go through life not knowing who we are. So you get to know yourself better, I think. National training did that to me a lot.

This notion that the IAF leads to broader horizons is also emphasized by another leader, who commented:

Well, I think that if it wasn’t for Valley Interfaith I think I would probably be trapped in my own little job, and little world, little family. Not thinking that I could make a difference in anybody’s lives and for that matter in my home. I think I’ve been able to get outside my own family and my own job and been able to get to know other people. Help other individuals and grow that way. And by being involved in other people’s lives, in other things, it’s helped me expand and not lose sight of what’s really important. In that respect I think it’s kept me really intact as to my community.
Building an Adversarial Culture

As the foregoing demonstrates, the IAF enhances people’s perceptions of their capacity. Whereas the union members studied by Lipset et al. came into the union with confidence in their status and abilities, the IAF is composed of people who lack this confidence, but the organizations work hard to help them develop it. The next question is how this sense of agency is exercised. In the Typographical Union, members participated via the formal competition of competing political parties. In the IAF there are no elections, but the organization’s culture creates an environment in which people are encouraged to be assertive, and, by acting in this manner, prevent the organizations from falling prey to the pathologies that concern us here.

A central element of the IAF culture is skepticism towards authority. This skepticism is developed via training exercises, rituals, and readings. Because members are encouraged to develop this skepticism, and because their sense of capacity and agency has been developed, they are more likely to resist organizational tendencies for elite domination.

A sense of how this attitude is developed can be gained by examining two devices utilized during IAF training. The first is a simple exercise: in the middle of a talk, the speaker asks one or more of the attendees to leave the room and then goes on with the presentation. The departed trainees are simply ignored. Eventually they may peek back in the room or else they may not be seen until the next break. At this point their behavior is examined. Why, the trainer wants to know, did these people so willingly accept orders? Under what conditions do we, and should we, simply accept authority?

The second is a reading drawn from Dostoevsky’s Brothers Karamazov, called “The Grand Inquisitor.” The story is a parable told by one brother to another. Christ, it seems, decided to return to earth, and He did so in Seville at the height of the Spanish

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16 “Capacity” as used here is clearly related to the larger social science concept of “agency” (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). Agency, in the Emirbayer and Mische formulation, involves the interaction of both history and habit with a drive to transform historically given structures (p. 970). They distinguish three components of agency, one of which (iteration) refers to people’s sense of their competencies and capacities and the second of which (projective) refers to their effort to “give shape and direction to future possibilities” (p. 984). My argument is that people’s views of their capacities and their drive to transform the future can be shaped and taught by the SMO.
Inquisition. Heretics were burned by the hundreds, and the terrified and passive citizenry was under the control of priests led by the ninety-year-old Grand Inquisitor. Christ is recognized as He walks the streets and people flock to him, but the Grand Inquisitor is furious and has Christ arrested and thrown into prison. The chapter replays the Grand Inquisitor’s monologue defending the dictatorship of the priests to a silent Jesus.

In the ultimate irony, it turns out that the priests are unhappy that Christ returned. “Why did You come back here, to interfere and make things difficult for us?” The original promise of Christ to mankind was freedom, but, the Inquisitor asserts, this has not worked. When men have freedom, they cannot manage it. The consequence is chaos and religious strife. “Freedom, free-thinking, and science will lead men into such confusion and confront them with such dilemmas and insoluble riddles that the fierce and rebellious will destroy one another; others who are rebellious but weaker will destroy themselves, while the weakest and most miserable will crawl to our feet and cry out to us.” People realize this: “So, in the end, they will lay their freedom at our feet and say to us ‘enslave us, but feed us.’ And they will finally understand that freedom and assurance of daily bread for everyone are two incompatible notions….”

The Inquisitor, despite his strong statements and terrible deeds, is not painted by Dostoevsky as an evil man. Rather, he devoted his life to thinking through how best to help mankind and came to these conclusions only at the end. He is tormented and, in fact, backs off from his original intention to kill Christ. He releases Him with the admonition to never again return to earth.

There is, of course, a certain irony in the IAF’s use of this parable. The story is suffused with anti-clericalism, yet the IAF works closely with organized religion. However, the IAF uses the story to teach about how power operates. The Grand Inquisitor is a story about the risk of unilateral power and about the dangers of passiveness and learned helplessness. The lesson of the story, which is central to how the IAF trains its members, is that the membership should be skeptical of authority, both external to the organization and within.

The IAF also has cultural norms about how people behave towards each other that taken together might be described as “tough love.” These norms are repeatedly conveyed in both formal training sessions and also in informal interactions between organizers and
leaders. The organizers take it as one of their core tasks to teach these norms and to reinforce them via ritual.

One norm is the so-called iron rule: “Never do for anyone what they can do for themselves.” People need to learn to act on their own behalf, and if organizers or other leaders are too interventionist, this learning won’t happen. In a similar spirit, groups of people—be they employees who are paid too little or disgruntled residents of a *colonia*—need to do the hard work of organizing to change their circumstances. Obviously this rule does not imply that no assistance will be rendered, since the IAF exists to help individuals and groups move forward, but it does imply that people have to make an effort. There is also internal political content to this norm: the organization has to choose what battles to undertake, and if affected parties are not willing to make a significant effort, then that particular issue is unlikely to be on the agenda.

Another ritual is constant evaluation. After every activity the leaders and organizers will come together to talk about what went wrong and what went right. These conversations can be quite direct. At one evaluation I attended, the event (a rally combined with a meeting with state representatives) was evaluated by out-of-town organizers and the local organizer on several criteria: the size and diversity of attendance, whether the leaders took ownership of the event, whether it was clear that the leaders represented specific institutions, and whether the event articulated issues that the politicians in attendance could be pressed to act upon (as opposed to problems that are not actionable). Even at the conclusion of one-on-one conversations, there will be an evaluation of the experience.

Finally, the IAF trains members to make a clear distinction between public and private relationships. Private relationships are those among family and friends. They are governed by a set of emotions—love, loyalty, desire to be accepted—that are widely understood. It is a mistake, however, to expect that these kinds of relationships should be extended to the world of organizing and work. Public relationships are those among colleagues and also between IAF members and public officials. These are governed by power rather than love, by the desire to be respected, not by the desire to be accepted, and by self-interest. The implication is that no one, colleagues as well as adversaries, should be fully trusted nor should their leadership be unquestionably accepted.
The Organizers Once Again

The logic of this paper thus far has been to demonstrate, first, that the SWIAF has managed to evade the iron law, and second, to describe the aspects of the organizational design that lead to this outcome. There is, however, one remaining puzzle: Why do the organizers go along with this? Why do they not work to undermine the model? After all, the normal expectation is that the temptations and incentives to reach for power and to aggrandize their position would lead them to take actions to move the organization along the traditional path towards elite domination.

Part of the answer is that the model is self-perpetuating in that once the leaders (members) develop their sense of capacity and then find themselves operating in the kind of adversarial culture that I have described, then they will work to maintain the balance of power in the system. This is, indeed, an important part of the answer and should not be underestimated. However, it is also important to inquire about the ideology, behavior, and incentive structure of the organizers.

The organizers begin with a deep grounding in the IAF ideology regarding the role of leaders (members), an ideology that has its roots in the 1930s and the work of Saul Alinsky (Horwitt, 1992). In this view, the very purpose of the organization is to build the capacity of the leaders, and any particular programmatic actions are secondary to this larger goal. The organizers, very much like the leaders, attend regular training sessions and seminars (on the order of once every six weeks), and at these the ideology is systematically reinforced.

This strong ideology, which is regularly retaught, is an important part of the story, but there is more. Another element is that the SWIAF has a set of organizational practices aimed at preventing organizer domination. The organizers are rotated every three or four years to another city and hence are prevented from developing a vested interest in building power in any particular location. In addition, when a lead organizer moves to another organization in a new city, he or she has to be approved and hired by the new local organization, i.e., by the members. An organizer with a poor reputation in
the network could have difficulty at this point (and there is a network of leaders in the region since they see each other at the training sessions and conferences).

Beyond the ideology and the organizational practices, it is also worth considering the career incentives facing organizers. First, looking at the potential downside, unlike union leaders, IAF organizers do not face elections in which they could be ousted. IAF organizers lose their jobs if their supervisors (more senior organizers) believe they are doing poor work. However, they do not face electoral risk and hence do not have an incentive to build a power base or to limit the capacity of potential opponents.

On the upside, the question is what it means for an organizer to get ahead in the IAF. Salaries in the IAF are good relative to other community organizations, but the salary structure is compressed, and no one gets rich by moving up the organization. In addition, the organizational hierarchy is flat, with only three levels (trainee, organizer, and lead organizer). Advancement means first becoming a lead organizer and then getting assigned to challenging and interesting cities. In addition, advancement means gaining respect in the eyes of one’s peers and hence becoming influential in the network. None of these sources of advancement depend upon establishing a power base in a local organization or suppressing the role of members.

In short, a combination of consistently reinforced ideology, lack of threat, and the nature of positive career incentives taken as a whole predispose organizers to accept an organizational framework in which their power, while not inconsiderable, is limited and constrained by the countervailing power of the membership. This balance is what permits the IAF to maintain the practices and culture that evade the iron law.

**Discussion**

The major lesson of this case is that oligarchy is not incompatible with strong membership energy and commitment. There is no evidence in this case of the “becalming” which Zald and Ash would predict under these circumstances. The IAF creates strong internal pressures against elite domination and goal displacement via two

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17 An entry-level organizer earns in the $30,000 range, an experienced organizer between $40,000 and $60,000, and the most senior organizers between $70,000 and $80,000.
interrelated steps. First, it builds in its members a strong sense of personal capacity. Added to this is an internal culture—developed through training and reinforced through ritual—which encourages members to confront authority not simply in the political world at large but also inside the organization. Taken together, a strong sense of agency and a skepticism of authority provide important organizational counterweights to the natural tendency of organizations to succumb to the iron law of oligarchy and goal displacement.

This argument is consistent with a line of argument found in the SMO literature regarding how organizations evade the iron law, but with a twist. As already noted, Lipset et al. (1956) place important weight on the social or cultural capital which members brought to the union, arguing that because the members saw themselves as high-status, they were inclined to insist on a voice in union affairs. Clemens (1993) argues that the turn-of-the-(twentieth)-century women’s groups she studied avoided the iron law because the social status of the members (as homemakers) rendered them relatively immune from the blandishments of the political establishment, and hence they were unlikely to be tempted by co-optation and less likely to use the organizational levers to maintain internal power for personal gain.

In both of these lines of argument, status and capacity are central in the process of avoiding the iron law, but in both cases these are exogenous to the organizations themselves. The members brought this status with them to the organization. There was no sense, for example, in which the union consciously created the preconditions for “union democracy.” By contrast, the IAF starts from a different point. Its members come into the organization with a weak sense of capacity, and the IAF puts enormous effort into building it. There are no political contests, but the IAF creates an adversarial culture. In short, while both Lipset et al. (1956) and Clemens (1993) describe how organizations were able to build on and take advantage of the preexisting status of their memberships, the IAF case is an example of an organization shaping the character of its membership. The dynamics built by the IAF permit strong self-perpetuating leadership to coexist with high levels of membership energy and commitment.

Another long-running theme in the literature concerns the relationship between the iron law and organizational structure. Polletta (2002, p. 214) defines participatory democracy as “a refusal to create formal jurisdictions and chains of command,” but this is
clearly not viable for a complex, long-lasting organization, as she herself acknowledges, and is certainly not relevant for the IAF, which has a well-developed organization chart. The age of an organization and the extent of its formalization (as measured by clear delineation of offices, division of labor, and hierarchy) are perhaps the best-known and most standard measures of organizational structure. Both Minkoff (1999) and Staggenborg (1988) focus upon these in their analyses of SMO survival, and both find, perhaps surprisingly, that formalization is an advantage for SMO survival. However, survival is not the same as maintaining energy and avoiding becalming. Nonetheless, Staggenborg (1988, p. 601) provides some textured case studies which show that more formal organizations (in the sense of having professional leaders) are more likely than others to engage in house-meetings and to train new volunteers. The IAF case is supportive of this finding.

There is also attention in the literature regarding the impact of the resource base on SMOs. On the one hand, Zald and Ash (1966, p. 335) hypothesize that if resources are available independent of members (e.g., via an endowment or an automatic dues checkoff), then the organization is more likely to become oligarchical. Jenkins and Eckert (1986), in their study of Civil Rights organizations, find that utilization of outside funding (in this case, foundations) tends to co-opt SMOs. The IAF case does not fit either line of thought in that a typical organization raises about 60 percent of its funds from member organizations (typically churches) and the remainder from foundations and the local business community. Hence funding is very much a mixed model, with the IAF dependent both on members and on outside funders, and, despite this double dependence, it has avoided the organizational traps with which this paper is concerned.

An important final question is whether this model holds lessons for other SMOs, ranging from community organizations to unions. Along at least one important dimension, the IAF model might appear nontransferable. Its ties to the religious community provide it with a resource base and source of members, which is distinctive.

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18 Polletta (2002, p. 221) writes, “I agree with critics that a consensus-based, non-hierarchical, and radically decentralized form of organization is not optimal for movement groups that are internally diverse, complex, and resource dependent.”

19 Within each IAF organization there are a lead organizer, senior organizers, and junior organizers. In addition, in Texas an organizer supervises all of the organizations, and this person in turn reports to an individual who supervises the entire Southwest.
Furthermore, religion provides some value “hooks” that the IAF can utilize to attract members. However, while there is some truth to this, the point can also be exaggerated. The IAF organizes a minority of churches in any given city, and in approaching a congregation, it has to compete with alternative views about the appropriate role of the church in seeking social change. By far, most congregations are more concerned with “charity” than with “justice” and as such are not interested in the approach of the IAF.  

Even if an IAF organization gains a foothold in a congregation, it is a constant struggle to increase, or even maintain, its role. In short, organizing in churches is, in many respects, little different from organizing in society at large.

Given this consideration, the IAF model does in fact hold important lessons for other SMOs. The IAF represents an unusual mixture of a very structured organization with strong leadership, which, at the same time, works hard to train its membership base, inculcate within them a sense of personal capacity, and encourage them to confront the leadership. By contrast, most SMOs go in one direction or the other, with unfortunate consequences. As an example, much of the decline of the union movement has been attributed, even by its friends, to an autocratic leadership which was out of touch with its members and which gave them no role in governance (Lichtenstein, 2002). Although by no means the whole story (employer opposition and a hostile political climate also played key roles (Kochan, Katz, and McKersie, 1986)), the internal dynamics sapped the energy of members and also made it difficult to organize new locals since prospective members saw that they would have little role (Voss and Sherman, 2000). On the other side, many emerging SMOs, in an effort to empower their members, fail to establish an organizational structure and leadership system that enable them to survive a difficult environment (Gamson, 1990; Polletta, 2002; Minkoff, 1999).

In short, from the perspective of both the scholarly SMO literature as well as the practical world of organizing, the SWIAF model holds considerable interest. What is less clear—at least from the perspective of practice—is the potential reach of the model.

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20 Ammerman (1997, p. 338) examined the activities of 23 randomly selected congregations and found that 21 were engaged in what she termed charity activities, while only two were “activist,” which she defined as working for social change.

21 The IAF engages in what it terms “congregational development,” which essentially involves organizing within a congregation to identify and train leaders who will keep the congregation involved in IAF activities (Osterman, 2002, pp. 114-116).
Whereas unions can organize thousands of workers in one election, the IAF model is based on slow retail organizing. The one-on-ones, house-meetings, and training sessions are all small-scale and time-consuming. Furthermore, the emphasis on capacity building frequently leads new IAF organizations to delay their work on issues until the organization itself is built. All of this can be frustrating to those schooled in other organizing models. The challenge for these other organizations is, therefore, to maintain their strategies yet extract the key lessons from the IAF to invigorate, and reinvigorate, their organizations. The challenge for the scholarly literature is to move away from the dichotomies that have dominated the debate and understand that strong authority and empowered membership can coexist successfully, at least within some SMO models.


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