

Overcoming Oligarchy:
Culture and Agency in
Social Movement
Organizations

Paul Osterman

*Massachusetts Institute of
Technology*

A case study of the Southwest Industrial Areas Foundation is used to examine how a mass-movement social organization has been able to avoid the consequences of an oligarchic leadership structure, which previous scholars have claimed leads inevitably to loss of membership commitment, "becalming," and goal displacement. The case describes this network of community organizations, which has a very strong and self-perpetuating authority structure but has nonetheless maintained the commitment and involvement of its membership for many decades as it addresses issues such as school reform, living wages, training programs, health insurance, and physical community infrastructure. The case shows how the organization maintained its membership commitment and a clear focus on its original objectives by enhancing the membership's sense of capacity and agency and building a culture of contestation within the organization that encourages the membership to push back against the elite who dominate the organization. ●

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. The basic source of this pessimism is the expectation that social movement organizations will come to be dominated by their leadership (Michels, 1962). An important consequence of oligarchical control appears to be loss of energy and commitment on the part of the membership, or what Zald and Ash (1966) characterized as "becalming." In a similar vein, McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald (1996: 12) spoke of the "eventual decline" of energy of social movement organizations. A second consequence of oligarchical control is that the activities of the organization are diverted from the original purposes. The bulk of the literature on oligarchy has either documented its emergence or else asked about contingencies that might prevent it from occurring. The negative consequences for organizations that are in its grip are taken for granted and seen as inevitable.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF OLIGARCHY

In this paper, I focus on mass-mobilization social movement organizations rather than on professional social movement organizations of the sort emphasized by McCarthy and Zald (1977). The former rely on the mass mobilization of beneficiaries, the latter on paid leaders, staff, and conscience constituents who contribute but are not active. In the remainder of the paper, the term social movement organizations (SMOs) refers to the mass-mobilization variety. The conventional expectation, stemming from the work of Michels (1962), is that these organizations will come to be dominated by an oligarchy. The enormous literature that followed Michels' formulation can be thought of as covering three general areas: an explication of the sources and dynamics of the "iron law" of oligarchy and the organizational consequences of the phenomenon, an empirical testing of whether the hypothesis is confirmed by the trajectory of organizations, and an examination of contingent circumstances in which the iron law does not take hold or when it is reversed.

© 2006 by Johnson Graduate School,
Cornell University.
0001-8392/06/5104-0622/\$3.00.

●
Funding for this research was provided by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. I would like to thank Lucio Baccaro, Susan Eckstein, Roberto Fernandez, Mauro Guillén, and three referees for comments. Natasha Freidus provided excellent research assistance.

Overcoming Oligarchy

Oligarchy arises because leaders wish to hold onto their positions of power either for psychological reasons or because the positions provide them with economic rewards and social status that they would otherwise lose were they to return to the ranks of the membership (Michels, 1962: 205). In his presentation of Michels' argument, Selznick (1943: 51) wrote in terms that are reminiscent of modern principal-agent theory, explaining that cooperative effort requires delegation to intermediary agents, which "creates a bifurcation of interest between the initiator of the action and the agent employed . . . [that can] generate actions whose objective consequences undermine the professed aims of the organization." This in turn raises the issue of control, and once a leader or group of leaders is in place, they create bureaucratic machinery that reinforces their grip on power. In what has been termed the "iron law" of oligarchy, they dominate the channels of communication and control resources. In addition, the leadership develops its own political skills and does not provide opportunities for members to develop theirs (Lipset, Trow, and Coleman, 1956: 8–10, 452). To this natural complexity, the leaders add a degree of mystification that makes it appear that only they can manage the organization's tasks. Over time, these tactics lead to low membership participation, which simply reinforces the pattern.

A great deal of literature suggests that the iron law is a common outcome, and reviews of the literature have concluded that the iron law is the typical trajectory of social movement organizations. Scott (2003: 343) wrote 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." Other scholars have read the literature in the same way. Voss and Sherman (2000: 306) reported a consensus that only informal organizations can avoid the iron law of oligarchy. Lipset, Trow, and Coleman (1956: 403) stated that "the functional requirements for democracy cannot be met most of the time in most unions or voluntary organizations." Clemens (1993: 755) wrote that "we have come to expect co-optation, conservative goal transformation, and the 'iron law of oligarchy.'"

How long it takes an organization's leadership to obtain control depends on the organization. The impulse may be virtually immediate or, Michels (1962: 167) put it, "With the institution of leadership there simultaneously begins . . . the transformation into a closed circle." The question of timing, therefore, becomes the practical one of the length of time it takes to create a self-sustaining bureaucratic apparatus and internal political system. Put this way, it is apparent that there is no universal answer to the timing question. It depends on the characteristics of the organization in question, such as size of membership, geographic scope, history, and so forth. In his description of the German Socialist party, Michels (1962: 117) implied that the process took about thirty years to play out, yet in a smaller, more compact organization, leadership could well cement its hold on power in a shorter period. For example, in Piven and Cloward's (1977)

view, the innovative unions of the New Deal period succumbed very quickly.

The forces that lead to the emergence of the iron law can take hold even in organizations such as the alternative or "collectivist organizations" described by Rothschild-Whitt (1979) that are conscious of the dangers and aggressively seek to avoid them. For example, in her discussion of one such organization, "Warmlines," Mansbridge (1983) showed how, over time, a dominating elite emerged despite the overt efforts of the organization to prevent this. Given that a central goal of these organizations, sometimes their very purpose, is to avoid leadership domination, the iron law directly undermines the organizations' objectives.

While the bulk of research cited above concluded that leadership oligarchy is the typical outcome for social movement organizations, the literature has become more nuanced in its treatment of the topic over time. The main new line of thought has been to argue that the emergence of oligarchy and top-down bureaucratization is not inevitable but is in fact contingent on a variety of considerations. The most well-developed theoretical discussion of the contingent nature of the iron law is found in Zald and Ash (1966), who put the greatest emphasis on the external environment of social movement organizations, the overall political ambience and the "sentiments" of members and the nature of the organizational field within which the social movement organization (SMO) operates. They also discussed how variations (contingencies) in internal organization can influence whether the SMO moves in the direction of oligarchy and emphasized the incentive structure of leaders and the possible emergence of factions.

This theoretical discussion was followed by a substantial empirical literature on the contingent nature of the iron law. Some of this literature deals with organizations that are not classic SMOs. One of the best-known investigations is Jenkins' (1977) study of a professional SMO, i.e., an organization that from the beginning lacked broad membership involvement. In this instance, the contingency was that goal displacement was in the liberal, not conservative, direction. Rothschild-Whitt (1976) directly took up the question of how organizations can avoid the iron law, but her cases were "alternative" institutions: a free high school, a free medical clinic, an alternative newspaper, and a food cooperative. Kanter (1972) also addressed a set of related questions about how dissenting organizations can maintain their mission and membership commitment, but her cases were nineteenth-century communes. Clark (1972) asked about how distinctive liberal arts colleges maintain their character, and Mansbridge (1983) examined the extent of membership participation in an alternative help-line and a New England town meeting.

Other literature has examined classic SMOs that are well established and highlights several distinct types of contingencies that influence whether oligopoly emerges. One theme has to do with the characteristics of the organization's members. Lipset, Trow, and Coleman (1956) in their study of the International Typographical Union pointed to the relatively

Overcoming Oligarchy

high status and skills of the union's craft members. In a similar vein, Clemens (1993) argued that the turn-of-the-(twentieth)-century women's groups she studied avoided the iron law because the social status of the members, who were typically not required to support themselves or children, 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.

Another contingency focuses on organizational design. Staggenborg (1988) provided textured information on 13 organizations, and her characterization of internal operations is largely what might be termed "organization chart" variables, such as decision-making structure, as well as the characteristics of the leadership. She related these to the success of the organizations in recruiting and training new members. 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. More recently, the contingency literature has asked about efforts of SMOs, particularly unions, to reverse the iron law (Voss and Sherman, 2000; Isaac and Christiansen, 2002).

These sources of contingency—the characteristics of the members, the motivations of the leaders, the design of the organization, and the nature of the external environment—are all important in explaining when the iron law emerges, or does not, in SMOs. What has not been examined, however, is the core assumption in the literature that when (or if) oligarchy takes hold, it entails a set of consequences that are inevitable. Given the contingencies already identified that influence whether an oligarchy will emerge, it seems worth examining whether these contingencies or others might allow an organization to develop an oligarchy yet avoid the consequences of loss of energy and membership and the displacement of its goals.

Assumptions about the Consequences of Oligarchy

The general expectation in the literature is that oligarchy has adverse consequences for SMOs. As already noted, scholars have tied the decline of the American union movement in part to its debilitating consequences. Piven and Cloward (1977) similarly attributed the weakness of protest movements to the rise of an internal bureaucracy and leadership domination. In terms of the theoretical development of the consequences of oligarchy, the most widely cited is loss of membership commitment, or what Zald and Ash (1966: 334) called "becalming," which they defined as when 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: 340), who listed a social movement's six tasks, two of which are maintaining energy and recruiting new members.

In Zald and Ash's (1966) argument, the direction of causality runs from becalming to oligarchy. They argued that when

members lose faith in the ability of the organization to achieve its goals, and as a consequence become somewhat disengaged, this creates the opportunity for leadership to act in its own self-interest and to become oligarchical. But much of the larger SMO literature points the causal arrow in the other direction and presumes that an organization in the grip of oligarchy is likely to lose the energy and commitment of its membership, because the membership becomes more and more removed from a decision-making role and from shaping the direction of the organization. For example, Voss and Sherman (2000: 304) attributed the decline of the union movement to loss of energy due to the "entrenched leadership and conservative transformation associated with Michels' iron law of oligarchy." In a similar vein, the main point of Piven and Cloward's (1977) argument is that energy is lost when an insurgent movement becomes bureaucratized.

The second consequence of oligarchy assumed to be inevitable is displacement of an organization's goals. Scholars have long been interested in the evolution of an organization's objectives. In his examination of non-profit hospitals, Perrow (1961) showed how the "operative goals" of an organization vary from its stated goals and focused on the role of the internal distribution of power in creating this gap. Goal displacement arises if the leadership and the membership nominally accept the same objectives for the organization, but the operative goals change. If the leadership and membership have different expressed goals, then the membership may in fact reject the legitimacy of the leadership.¹ The general expectation is that when oligarchy takes hold, the organization's leadership is more likely to be co-opted and to become more concerned with personal and organizational survival than with achieving the initial goals. 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 them more congruent with environmental demands and opportunities. Organizations 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-optation 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. Some organizations that change their goals go on to considerable success, as, for example, Zald and Denton (1963) demonstrated for the YMCA, which shifted from an orientation toward evangelical Christianity to broader social service objectives. In

¹ I thank a referee for suggesting this point.

Overcoming Oligarchy

the SMO context, however, goal displacement has a negative connotation, and the link between goal displacement and oligarchy arises because goal displacement is more in the interest 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 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. As Michels (1962: 338) put it, "... from a means, the organization becomes an end ... the sole preoccupation [of the leaders] is to avoid anything which may clog the machinery."

In short, there are many reasons why we should be concerned about the iron law of oligarchy. It may lead to loss of energy in the membership and hence to organizational decline, with the example of the American labor movement often used to illustrate this. It may lead to the diversion of the organization away from political or social goals, as the cases described by Piven and Cloward (1977) demonstrate. Or, as the case of Warmlines illustrates, it may directly subvert the very meaning of the organization as felt by its members (Mansbridge, 1983). Because of these concerns, researchers have explored under what circumstances oligarchy is contingent and might not arise. Seen in this way, there is one additional important issue that has not been explored: whether oligarchy can arise yet the consequences be avoided. The argument developed below is that when an SMO builds the capacity or sense of agency of its membership and, in addition, creates a culture that encourages members to assert themselves against the leadership, then even though oligarchy may not be eliminated, its consequences can be avoided.

The Influence of Culture and Agency

Some scholars of SMOs have discussed culture in the context of oligarchy. For example, in her analysis of participatory democracy in SMOs, a discussion that is part of the literature on the contingencies for avoiding the iron law, Polletta (2002) emphasized the impact of personal relationships and rituals of discussion and decision making, ideas that can be interpreted as culture. In general, however, culture has not been a central variable in the iron law literature. The literature nonetheless does provide clues about how organizational culture may help SMOs avoid the consequences of the iron law. For example, Lipset, Trow, and Coleman (1956), in their classic discussion of the Typographer's Union, argued that 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, Trow, and Coleman demonstrated, the emergence of the political competition within the union was due to historical accident, i.e., to the peculiarities of that union's development. But the social structure of the union was also important. The members of the union were socially of 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.

Although most SMOs lack political parties or overt leadership contests, and members of some SMOs are low-status and poorly educated, an SMO may create the underlying conditions that encourage the growth of political skills and feelings of self-worth. Training and socialization may transform people's perceptions of their self-worth and develop their political skills. In effect, their subjective status, or sense of agency, can be changed. Agency, in Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) formulation, involves the interaction of both history and habit with a drive to transform historically given structures. They distinguished 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" (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998: 984). People's views of their capacities and their drive to transform the future can be shaped and taught by an SMO that is designed to do that.

Second, one can imagine a process that creates an assertive organizational culture, a culture of contestation, that acts as something of a substitute for contested elections. Organizational culture, a rapidly growing research field (Barley, Meyer, and Gash, 1988; Martin, 1992), 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 (Sørensen, 2002), though scholars who study culture do not always agree about what the concept means. Here, culture refers to a set of norms that shape organizational behavior and a set of routines that channel action, rather than an organization's values or ultimate purposes. This view is consistent with the definition of culture provided by Swidler (1986: 273–276), who defined culture as a "tool kit" of "skills, habits, styles" that determine "the way action is organized," in particular the behavior of an organization's members in terms of their attitudes toward each other and their own roles. Hence it is appropriate to draw on Swidler, who rejected culture as based on ultimate ends or values and instead focused on "strategies of action." This view is also consistent with Martin (1992: 3), who described an organizational culture as the "dress norms, stories people tell, the organization's formal rules and procedures, its informal code of behavior, rituals, tasks." I use this definition of culture in hypothesizing that the interaction of a heightened sense of agency and a culture that encourages the utilization of this agency can maintain organizational commitment and avoid goal displacement, despite the standard expectation that oligarchy inevitably dampens commitment and leads to goal displacement. I test this hypothesis in a study of the southwest network of the Industrial Areas Foundation.

Overcoming Oligarchy

METHOD

Context

The Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) is a national network of community organizations that had its 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 56 IAF affiliates in 21 states. In the IAF network, the organizing model is fairly standardized. In addition, there are other national organizing networks that have adopted the IAF model, and a recent survey identified 133 such organizations in 33 states (Warren and Wood, 2001).

In this paper, I 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 over 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, I consider the southwest network as a whole in studying the trajectory of organizational behavior (Osterman, 2002).

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 affiliates 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, including labor unions or community groups such as health centers, are members. Individuals get connected to the IAF through their institutions, a mechanism that Oberschall (1973: 125) termed "bloc recruitment." To give a sense of size, Valley Interfaith has 45 member churches and 16 schools as affiliates, 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 2 percent of their annual budget to the IAF organization.

For the IAF, organizing through institutions has several advantages. 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, because an obvious problem facing any organization is resources—money—by affiliating with institutions and requiring dues, the IAF partially solves this problem.

Among an IAF organization's main activities are identifying and training members of their affiliates. Over the course of any week, organizers and many of the 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 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 10-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.

In parallel with the ongoing identification and training of affiliates' members, 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 its 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. But although the IAF is very active in electoral politics via developing agendas and pressuring candidates to accept these, as well as voter registration drives, it does not endorse individual candidates. Furthermore, any IAF member who chooses to become personally involved in politics is required to leave the IAF leadership. This prevents individuals from using the IAF as a platform to further their own individual ambitions. In this sense, the IAF differs from the union Lipset, Trow, and Coleman (1956) studied. Leaders in the Typographer's Union desired leadership positions because these were preferred to returning to regular work, but in the IAF, the members do not gain personal rewards or resources from working with the IAF. Although there may be psychological rewards, the material rewards are minimal.

The power of the Southwest Industrial Areas Foundation has seen ebbs and flows. In the past few years, while it continues to enjoy local success in the cities in which it operates, it has had a more challenging time at the state level. Nonetheless, over the years, the SWIAF has compiled a substantial record (Shirley, 1997; Warren, 2001; Osterman, 2002). 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. The IAF launched a major school

Overcoming Oligarchy

reform effort, and its Texas Alliance Schools program has received substantial state funding. In all of the cities in which it works, it has achieved numerous local victories with respect to parks, police protection, sewers, housing, and the like.

Research Method

The research underlying this paper began in 1995 with an initial visit to several of the southwest organizations. Between 1995 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 affiliates' members and organizers. Beginning 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 of affiliates and six organizers. The interviews with the organizers asked about their career in the organization and in the network, their perception of decision making, their view of how the organization's goals and tactics had changed over time, and their perceptions about the role of the members. The interviews with members asked about the history of respondents' relationship with the organization, the nature and extent of participation and how that varied over time, the impact of participation on the respondents' attitudes, capacities, and self-image, their views about the evolution of the organization's goals and tactics, and their perceptions of decision making in the organization. Although the interviews were not drawn randomly from a list of members, I made an effort 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.

The IAF as a Social Movement Organization

One important question is whether the IAF is the kind of organization toward which concerns about the iron law of oligarchy are directed. Clearly, the IAF is not an unstructured spontaneous mass movement of the sort described in Piven and Cloward (1977), nor is it a professional SMO (McCarthy and Zald, 1977). The beneficiaries of its activities are directly involved in the local IAF organizations. The IAF is a formalized organization in that it has professional staff and well-defined procedures (Staggenborg, 1988). In Minkoff's (1999) language, the IAF is not a protest group in that it is not disruptive and it addresses a broad range of issues rather than being focused on a single grievance. It falls into the grouping that Minkoff described as "institutional advocacy," by which she meant that the strategy of the organization is lobbying and advocacy rather than protest or social services (Minkoff, 1999: 1668). But, as she also noted, since the 1960s, protest and institutional advocacy have tended to blend together, and this more accurately describes the IAF. It engages in extensive lobbying and other forms of administrative and legislative action, but its power derives from its ability to mobilize its members and turn them out for assemblies, marches, and voting.

For a number of reasons, the IAF is a good case in which to examine the influence of agency and culture on the consequences of oligarchy. First, the power of the IAF lies at the local level in organizations such as COPS in San Antonio and Valley Interfaith in the Rio Grande Valley. Overwhelmingly, actions and campaigns are local. In addition, the IAF does not simply mobilize organizers and highly committed members. A key to its success is its ability to mobilize thousands of other members from the affiliates. When the organizations hold accountability sessions during election campaigns, they need to fill the hall with members. At statewide assemblies, members numbering in the five figures attend, and in more local assemblies, the attendance is in the hundreds and thousands, depending on the event. The ability to generate this kind of attendance is central to capturing the attention and respect of adversaries and targets.

The importance of mobilizing large numbers of members goes beyond simply getting attendance at meetings. In its issue campaigns, the local IAF organizations rely on an energized membership, and though these campaigns may not be insurgent in the sense of being potentially violent and disruptive, they involve a great deal of energy and are contrary to the interests of the establishment. For example, the campaign to establish single-member voting districts in McAllen, Texas, required numerous assemblies, door-to-door canvassing, and get-out-the-vote efforts. These activities were carried out by a large number of members, not simply the most active members of the organization. At the same time, local IAF organizations need to maintain the attachment of the more involved members, i.e., the primary members. These are busy people, and although their communities benefit from the IAF, as individuals they receive no direct personal gain from participation. Maintaining their commitment is essential to the organization and would be put at risk by becalming induced by oligarchy.

The IAF also has some of the characteristics of a union. Although there are some differences (e.g., unions elect the top leadership, and they endorse political candidates), the structural similarities with the IAF are strong. Both unions and the IAF have a paid professional staff (business agents and organizers). They also have a non-professional membership cadre in leadership positions (shop stewards and primary members). In both cases, their power ultimately derives from their ability to mobilize large numbers of less-committed members (e.g., by going on strike or undertaking a job action or political canvassing, in the case of unions, and by attending assemblies and doing political canvassing, in the case of the IAF).

In addition, the IAF has had a long enough history for the iron law to be relevant to it. First, the IAF is certainly well established, as this term is used in the SMO literature. Gamson (1990: 31) defined "established," in his study of 53 challenging organizations, as the time at which a challenging organization's "major antagonists accept the group as a valid spokesman for its constituency and deal with it as such." As an example of the latter, Gamson offered a union that achieves the right to bargain a first contract for its members.

Overcoming Oligarchy

By this definition, the IAF is long past the point of establishment. It has also developed the bureaucratic structures that enable the leadership (the organizers) to operate oligarchically. The bureaucratic structure has four levels: the most senior organizer, regional lead organizers, organizers, and junior organizers. In addition, the organizers maintain their own communications and training structure, and career paths for the organizers are well defined and understood. The organizers also control the local budgets. In these ways, the organizational structure of the IAF closely resembles other SMOs such as unions, and there is every reason to believe that the iron law discussion is relevant to it.

The IAF as an Oligarchy

The elements of an oligarchy are a self-perpetuating leadership group that dominates decision making via its control over knowledge, resources, and communication. The IAF organizers fit this description. Several specific traits support this interpretation. First, the organizers are a self-perpetuating group. The IAF network in the Southwest employs roughly forty organizers. The organizers are hired centrally by the most senior organizers and are assigned by these senior organizers to local organizations. The organizer's movement across organizations is decided centrally, as is the organizer's progression up the hierarchy.

Second, the organizers have their own career ladder and bureaucratic structure. There are several levels of organizers. The leader of the SWIAF supervises the entire region. Below him are supervisors for several subregions, and below them are lead organizers for each organization. Then within the organizations are organizers and trainees. Careers are made by moving up this hierarchy and by moving from smaller to larger cities. Unlike the pattern in other organizing networks (e.g., Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, ACORN), the expectation is that a new IAF organizer will stay, make a career, and move up the ladder. In addition, a senior organizer can earn in the high five-figure range, so careers in IAF organizing are well paid for the profession and come with a good benefits package. Hence there are strong incentives for people interested in this work to want to obtain and hold onto the job.

Third, the organizers think of themselves as a closed group. They have a strong peer network, and they regularly have organizer-only training sessions that both increase the skill gap between them and members and build up a sense of internal esprit. In addition, in an informal way they are also a closed group. For example, at larger organization-wide meetings, the organizers will typically eat and socialize among themselves and not with members from affiliates.

Finally, the organizers have skills and resources that the members lack. The skill and sophistication of the organizers and the fact that they are full time while the members frequently have other more time-consuming commitments, such as earning a living, means that the organizers in fact dominate decision making. At the local level, the lead organizer dominates the organization. This person has control of the budget, calls meetings, assigns members to various tasks,

schedules training sessions and shapes their content, and has the dominant voice in deciding which issues and campaigns the organization takes up. Examples of the power of the organizers are plentiful. Several years ago, the Texas network forged an alliance with the Service Employees International Union (SEIU); the decision to do this was made by the senior organizers and then sold to the members. Similarly, in a recent statewide election, the network decided to invest a great deal of resources in 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. In short, the organizers are akin to the paid professional staff described in Jenkins (1977). They are a highly influential self-perpetuating leadership cadre. They are committed to the organizations full time, while members are only committed part time, and their political skills, policy knowledge, and training exceed those of the membership. They are the oligarchs of the SWIAF.

AGENCY AND CULTURE IN THE IAF

The IAF case material shows that the IAF created a sense of agency in its membership. A useful summary of the impact of the IAF was provided by one member whose comment was representative. She said that the IAF is "a university that educates us. We're prepared for any event." In thinking about how this sense of agency or capacity is enhanced, it is useful to distinguish among three broad strategies: skill development, behavioral modeling, and role playing.

Skill development takes place at a typical training session when organizers or outside experts run small-group workshops on particular topics, both substantive (e.g., new ideas about school curriculum, water law, or the economics of living-wage campaigns) and organizational (e.g., how to run a house meeting, social doctrine in the Bible, or voter registration strategies). In addition, IAF members 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. Members also attend more extended training, which lasts three, five, or ten days, depending on the program. These are extended introductions to the IAF's philosophy of organizing and personal development.

Behavioral modeling occurs via skits and exercises in training sessions. A group of members might, for example, be assigned the task of scripting a "play" in which some take the role of the local water board and others act out the roles of members of the IAF who confront that board. In this "play" the members are encouraged to act as assertively as they would be expected to do in reality. After the play, other members and the organizers critique the behaviors and offer suggestions.

Role playing takes place in the formal training sessions and in real actions, when members are given the responsibility to

Overcoming Oligarchy

take on key functions. After the training and after the action, what took place is assessed and used for further education. A description of this process was provided by a member, a man in his early fifties, who had been involved with the organization for about five years:

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 member, a younger man who was a medical technician with about ten years of experience in the organization, told 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, OK 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.

A good sense of the overall impact of the skill development, behavioral modeling, and role playing on agency and capacity can be gleaned from interviews in which members were asked how they felt that they had changed as a result of IAF training. The following comments were typical in virtually all of the interviews: "When I got to know Valley Interfaith I was one of those persons who was never involved in anything"; "When I began to train I didn't know how to talk"; "I was a timid person, ashamed. I couldn't talk"; and "I was more like a shy person. I couldn't talk to other people. I was like in my little shell, not speaking out." Such 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"; "It gave me the courage to talk"; "I'm not afraid anymore. Before I thought I'd be afraid to confront a political person of one kind or another"; or "I have changed a lot. I'm no longer afraid to talk."

I asked members 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 of one member, "When I first saw [X] 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 described personal changes that went well beyond the purely political. In one woman'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 was also emphasized by another woman, a school teacher, 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.

As the foregoing demonstrates, the IAF enhances people's perceptions of their capacity or agency. Whereas the union members studied by Lipset, Trow, and Coleman (1956) 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. This sense of agency is exercised differently than in the Typographical Union, where 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, avoid becalming and goal displacement. The idea that a culture of assertiveness or contestation is healthy for the organization is reminiscent of Coser's (1956) claim that conflict can be functional for organizations because it helps subgroups define their own interests, creates a balance of power between groups, and by providing an outlet for differences, prevents exit behavior. Although conflict, with its connotation of open hostility (Coser, 1956: 38), is too strong a term for the culture of the IAF, contestation is central.

Building a Culture of Contestation

The case material reveals that the IAF does have a core culture, though one might ask whether what Martin (1992) termed the "differentiation" or "fragmentation" perspectives would be more descriptive. It is no doubt true that within a local IAF organization, there may be variation—for example, the member congregations coming from different denominations may vary in what they impart to their members—and there is also variation across different cities—for example, cities vary in the ethnic composition of the IAF membership, which may affect the cultures of the organization. Nonetheless, there is a clear and strong core IAF culture that is common across and within organizations. Outsiders perceive this

Overcoming Oligarchy

because other community organizations that operate on different models typically cite the IAF model and culture as a unitary competing vision (Kling and Fisher, 1993). In addition, the IAF itself centralizes its training to a large extent via national 10-day training, which occurs several times a year, as well as regular statewide training, expressly to create a common culture. A member of an IAF organization in one city would feel completely at home with norms and procedures if he or she were to move elsewhere and join that city's IAF organization.

The core cultural content of the IAF is assertiveness and skepticism toward authority. This culture is developed both in training sessions and in actions through norms and routines that are constantly taught and reinforced. A sense of how this attitude is developed can be gained by examining two devices used 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 into 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 device 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 Inquisition. Heretics were burned by the hundreds, and the terrified and passive citizenry was under the control of priests led by the 90-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 portrayed 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. Simply put, 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 toward each other that, taken together, might be described as "tough love." These norms are repeatedly conveyed in both formal training sessions and in informal interactions between organizers and members. The organizers take it as one of their core tasks to teach these norms and to reinforce them via ritual. One norm that is explicitly taught in training is "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 members 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, given that 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 norm is constant evaluation. After every activity, the members 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 activity—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 members took ownership of the event, whether it was clear that the members 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 these kinds of relationships to 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

Overcoming Oligarchy

by self-interest. The implication is that no one, whether colleagues or adversaries, should be fully trusted, nor should their leadership be unquestionably accepted.

As the case shows, the core of the dominant IAF culture is contestation and assertiveness. This is distinct from the idea that a subculture or new cultural movement arises to contest the dominant culture (Rao, Monin, and Durand, 2003). Rather, the dominant and, to date, quite stable and well-established set of norms and tool-kit of behavior and action (Swidler, 1986) is to assert oneself and to be skeptical of internal authority. These qualities have enabled the IAF to avoid the consequences of oligarchy.

Avoiding the Consequences of Oligarchy

Despite the presence of an oligarchical group of organizers, the heightened sense of agency of the members, combined with the culture of contestation, has enabled members to maintain a strong sense of energy (i.e., avoid becalming) and enabled the Southwest Industrial Areas Foundation to avoid goal displacement, as hypothesized.

Avoiding becalming. As the descriptions of personal change in the previous section show, the members view themselves as more assertive and capable than prior to their participation in the organization. This point was made explicitly by a member, a young housewife, when she described seeing another member: "I remember when I came back I told [X], I said, 'Gosh, [X], you know, you look so different out there.' I remember she asked what way. I said, 'You seem just more sure of yourself. More confident.' She was all assertive up there." The most common way that members assert themselves in running the organization is that they push back against the organizers in setting the agenda for the organizations. A recent campaign in McAllen, Texas, illustrates the importance of members' energy to the organization and the very existence of this energy. McAllen's city council had long been elected via a citywide at-large system. But as complaints increased in Valley Interfaith neighborhoods that phone calls to the city about local issues such as potholes, park clean-ups, and the like were not being returned, the members of Valley Interfaith began to think about transforming the electoral system. Their argument was straightforward: single-member districts would create a system in which neighborhoods felt that they had their own representation. Furthermore, compared with an expensive citywide campaign, it would be cheaper for candidates to run in a district, and the political system would be opened to a broader range of people.

The Valley Interfaith organizers were reluctant to take on this issue for precisely the reason identified by Michels (1962: 338): a loss would expose organizational weakness and threaten the organization itself. The members insisted, over the organizers' fears, and in February 2000, Valley Interfaith submitted a petition with 3,100 signatures calling for a referendum on changing the McAllen city council from an at-large to a single-member-district system. Their opponents also saw that a single-member-district system would remake power in McAllen, and they reacted accordingly. Valley Interfaith's

opponents raised funds, hired a campaign consulting firm, and launched an attack on the idea, on Valley Interfaith, and on the participation of the church in politics.

Valley Interfaith, caught by surprise by both the ferocity of the attack and the resources of the opponents, scrambled to respond. It lacked the financial resources to match the opposition's ads and its polling, but at the core of Valley Interfaith's strategy was registering and getting out the vote. The organization set up a system of block and area captains, organized house meetings, did neighborhood walks, signed up voters, and in general ran a street-level effort. Hundreds of members were involved in the campaign. When the final tallies arrived, the single-member-district initiative had passed by 221 votes. Valley Interfaith prepared for the May council elections by organizing a house-meeting campaign to define an agenda and then by calling the candidates together for accountability sessions at which they were asked to state their commitment to that agenda. The candidates who signed on to support the IAF's agenda won in four out of McAllen's six council districts.

The role of the members in the single-member-district campaign was reminiscent of an episode that occurred early in the history of Valley Interfaith. The organizers at the time 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, the organizers were surprised to discover that the energy in house meetings was mostly about conditions in the *colonias*. As a result, the IAF decided to make this the centerpiece of the governor's visit.

A third example is discussion around citizenship programs. Recently, Valley Interfaith had to decide whether it would get involved in helping people obtain their citizenship papers. In the words of a member,

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 members. 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.

After a debate on the question, members decided to pursue the citizenship program because of members' strong interest in it.

In the end, what is decisive in determining which issues get put on the organization's agenda is the willingness of the members to work. The most common sentiment about the decision-making process had to do with energy. One member 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

Overcoming Oligarchy

are the issues where more people have energy. And who has the energy to work with them." Although agenda and willingness to work (i.e., energy and lack of becalming) are the key mechanisms, the willingness of the members to assert themselves against the organizers occasionally appears in other ways. For example, a few years ago an organizer in one of the SWIAF cities had an extramarital affair, and the members insisted that he leave. He did leave, but he was re-assigned by the senior organizers to another city in the region.

Avoiding goal displacement. The IAF is also able to avoid significant goal displacement, which is a serious risk given its relationships with government. 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 constant pressure on elected officials and bureaucrats. This kind of relationship inevitably leads to a deep involvement in the day-to-day issues of government. 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 on 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. Contrary to expectations, however, 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 that 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 50 percent, which the city did. In the end, a compromise was reached that 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 its commitment to its original mission.

Another example of the organization’s ability to avoid goal displacement comes from its involvement in housing programs. These programs, which had been delivering services to COPS’ neighborhoods, were popular but also used up a good deal of organizational energy and began to divert the organization from its mission of building countervailing power to one of simply being a social service agency. Demonstrating a high degree of self-awareness, the IAF leadership took action to intervene. A woman who had been with the organization nearly 20 years described the problem as follows:

COPS can become this super-civic organization that does a lot of good for a lot of people on health care and housing and infrastructure, fixing all the ills and needs of the community, you can become that if you’re not careful. Or you can continue to challenge yourself and agitate yourselves to become a broad-based powerful organization. And if you’re about building power, then your question for the membership is: who are you identifying and developing as members? Because for a broad-based organization, the primary concern is what members are you developing? How are you developing other members and identifying other members?

To return to the organization’s mission, COPS took a number of steps. First, it began a series of workshops to help members identify the problem. Some of these workshops were led by senior organizers, but others were led by members. In addition, COPS pulled back from the business of providing services. One member described what happened:

We had established a housing alliance. We identified families in the community that wanted to be home owners and helped them through that process. But it was eating up the talent. It was eating up the membership. We came to the realization that while housing was needed in San Antonio, COPS [was] not about providing services. We’ve never been about that. And we shut down the housing alliance. Now that was very painful to do. But they understood the role of COPS . . . was to organize this power organization and identify members. There was no debate about where we needed to cut the line.

COPS has also pulled back from its involvement in the allocation of Community Development Block Grant funds, federal money that flows to cities for local projects and, over the past year, has rededicated itself to a project much more in the original spirit of the organization: a drive to divert sales tax revenue away from physical infrastructure and toward education and job training projects. Developing the support for this has meant voter registration drives, identifying new members with energy around the issue, training sessions in congregations, in short, all of the traditional organizing and power-building work that lies at the core of the model.

What is striking about the housing story and the story of the golf course is not that COPS, and by extension other IAF organizations, teetered on the edge of settling into routines that diverted the organization from its mission. This is, as Selznick (1984) and other scholars have reminded us, not just a constant danger but a typical path. The IAF is remarkably sensitive to this danger and has built a self-repair kit into its

Overcoming Oligarchy

culture. When it senses itself becoming less assertive or seeking to protect the organization at the expense of its agenda, organizers rethink its actions. The culture, therefore, plays a key role in avoiding goal displacement. This achievement distinguishes it from the vast majority of organizations, political and otherwise.

The case materials show that despite its oligarchical structure, the IAF has maintained membership commitment and avoided the temptations for goal displacement that oligarchy brings. In other ways, the IAF organizations have also avoided becoming. 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 (Osterman, 2002: chap. 5). 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 over thirty 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 has the number of members who are attached through their institutions.

DISCUSSION

The major lesson of this case is that oligarchy need not inevitably lead to the outcomes that are typically expected. The IAF achieves this via two 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, that 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 enable the organization to avoid the consequences of oligarchy. There is none of the sense of alienation, distance, or cynicism that one might expect to find in the membership of an organization that has succumbed to the iron law of oligarchy, nor is there evidence of goal displacement.

This study represents an addition to the literature, which has, up to this point, largely emphasized the contingencies that might prevent the iron law from emerging rather than the view developed here that, under some conditions, oligarchy is compatible with energy in the membership and lack of goal displacement. The new contingencies that I introduce add to the large body of organizational scholarship that seeks to move analysis away from the simpler lines of causality found in the older functional literature.

In hypothesizing that a sense of agency and culture could help an organization avoid the negative consequences of oligarchy, the paper drew on ideas in the traditional contingency literature, although with a twist. Lipset, Trow, and Coleman

(1956) placed important weight on the social or cultural capital, i.e., sense of agency, that 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. In this argument, status and capacity are central to the process of maintaining energy, but these are exogenous to the organizations themselves. The members brought this status with them to the organization. There was no sense, for example, that 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 a culture of contestation. In short, while Lipset, Trow, and Coleman (1956) described how organizations were able to build on and take advantage of the preexisting status of their members, the IAF case is an example of an organization shaping the character of its members. The dynamics created by the IAF permit strong self-perpetuating leadership to coexist with high levels of energy and commitment in the membership.

A natural question that emerges from this case is why the organizers, given their decision-making power, permit even the level of membership involvement that exists. Part of the answer has to do with understanding the self-interest of the organizers. Unlike the organizations studied by Michels and Lipset, Trow, and Coleman, there are not scarce positions in the organizational hierarchy for which organizers are potentially competing with members, nor do organizers fear falling back into the ranks of membership. Instead of being driven by a potential career threat from the membership, the oligarchy in the IAF arises via more "natural" organizational processes: the organizers have far more expertise than the members, the organizers are full time, while members have other work and life commitments, the organizers form a strong peer group, and the organizers hold the levers of communication and budgets. Given the lack of what might be termed a "pecuniary" motivation, the organizers are willing to accept the push-back that the culture of contestation and sense of agency generates.

A second consideration is that the organizers in fact believe in the importance of contestation and agency. It is they who teach it in the training sessions. The organizers begin with a deep grounding in the IAF's ideology about the role of 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 members, and any particular programmatic actions are secondary to this larger goal. The organizers, very much like the involved members, attend regular training sessions and seminars about once every six weeks at which the ideology is systematically reinforced. Finally, it is in the self-interest of the organizers to avoid becalming, because the success of the organizations, and hence their personal success, depends on the ability to mobilize large numbers of members for campaigns of various kinds.

Overcoming Oligarchy

Although it may not be obvious at first, the mechanisms discussed here should be relevant to organizations other than social movement organizations. While many organizations may be run by an elite, the issue of oligarchy per se and its consequences is not generally seen as a problem for most organizations. As Lipset, Trow, and Coleman (1956: 3) noted, "oligarchy becomes a problem only in organizations which assume as part of their public value system the absence of oligarchy." Nonetheless, while avoiding oligarchy, or minimizing its consequences, may be specific to social movement organizations, the analysis developed here connects to broader strands of the organizations literature. For example, as discussed earlier, in studying organizations such as the YMCA or hospitals, researchers have been concerned with goal displacement. In addition, the issues raised by this paper that touch on other organizations go deeper. In recent years, a central problem facing firms has been how to generate employee commitment to the enterprise. This commitment is seen as important because many of the productivity gains of so-called high-performance work organizations flow from employees offering their ideas and making extra efforts on behalf of the enterprise (Pfeffer, 1994; Kochan and Osterman, 1994). Lincoln and Kalleberg's (1990) book comparing the attitudes and work efforts of American and Japanese employees is titled *Culture, Control, and Commitment* to highlight just this point.

In this context, the challenge facing firms is how to induce commitment and effort in an organization that is not democratic in its decision making. Stated in these terms, this is what the Industrial Areas Foundation has achieved. It has done this by creating a sense of agency, which in firms involves training, and by building a culture of contestation, which in firms means encouraging employees to voice their ideas and their views. There is considerable evidence, however, that most American firms currently do not provide high levels of training to their frontline workers (Ahlstrand et al., 2001: 329), and it is a rare firm that encourages workers to challenge standard operating procedure or, to draw a metaphor from the automobile industry, to stop the assembly line when there is a problem. Yet the evidence regarding the productivity consequences of increasing the agency and voice of employees suggests that these strategies have substantial payoffs (MacDuffie, 1995; Ichniowski et al., 1996; Ichniowski, Shaw, and Prensushi, 1997). Seen in these terms, the arguments in this paper have relevance beyond the social movement sector.

This paper has emphasized the role of agency and culture in shaping the consequences of the iron law of oligarchy, but one might also ask whether structural factors play a role. As already noted, the main lines of the contingency literature examine structure in terms of contingencies affecting the emergence of the phenomenon, not what prevents the consequences. Nonetheless, it is worth asking whether the structural factors typically examined in the literature with respect to the emergence of oligarchy might also play a role in mitigating its consequences. One of the most commonly cited structural considerations is the resource base of SMOs.

Zald and Ash (1966: 335) hypothesized 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, found that utilization of outside funding (in this case, foundations) tends to co-opt SMOs. In the IAF, however, 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. Its resource base is therefore diversified, and neither argument fits.

A second structural factor commonly considered is the size of the organization and its organizational design. Polletta (2002) noted for the organizations that she studied that as scale increased, it became more difficult to maintain membership participation, but scale is not a likely factor for the IAF. Although the IAF does not operate on a national level, it does organize statewide and, in addition, its local organizations are substantially larger than the ones that Polletta considered. For example, as already noted, Valley Interfaith comprises over forty congregations and tens of thousands of families. Furthermore, IAF training is centralized, and the organizers form a close cadre and are expected to follow the model and not to operate on their own, independent of central guidance. Hence the IAF's outcomes cannot be attributed to either small size or to a distribution of authority in which local organizations operate independent of the center.

The foregoing suggests that the dominant structural explanations found in the literature—the resource base, organization design, and size—do not appear to be relevant, and hence these structural explanations are not the primary drivers of the IAF's ability to avoid becalming and goal displacement in the face of oligarchy. A broader reading of structural factors, however, indicates that they do play an important role. Staggenborg (1988: 601) provided some textured case studies showing 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 supports this finding. The IAF's training and evaluation sessions are significant components of the organization's structure. Similarly, as described above, the incentive structure facing organizers reduces their temptation to prevent members from maintaining their energy and commitment. Indeed, the success of the IAF depends on this energy and commitment because its power results from its ability to mobilize members for rallies, voting drives, and the like. In these ways, structure is a complementary rather than a competing explanation of the ability of the IAF to avoid the "inevitable" consequences of oligarchy.

An important final question is whether this model holds lessons for other social movement organizations, ranging from community organizations to unions (Osterman, 2006). Along at least one dimension, the IAF model might appear to be nontransferable. Its ties to the religious community provide it with a resource base and source of members that is distinctive. Furthermore, religion provides some value "hooks" that the IAF can utilize to attract members. Although

Overcoming Oligarchy

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 social justice and, as such, are not interested in the approach of the IAF.² Even if an IAF organization gains a foothold in a congregation, it is a constant struggle to increase or even maintain its role. In fact, the IAF engages in what it terms “congregational development,” which essentially involves organizing within a congregation to identify and train members who will keep the congregation involved in IAF activities (Osterman, 2002: 114–116). In short, organizing in churches is, in many respects, little different from organizing in society at large.

From the perspective of both the scholarly organizational literature as well as the practical world of organizing then, the organizational model of the Southwest Industrial Areas Foundation holds considerable interest. As already noted, the IAF model has been adopted by other organizing networks, and hence the potential reach is substantial. In terms of practice, however, there are also limitations to the model. Whereas unions can organize thousands of workers in one election, the IAF model is based on slow, small-scale organizing and extensive training of individuals. The one-on-one meetings, house meetings, and training sessions are all on a small scale and are 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, therefore, is 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 oligarchic authority and energetic membership can coexist successfully, at least within some models of social movement organizations.

2

Ammerman (1997: 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. Becker (1999: 209–210) distinguished between four congregational “identities”: house of worship, family, community, and leader. The “community” congregations are closest to Ammerman’s activist construct, although the distinction between charity and justice is not clear.

REFERENCES

- Ahlstrand A., M. Armbruster, L. Bassi, D. McMurrer, and M. Van Buren
2001 “Workplace education investments and strategies for lower-wage workers.” In R. Kazis and M. Miller (eds.), *Low Wage Workers in the New Economy*: 327–346. Washington, DC: Urban Institute Press.
- Ammerman, N. T.
1997 *Congregation and Community*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Barley, S. R., G. W. Meyer, and D. C. Gash
1988 “Cultures of culture: Academics, practitioners, and the pragmatics of normative control.” *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 33: 24–60.
- Becker, P. E.
1999 *Congregations in Conflict: Cultural Models of Local Religious Life*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Clark, B.
1972 “The organizational saga in higher education.” *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 17 (2): 178–184.
- Clemens, E.
1993 “Organizational repertoires and institutional change: Women’s groups and the transformation of U.S. politics, 1890–1920.” *American Journal of Sociology*, 98: 755–798.
- Coser, L.
1956 *The Functions of Social Conflict*. New York: Free Press.
- DiMaggio, P. J., and W. W. Powell
1983 “The iron cage revisited: Institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields.” *American Sociological Review*, 48: 147–160.

- Emirbayer, M., and A. Mische**
1998 "What is agency?" *American Journal of Sociology*, 103: 962–1023.
- Gamson, W.**
1990 *The Strategy of Social Protest*. New York: Wiley.
- Horwitz, S.**
1992 *Let Them Call Me Rebel: Saul Alinsky, His Life and Legacy*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Ichniowski, C., T. Kochan, D. Levine, C. Olson, and G. Strauss**
1996 "What works at work." *Industrial Relations*, 35: 299–333.
- Ichniowski, C., K. Shaw, and G. Prennushi**
1997 "The effects of human resource management practices on productivity: A study of steel finishing lines." *American Economics Review*, 87: 291–313.
- Isaac, L., and L. Christiansen**
2002 "How the civil rights movement revitalized labor militancy." *American Sociological Review*, 67: 722–746.
- Jenkins, J. C.**
1977 "Radical transformation of organizational goals." *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 22: 568–586.
- Jenkins, J. C., and C. M. Eckert**
1986 "Channeling black insurgency: Elite patronage and professional social movement organizations in the development of the black movement." *American Sociological Review*, 51: 812–829.
- Kanter, R. M.**
1972 *Commitment and Community: Communes and Utopias in Sociological Perspective*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Kling, J., and R. Fisher**
1993 *Mobilizing the Community*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Kochan, T., and P. Osterman**
1994 *The Mutual Gains Enterprise*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
- Kunda, G.**
1992 *Engineering Culture: Control and Commitment in a High Tech Corporation*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Lincoln, J., and A. Kalleberg**
1990 *Culture, Control, and Commitment: A Study of Work Organization and Work Attitudes in the United States and Japan*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lipset, S. M., M. Trow, and J. Coleman**
1956 *Union Democracy*. Garden City, NJ: Doubleday.
- MacDuffie, J. P.**
1995 "Human resource bundles and manufacturing performance: Flexible production systems in the world auto industry." *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, 48: 197–221.
- Mansbridge, J. J.**
1983 *Beyond Adversary Democracy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Martin, J.**
1992 *Cultures in Organizations: Three Perspectives*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- McAdam, D.**
1983 "Tactical innovation and the pace of insurgency." *American Sociological Review*, 48: 735–754.
1996 "The framing function of movement tactics: Strategic dramaturgy in the American Civil Rights Movement." In D. McAdam, J. D. McCarthy, and M. N. Zald (eds.), *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framing*: 338–355. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- McAdam, D., J. D. McCarthy, and M. N. Zald (eds.)**
1996 *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framing*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- McCarthy, J. D., and M. Zald**
1977 "Resource mobilization and social movements: A partial theory." *American Journal of Sociology*, 82: 1212–1241.
- Michels, R.**
1962 *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy*. New York: Collier Books.
- Minkoff, D.**
1999 "Bending with the wind: Strategic change and adaptation by the women's movement and racial minority organizations." *American Journal of Sociology*, 104: 1666–1703.
- Oberschall, A.**
1973 *Social Conflict and Social Movements*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Osterman, P.**
2002 *Gathering Power: The Future of Progressive Politics in America*. Boston: Beacon Press.
2006 "Community organizing and employee representation." *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 44: 629–649.
- Perrow, C.**
1961 "The analysis of goals in complex organizations." *American Sociological Review*, 26: 854–866.
- Pfeffer, J.**
1994 *Competitive Advantage Through People: Unleashing the Power of the Workforce*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
- Piven, F. F., and R. A. Cloward**
1977 *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail*. New York: Vintage.
- Polletta, F.**
2002 *Freedom Is an Endless Meeting*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Rao, H., P. Monin, and R. Durand**
2003 "Institutional change in Toque Ville: Nouvelle cuisine as an identity movement in French gastronomy." *American Journal of Sociology*, 108: 795–843.
- Rothschild-Whitt, J.**
1976 "Conditions facilitating participatory-democratic organizations." *Sociological Inquiry*, 46: 75–86.
1979 "The collectivist organization: An alternative to rational bureaucratic models." *American Sociological Review*, 44: 509–527.
- Sales, A. L., and P. H. Mirvis**
1984 "When cultures collide: Issues of acquisition." In J. R. Kimberly and R. E. Quinn (eds.), *Managing Organizational Transitions*: 107–133. Homewood, IL: Irwin.

Overcoming Oligarchy

Scott, W. R.

2003 *Organizations: Rational, Natural, and Open Systems*, 5th ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Selznick, P.

1943 "An approach to a theory of bureaucracy." *American Sociological Review*, 8: 47–54.

1984 *TVA and the Grassroots: A Study of Politics and Organization*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Shirley, D.

1997 *Community Organizing for Urban School Reform*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Sørensen, J.

2002 "The strength of corporate culture and the reliability of firm performance." *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 47: 70–91.

Staggenborg, S.

1988 "The consequences of professionalization and formalization in the pro-choice movement." *American Sociological Review*, 53: 585–606.

Swidler, A.

1986 "Culture in action: Symbols and strategies." *American Sociological Review*, 51: 273–286.

Voss, K., and R. Sherman

2000 "Breaking the iron law of oligarchy: Union revitalization in the American labor movement." *American Journal of Sociology*, 106: 303–349.

Warren, M.

2001 *Dry Bones Rattling: Community Building to Revitalize American Democracy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Warren, M., and R. Wood

2001 *Faith-Based Community Organizing: The State of the Field: A Report of the Findings of a National Survey Conducted by Interfaith Funders*. Jericho, NY: Interfaith Funders.

Zald, M., and R. Ash

1966 "Social movement organization: Growth, decay, and change." *Social Forces*, 44: 327–340.

Zald, M., and P. Denton

1963 "From evangelism to general service: The transformation of the YMCA." *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 8 (12): 214–234.