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Author(s): W. LANCE BENNETT

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The Personalization of Politics: Political Identity, Social Media, and Changing Patterns of Participation

By
W. LANCE BENNETT

This article proposes a framework for understanding large-scale individualized collective action that is often coordinated through digital media technologies. Social fragmentation and the decline of group loyalties have given rise to an era of personalized politics in which individually expressive personal action frames displace collective action frames in many protest causes. This trend can be spotted in the rise of large-scale, rapidly forming political participation aimed at a variety of targets, ranging from parties and candidates, to corporations, brands, and transnational organizations. The group-based “identity politics” of the “new social movements” that arose after the 1960s still exist, but the recent period has seen more diverse mobilizations in which individuals are mobilized around personal lifestyle values to engage with multiple causes such as economic justice (fair trade, inequality, and development policies), environmental protection, and worker and human rights.

Keywords: personalization of politics; digital media; politics; occupy protests; political consumerism; political participation

*T*ime magazine made two interesting choices for its much-publicized person of the year in the first decade of the twenty-first century. In 2006, the person of the year was *You*. (Congratulations!) The cover contained a mirror in which the viewer’s face appeared in place of the more customary photos of the heads of state or world figures that have set the tone since *Time* began giving the award in 1927.¹ The broad rationale for that surprising choice was the awareness that individuals were

W. Lance Bennett is a professor of political science and Ruddick C. Lawrence Professor of Communication at the University of Washington, where he directs the Center for Communication and Civic Engagement. He has received the Ithiel de Sola Pool and Murray Edelman career awards from the American Political Science Association, and the National Communication Association has recognized him as a Distinguished Scholar for lifetime achievement in the study of human communication.

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increasingly on their own in changing societies, yet empowered with proliferating social media and personalized communication technologies that enable a large number of ordinary people to become linked to and recognized by a large number of others. The year 2011 marked another interesting choice as *The Protester* graced the *Time* cover in the form of a masked and amorphous demonstrator who could have been male or female, or come from the Arab Spring in Tahrir Square, the *indignados* in Madrid or Barcelona, or any of the hundreds of Occupy camps in the United States or elsewhere around the world (the image turned out to be a young woman from Occupy LA).

The focus of a great deal of social, political, and economic life in the recent era has been up close and personal, as exemplified by an expanding number of self-help books, multiplying therapeutic talk programs, ever-surprising reality TV genres with their strange assortment of everyday people picked from obscurity to become celebrities, and, everywhere, the consuming emphasis on personal lifestyle affordances as the building blocks for a meaningful life. (When I asked Siri—the personal valet that Apple built into my iPhone—about the meaning of life, she told me that all the evidence points to chocolate.)

Among the most interesting aspects of this era of personalization has been the rise of large-scale, rapidly forming political participation aimed at a variety of targets, from more traditional parties or candidates, to direct engagement with corporations, brands, and transnational policy forums. These mobilizations often include a multitude of issues brought into the same protests through a widely shared late modern ethos of diversity and inclusiveness. The identity politics of the “new social movements” that arose after the 1960s centered on group identity (women, minorities, immigrants, and native people) or cause issues (antinuclear, environmental conservation, and specific rights) still exist, of course, but they have been joined by more heterogeneous mobilizations in which diverse causes such as economic justice (fair trade, inequality, and development), environmental protection, and war and peace are directed at moving targets from local to national and transnational and from government to business. The more diverse the mobilization, the more personalized the expressions often become, typically involving communication technologies that allow individuals to activate their loosely tied social networks.² There are still plenty of conventional politics based on identification with parties, ideologies, and common causes. However, the rise of a more personalized politics has become a notable trend.

The discussion here expands on Bennett and Segerberg (2011) and defines personalized politics as involving varying combinations of the following conditions:

NOTE: The author would like to acknowledge that these ideas have evolved from his Olof Palme Inaugural Lecture in October 2010, delivered as part of the Olof Palme Visiting Professorship awarded by the Swedish Research Council and hosted by the Department of Political Science, Stockholm University. Among the many colleagues in Sweden who contributed to my thinking, I particularly want to thank Michele Micheletti and Alexandra Segerberg for their input and support. Thanks also goes to the participants at The Politics of Consumption conference at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, in particular to Dhavan Shah.

An ethos of diversity and inclusiveness defined by tolerance for different viewpoints and even different issues linked across loosely bounded political networks.

The rise of crowd-sourced inclusive *personal action frames* (e.g., “We are the 99%”) that lower the barriers to identification. These easily personalized frames contrast with more conventional collective action frames (e.g., “Eat the rich”) that may require more socialization and brokerage to propagate in large numbers.

Participation is importantly channeled through often dense social networks over which people can share their own stories and concerns—the pervasive use of social technology enables individuals to become important catalysts of collective action processes as they activate their own social networks.

Personalized politics has long existed, of course, in the form of populist uprisings or emotional bonds with charismatic leaders. The interesting difference in today’s participation landscape is that widespread social fragmentation has produced individuation as the modal social condition in postindustrial democracies, particularly among younger generations (Beck 2006; Bennett 1998; Giddens 1991).³ While individuals may be at the center of their own universes, those universes can be very large thanks to the social networking potential of ubiquitous communication technologies. These often dense communication networks enable political organization and expression that often lacks, or actively shuns, clear central leaders and organizations. Sometimes these networks are loosely coordinated by custom Web platforms that provide information, media hosting, and direct interaction among activists. Developing or adapting interactive media affordances also enables NGOs and social movement organizations to personalize the pathways to popular engagement with their issues (Bennett and Segerberg 2012). Even mainstream institutions such as political parties often find that personalized appeals to growing ranks of independent voters can help to engage them.

As ideology and formal group identifications (e.g., party, union, church, or class) fade as the mechanisms for organizing civic life (Putnam 2000), individuals increasingly code their personal politics through personal lifestyle values (Bennett 1998; Giddens 1991). It is common for many of these lifestyle values to echo across the porous boundaries of product and political advertising. Is my car environmentally friendly? Are my fashion, food, or electronic devices worker friendly? Are my favored cause organizations or candidates expressing my personal values, and do they understand my pain or anger? These battles for individual emotions swirl around sustainable lifestyle initiatives among progressives, with much of the attention on consumer identifications that find easy outlets in corporate campaigns against McDonalds, Monsanto, Exxon, and even Apple. Personalized politics also extends well into more conventional issues and policy arenas, from the popular idea of a Robin Hood Tax in Europe, to the “occupation” of institutions, people, and ideas in the United States and elsewhere.⁴ The inroads of personalized politics are by no means happening just on the Left and

the center. In many ways, the right wing has become the default location for highly individualized discourses of personal freedom and market deregulation, resulting in heavy discounting of public goods and common interests.

Different Communication Styles: Personalized Politics on the Left and Right

Many sorts of personalized collective action arise from the conservative Right. For example, most of the postindustrial democracies have seen the rise of hybrid nationalist movements as diverse as the Tea Party in the United States, the years of Berlusconi/Northern League rule in Italy, and the Sweden Democrats. Similar to traditional nationalist populist movements, these late modern hybrids invite followers to define “true citizens” as “people like me” (e.g., a white, hard-working native-born citizen) and not those immigrants who come to live off my hard-earned tax money. Beyond this, the nationalist hybrids invite highly personalized forms of expression against any number of emotional targets. In this process, personal emotion becomes self-validating. Participants can pick their own outlets for anger, from race or sexual preference, to the many perceived government restrictions on personal freedoms. Seeming contradictions melt away in feelings of personal entitlement, as when Tea Party identifiers make exceptions for government Medicare programs that benefit them because they believe that, unlike undeserving immigrants or minorities on welfare, they have worked hard to earn their benefits (Scocpol and Williamson 2012).

If personalized politics still exhibits some echoes of old conservative ideology, it is in the neoliberal consensus of the recent era of globalization, in which free markets and free consumers were heralded as the paths to prosperity and democratic development. (It is not surprising that Ayn Rand and von Hayek made comebacks in this era.) The conservative end of the personalized politics spectrum is heavy with references to personal freedom and highly emotional reactions to attempts to adjust the social equity balance in schools, health care, or income, which are seen as threats to that freedom. The extreme personal attacks on President Obama that were part of the right-wing branding of the “Obamacare” health plan portrayed him in Internet caricatures and on talk shows as both a communist and Hitler while continuing to challenge the authenticity of his birth taking place in the United States. Even the place of Tea Party Patriots in the Republican Party is by no means a comfortable fit given the levels of emotional attachment to ideas such as allowing the government to go into default rather than honor its debt obligations.

Neither evidence nor reasoned debate often sway such emotional orientations. Indeed, conservative opposition to government efforts to regulate or find substitutes for carbon energy use have been supported by jokes and paid experts raising doubts about climate science itself, amplified by intensive corporate-backed propaganda attacking climate research. Carbon energy companies poured large sums of money into think tanks, conferences, and campaigns to fuel denial of

climate change, providing a steady stream of material for talk shows and political candidates to sell retail to individual citizens. The result has been a rapid erosion (most notably on the Right) of American public belief in climate change, in human causes of climate change (from 50 percent to 34 percent between 2006 and 2010), and even in thinking that scientists generally agree about human contributions to global warming (Pew Research Center 2010). Meanwhile, European popular support for environmental protection policies has remained strong, suggesting grounds for interesting comparative research.

With the notable exception of historians, scholars have not focused enough on the long-standing American conservative and business propagandizing of corporate virtue, market and consumer freedoms aimed at dampening the effects of more progressive forms of consumer action or government regulation. Nor have communication scholars focused enough attention on the palpably different communication styles of personalized politics on the Left and the Right. Where the Right seems uninterested in dialogue and responding to rational or factual challenges, the Left may err in the continued pursuit of reason, deliberation, and civility with opponents. The result is a profound political disconnect with consequences that are worth understanding. If, indeed, the Right has adopted a strategic and personally ingrained aversion to dialogue and deliberation, scholars should not shy away from analyzing this just because they fear charges of bias. The Right has used charges of liberal bias as its symbolic battering ram for several decades. Given the success of conservative networks in using “the power of no” to turn minority publics into veto blocks on many issues, one might consider both the political advantages of closed, nondeliberative discourse styles as well as their antidemocratic outcomes (see Bennett 2011). The impasse between the discourse styles of the Left and the Right has been a defining element of contemporary personalized politics.

Origins of Personalized Politics: Globalization and the Free Market Fetish

The roots of personalized politics in the current era can be traced broadly to social changes related to the era of economic globalization that can be roughly bounded from the 1970s to the global financial crisis of the early twenty-first century. There have been many eras of globalization throughout history, each with its own kind of economic logic and impact on societies, so there is no one-kind-fits-all model of globalization, society, and politics. The time of Marco Polo differed from the colonial era, which differed from the postcolonial period of ideologically filtered globalization in the great Cold War struggle for military and economic domination of the Third World.

During the recent period, what has been termed a neoliberal trade regime arose to transform global production, finance, marketing, labor, and consumption. As manufacturing moved south, the so-called postindustrial nations of the North underwent tectonic shifts in national labor markets and the social and

political relevance of civil society institutions (these shifts were buffered more in some nations than in others). Changes included the transformation of domestic industrial sectors and careers (growth in service and information industries and declines in union manufacturing labor), related personal instability in career and lifestyles, and rising levels of personal stress and sense of responsibility for choices and consequences (Beck 2006; Bennett 1998). In addition, public sectors underwent sweeping changes as privatization and hybrid (public-private partnership) market schemes were applied variously to education, health care, energy, transportation, and even security functions of the state. These changes inside nations further placed individuals in uncertain market relationships in many areas of life: temporary labor, costly choices in public education and health care, greater sense of risk and “precarity,” and longer periods of unemployment and retraining between the multiple careers that often characterize the late modern biography. As the slogan of the age goes: failure is the new success.

In short, the neoliberal economic regime not only changed the world economy, it changed fundamental policies within nations by introducing privatization and market forces into daily personal life. This reduced the GDP contribution of most public sectors and enabled the rise of voracious consumer populations with more money to spend on goods that were cheaper due to the use of cheap labor and natural resources in the South.⁵ Collateral human and environmental damage became externalities in this scheme, accounting for the tempting prices of lifestyle goods, but deferring and displacing their true costs as perverse “public bads” shared by the entire planet. Since much has been written about all of this (Bennett 1998; Beck 2006; Giddens 1991), I do not go into much more background here, and instead turn to several theoretical generalizations that may be useful for understanding the shift to personalized politics and its relation to the rise of such offshoots as political consumerism, Occupy, and the Tea Party-style protest networks.

During this historic period of globalization (roughly bounded from the mid-1970s to the present), the ideals and practices of neoliberal economics became so pervasive that many parties on the Left shifted their stances on formerly staunch domestic programs, often leading the way in sacrificing labor protections to business-friendly trade agreements, while privatizing other public goods and services such as education, health care, and transportation. This led to the demise of social democrats and labor parties in such bastions as Germany, Sweden, and Britain, and created odd hybrid models such as the Obama and Clinton presidencies in the United States. This bipartisan consensus on the virtues of market deregulation (sold under the slogans of individual freedom and job creation) drove social and economic equality values (the old foundation of many collective action frames) steadily to the political margins. In the United States, for example, many Democratic social and economic policies were borrowed from the Republican playbook. At the same time, Republicans were outflanked by increasingly conservative factions such as the Tea Party and even more stark demands from businesses for more deregulation and lower taxation for the rich. An individualized market culture even arose in Sweden (albeit with a hybrid embrace of the welfare state), where the demise of the Social

Democrats for an unprecedented second time in the elections of 2010 was crowned with the ironic campaign slogan that the Moderates (a Center Right party) were the “true labor party.” Typical of a move toward a politics of personal emotion was the startling rise of an ultra-right anti-immigrant party (the Sweden Democrats) that entered parliament in 2010.

The importance of this rightward shift for our story about the personalization of politics cannot be underestimated. The neoliberal mantra of personal freedom and growth through market deregulation became the default ideology of our time, perhaps challenged only by the global financial crisis that spread out from the U.S. housing bubble that burst in 2008. As a result, many voters were deprived of meaningful election choices on what was formerly known as the Left, and younger citizens often developed aversions to politics and government altogether. Other voters came to see the Center Right as the true standard bearer of neoliberal ideals packaged in terms of personal freedom and choice, and voted it into office in such places as Germany, Sweden, Britain, and the United States, along with extreme fringe factions such as the Tea Party and the Sweden Democrats. While other reactions were set in motion by the growing economic crisis in Europe, the notable pattern was one of government instability and public anger rather than an embrace of clear competing ideologies or party identifications on the Left.

An important spinoff of the diminishing choices in the formal political arena created what Beck (2006) refers to as a subpolitics, marked by the growing attraction of large-scale personalized politics by other means, from consumer action to mass occupations. As explained below, these collective actions are less like conventional social movements with leaders, organizations, and collective identity frames than they are what Micheletti (2003) describes as *individualized collective action* where large numbers of people join in loosely coordinated activities centered on more personal emotional identifications and rationales.

Another broad enabling condition of individualized collective action is that individuals have become fully immersed in consumer cultures and have developed a discerning eye for their political and personal products. Whether the Left moved to the Right due to political expedience, voter demand, or both, the individualized orientation of the citizen-consumer further undermines the appeal of adopting collective identifications with party, ideology, or conventional movements. As voters fell away from party identifications (even a plurality of Swedish voters under 30 expressed no party preference by 2010), they became hard sells and often demanded (or were cynically sold) rather crass offers such as lower taxes and moving the welfare line further down the economic ladder to pay for them. The consumer practices that came to define many areas of public and private life support broad repertoires of political activity. Some of this activity is direct, as boycott and boycott pressures have produced changes in corporate behavior, from commitments to greater responsibility for labor and environmental harms, to rebranding products as worker or environment friendly or fairly traded. Some practices from the consumer culture emerged indirectly through implicit understandings about how to use the messages and technologies of personalized communication to share political concerns and promote them under popular slogans such as “We are the 99%.”

In short, just as consumerism has entered politics through branding and marketing to independent voters, it has become an increasing focus for the less conventional politics of the age, as activists have mounted numerous campaigns to discipline global corporations that they see slipping the net of national regulations. Many of these have produced notable changes in corporate behavior and policy (e.g., Nike's sweatshop labor problem; McDonald's food chain, packaging, and health problems; the environmental impact of Coca Cola's bottling practices; Monsanto's Frankenstein seeds; Starbucks's unfair trading practices in the coffee market; Apple examining the conditions in its Chinese factories; and on and on). Related protests at world summits of the G8 and 20 and at the Davos World Economic Forum have become routine in the years following the Battle in Seattle that shut down the World Trade Organization meeting in 1999. Other protests have been equally impressive in their scope, as in the cases of the *indignados* and Occupy protesters, who have triggered international discussions about growing inequality and other predations of the 1 percent against the 99 percent. These activist networks seem to be reinventing repertoires of participation.

I use the term "reinventing" advisedly here, as it evades unproductive debates about what is new and what is old. It may seem that there is nothing new under the sun, as the new economic justice protests faintly echo the early labor politics of boycotts dating from a century ago, but unlike labor-led boycotts or buycotts, the latter-day varieties may not even be centrally organized by labor unions, and they are often aimed at conditioning corporations to be more responsible in factories that have spread across the globe in a race away from domestic unionized labor. Similarly, the dense networks of *indignados* and Occupy protesters that emerged following the global financial crisis in the first decade of the twenty-first century may echo some of the economic justice demands of leftist social movements, but without the militant ideologies, interorganizational struggles, and conflicts over collective identities that often occupy the center stage of movement participation (the endless meetings of the Occupy or *indignado* general assemblies are of course another matter). Rather than spill too much ink here worrying about just what criteria satisfy the standards of "new," I focus on a collection of interesting differences that seem to be at the very least changing the way in which some of this personalized participation is organized, even as other characteristics may display some continuities.

Scholars are beginning to explore hybrid forms of participation that emerge outside of conventional institutional structures. As noted above, Micheletti (2003) and Stolle and Micheletti (forthcoming) analyze forms of individualized collective action that characterize new patterns of political consumerism that take aim at corporations and other economic targets with behaviors that are often anchored more in personal or local logics and, perhaps, only loosely directed by movements or advocacy organizations. Bimber, Flanagin, and Stohl (2012) have also found that the relationships between individuals and civic organizations are becoming more entrepreneurial and less centrally manageable, resulting in changes in the way communication is involved in organizing collectivities.

Bennett and Segerberg (2012) have identified a *logic of connective action* that explains how individuals avoid self-interest or free rider obstacles to joining contentious politics because they can engage via intrinsically motivating personal expression that can be shared across social networks that, in turn, link people to larger protest networks. Some of those networks may have NGOs or other organizations embedded within them, but they are often in background roles facilitating personalized engagement rather than managing conventional collective action with its issues of divided group identities, ideological splits, and resource struggles. As Castells (1996) pointed out, these collectivities are better understood as fine-grained, multilayered networks rather than as hierarchical coalitions of organizations. In this network view, communication becomes an organizational process that goes well beyond the exchange of messages.

Communication and the Organization of Personalized Politics

The “me generation,” which was reflected on *Time*’s mirrored cover announcing that *You* were person of the year, seemed to come of age at the dawn of the twenty-first century. Yet the cries of late-twentieth-century critics about mass narcissism and the degradation of public life seemed not fully consistent with the growth of dense and often intersecting social networks through which individuals join with others to share ideas, music, games, code, peer product ratings, and political protests. There is little to gain from sweeping generalizations about the (alternately) cheerful or gloomy prospects for a political future based on (alternately) isolated and polarized, or loosely tied and easily, connected individuals. These debates abound and seldom shed light on more complex underlying realities. I cautiously embrace the views of Benkler (2007) and propose that although the Internet is vast and full of seemingly isolated nodes and long tails, communication technologies can activate the “small world” phenomena through which distant people are in remarkably close reach. In short, communication technologies may put individuals at the center of their own networks, but the reach of those networks often enables the coproduction and distribution of multimedia content with a surprisingly large number of others. Political participation in this picture comes in the form of recombinant digitally networked action (RDNA) that reflects the flexible, large-scale, and surprisingly stable networks that are engaging many arenas and targets of power (see Bennett and Segerberg 2012).

As noted above, Castells (1996) argued early on that social and political networks were becoming the loci of power in society, replacing hierarchical social and political institutions. Whether and under what conditions such sweeping power shifts may have become decisive remain complex empirical questions. There are still plenty of old-fashioned institutions wielding power, and the last time I checked, the state (along with its newly grown transnational arms) seemed alive and well. However, it also seems clear that loosely organized large-scale

networks as diverse as al Qaeda, Occupy, *indignados*, and media file sharers have become fixtures on the political landscape that increasingly pose challenges to states and related dominant cultural, political, and economic regimes.

When conventional political institutions seem on the verge of acting against the interests of diverse and seemingly isolated populations, the social networked communication of digitally networked activism (DNA) can produce surprising results. In early 2012, for example, the U.S. Congress was poised to vote on a pair of invasive antipiracy bills. The legislation was backed by “old media” companies and raised the specter of filtering the Internet and turning online companies into police agencies. Wikipedia and Google led a protest involving hundreds of other sites that directed millions of diverse individuals to contact their representatives. This twenty-four-hour protest forced sponsors to withdraw the legislation and backers to regroup. Typical of many rapid collective action formations in this era, there was no clear collective frame to mobilize individuals. Rather, individuals were offered a rainbow of reasons to act (bad for business, threat to innovation, job killer, invasion of privacy, national security threat, vulnerabilities to the Internet, and so on). The common thread was a loose call to prevent government censorship of entities ranging from the entire Internet, to the safety of personal communication, to the independence of favorite sites (Google and Wired featured black redaction bars across their pages). Such inclusive and easily personalized action frames and ubiquitous mechanisms for technology-enabled participation increasingly dot the political landscape (Earl and Kimport 2011). Sometimes these mobilizations are explicitly triggered by appeals to lifestyle consumer values and accompanied by branded communication, and sometimes, they address more general economic foundations of society as expressed in terms of justice and fairness.

Reactions to these kinds of participation often entail puzzlement on the part of observers who have trouble fathoming their political logic. Journalists, for example, have persisted in asking the diverse members of many of these protests what their common position or demand is, or who their leaders are. At the same time, the earnest individualism, the easily embraceable personal action frames, and the often remarkable scale of many of these protests made them hard to dismiss. Many of these protests have received more positive press coverage (Bennett and Segerberg 2011) than is typically associated with social movements confronting governments with more challenging or extreme ideological collective action frames (Gitlin 1980). At the same time, operating outside of conventional norms and rituals (whether those attached to government or to social movement repertoires) gives these protests something of a Do-It-Yourself (DIY) ethos.

DIY Politics: Understanding Emerging Forms of Participation

Thorson (2012) has observed that shifts in the citizenship orientations of younger generations have been noted by many observers (including this author).

However, a missing element of various analyses of the citizenship shift is a compelling documentation of the norm set for the next era of variously termed citizenship. Modern era dutiful citizens were urged by educators, politicians, civic leaders, and other authorities to follow the news, join community organizations, and, above all, vote. By contrast, the younger generations breaking away from these norms in the current era of personalized politics have few clear guidelines to follow in fashioning a public life. Part of the gap is surely due to the fact that civic authorities continue to be drawn from older generations who practice dutiful civic virtues and who understandably think they work just fine. Despite continuing efforts of institutional authorities to press dutiful practices and ideals on younger generations, they are increasingly unlikely to find receptive audiences. While older citizens may lament the trouble with youth today, young people are forging ahead in many areas of politics and making it up as they go along (often with mixed results).

Many of the large-scale examples of individualized collective action that dot the political landscape surely draw on repertoires of action from the past, as in the ways in which Occupy protesters or *indignados* organized their general assemblies using consensus procedures and a host of direct democracy practices that have been handed down from past protest repertoires. At the same time, the protests displayed openness to individual-level innovation aided by clear avoidance of formal organization, leaders, collective identifications, divisive ideology, or hierarchy. Also characteristic of the open communication architecture of the Occupy protests were the dense and highly personalized media networks used to maintain connections and coordinate activities. Moving beyond off-the-shelf communication technologies such as Facebook and Twitter, Occupy technology developers sought to build idea generators, take-action platforms, and a “global square” virtual commons.

There are open questions about where and how new norms guiding participation will emerge from the profusion of self-actualizing, digitally mediated DIY politics. Will norms emerge from reforming existing institutions, from changing school civics curricula, or from grassroots success models? Research is needed to chart these pathways. There may even be an argument for DIY as a more or less permanent adaptive response to complexities of late-modern politics: given the numbers and types of moving political targets that citizens must engage to register their concerns, a DIY ethos may prove the most flexible orientation.

Can these personalized forms of collective action achieve the levels of focus and sustainability that have typically been required for social movements to press their demands successfully? This question may be too broad in scope to yield easy or definitive answers. Recent history suggests a mixed record. As noted in the sections below, there have been impressive gains in terms of deposing regimes in Tunisia and Egypt, or raising long-ignored questions of inequality among elites and in the American press. At the same time, there have been repeated setbacks at climate conferences and in various areas of reforming trade regimes. Whether classic social movement organization would have produced better outcomes is

debatable, given the disproportionate influence of business and free market values that continued to dominate formal political debate even in the midst of global financial and environmental crises. The next two sections offer ways of thinking about the impact of these personalized forms of connective action.

The Upside: Shaping the Political Agenda

As globalization created divisions between poorly compensated producers in the South and increasingly well-appointed consumers in the North, activists successfully raised questions about whether one's fashion statement came at the expense of exploited sweatshop workers or coffee growers squeezed to bare subsistence by global commodity markets. In many ways, consumer activism has put corporations on alert that their brands are in danger (Klein 1999). These consumer mobilizations do not even require mass awareness or radical conversions to succeed. A combination of creative protest strategies and timely information delivered to journalists (e.g., arrests of union organizers, suicides at plants, or working conditions at foreign sites of production) can hold the brands hostage in the press, making corporations at least begin to address social responsibility issues (Bennett and Lagos 2007; Stolle and Micheletti forthcoming).

Looking more generally beyond explicit consumer action, there have also been clear impacts from the broad DNA uprisings against corrupt authoritarian regimes of the Middle East, and against the inequities that produced the financial crisis in which taxpayers in the OECD democracies suffered austerity to save the banks. Spurred by the economic downturns of a global finance crisis that had the world on the brink of economic depression, protesters raised questions about inequality and the false promises of deregulated markets. These underlying issues stemming from the *indignado* and Occupy protests circulated widely in many societies, leading to changes in national conversations and political agendas.

These shifts in national discourses were major accomplishments coming from loosely organized protests that are not easy to classify as social movements, since they lacked central coordination, collective identity frames, and focused political demands. Indeed, emerging patterns of political activism such as Occupy were dispersed, de-centered, weakly coordinated, and pegged to inclusive personal identity frames such as "We are the 99%," which became a mantra of the protests and media discourses about them. One palpable correlate of such inclusive participation networks was more favorable press coverage than many radical social movements typically receive. In part, this is because inclusive "everyperson" *personal action frames* such as "the 99%" are easier to report favorably than exclusive *collective action frames* defining narrower social identity groups against the established order. In addition, it was clear that many journalists and commentators had long recognized the growth of inequality as the big untold story of the era that few officials wanted to touch politically. Now it could be reported as a real problem, and politicians could discuss it.

The elites who began to address formerly marginalized topics such as inequality and fairness did not necessarily endorse or always even acknowledge the protesters. The press coverage offered a bridging device to make reference to topics that were now in wide public circulation. In Washington, London, Berlin, Paris, and Davos, leaders made cautious suggestions about adjusting the distribution of economic gains so that people in societies might better benefit from capitalism. Some of these discussions on the Left were framed in terms of restoring fairness values in societies where economic power had leveraged the political game too far in favor of the rich. Some on the Right expressed more pragmatic concerns that too much inequality could kill the consumer capacity on which economic growth depends. It is hard to imagine this range of discourse emerging without the pressure of dense personalized protest networks that now had their own media systems that intersected with conventional media audiences and enabled content to flow across vast networks. Images and memes, such as the 1 percent versus 99 percent, traveled through most every communication channel in the OECD democracies and beyond.

In the United States, the inequality discourse quickly took on a life of its own, creating a media bridge for supporting voices such as labor unions and progressive members of Congress who were wary of becoming too closely identified with the protesters. Eventually, even Barack Obama signaled a shift in his concessionary political style by raising questions of fairness and equity, sparking a frustrated support base, and making inroads into parts of the middle electorate. In other nations, leaders from the Center Right such as Merkel in Germany and Sarkozy in France spoke in favor of a Robin Hood Tax on financial transactions aimed at limiting the volume of unproductive speculation in world economies and adjusting inequities in relations between rich and poor at home and abroad. While the economic crisis no doubt provided the political opportunity for these ideas to emerge in high places, the pressures from below undoubtedly helped them along.⁶

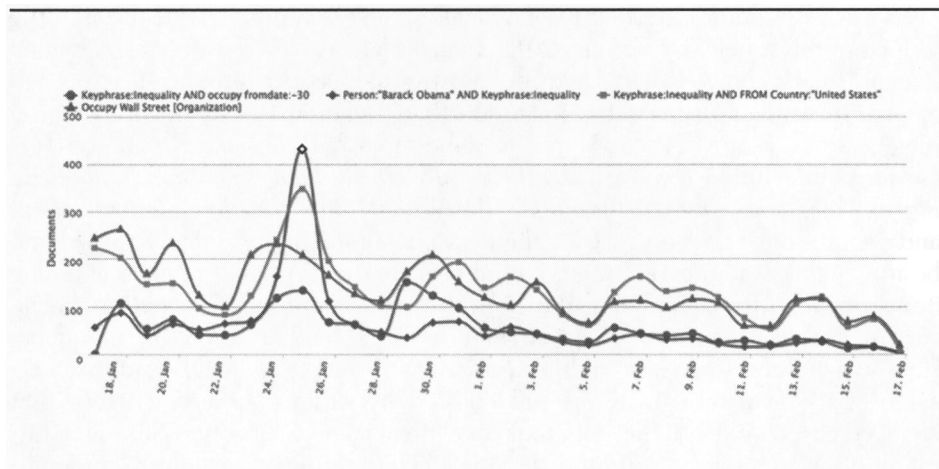
It was under the cover of the growing press coverage on inequality and the excesses of the 1 percent that Obama delivered a game-changing speech channeling Teddy Roosevelt in Osawatimie, Kansas on December 6, 2011. The speech, along with a *60 Minutes* interview that week, offered a number of trial balloons testing themes for his presidential campaign. Among these ideas was an elliptical reference to the grand 1 percent versus 99 percent meme of the Occupy protests: "I'm here in Kansas to reaffirm my deep conviction that we're greater together than we are on our own. I believe that this country succeeds when everyone gets a fair shot, when everyone does their fair share, when everyone plays by the same rules. These aren't Democratic values or Republican values. These aren't 1% values or 99% values. They're American values. And we have to reclaim them" (*Washington Post* 2011). These ideas resonated with his base and beyond, and triggered a large volume of press coverage and commentary. Obama further amplified the fairness and inequality themes, and added the idea of economic sustainability, in the 2012 State of the Union Address titled "A Nation Built to Last." Many observers took that speech as a preview of his 2012 election stump speech.

Using Silobreaker, I conducted semantic network analyses of all media with online presences, which enabled me to track co-occurrences of the terms *inequality* and *occupy*, along with other terms chained to them. I followed these semantic networks from before the first Occupy protests in September 2011, through the writing of this article in February 2012. Even as late as November 2011, semantic network maps showed that the terms most closely associated with *occupy* and *inequality* were *Adbusters* (the magazine that triggered the occupations with a blog post that went viral); *taxes*; and, at some remove, a conservative oppositional cluster that included *Tea Party*, *Tea Party Movement*, *Paul Ryan*, and *Republican Party*. The *Democratic Party*, *unions*, the *White House*, *Obama administration*, and *Obama* did not even register their coappearance in any substantial volume beside the high-volume discourses (numbering in the thousands of news and blog items per month) surrounding the central terms *occupy* and *inequality*. In the early period of the protests (September 17 to mid-October 2011), the inequality story was closely attached to the protests. By November, inequality had taken on a life of its own, though it was still boosted by various occupy activities that received coverage. Until the story took on a life of its own, a cautious liberal political elite stayed away from protest discourse. The occupy protesters continued to take their economic concerns directly to the politicians, as Obama and the Democratic Party were “occupied” by protests outside of venues where they courted big donors including the Wall Street bankers they had just bailed out.

Figure 1 shows that by early 2012 there were many interwoven narratives in the media. There was still a baseline of news stories and blogs containing both the *occupy* and *inequality* frames, but even larger volumes of stories focused on the two frames separately. This enabled elite discourse strategies of the sort developed by Obama to appropriate the idea of inequality and economic justice without becoming directly associated with their protest messengers. When Obama delivered his Kansas speech on December 6, he immediately moved into the center of the semantic *inequality* space (along with *Teddy Roosevelt*, *Osawatimie*, and *White House*). For a few days, Obama even displaced Occupy Wall Street from its near exclusive position at the center of the inequality discourse space in the media.⁷ By the time of the 2012 State of the Union Address, Obama meshed easily with the inequality discourse space, taking periodic ownership of an idea that now had a life of its own, while still reflecting its original association with Occupy. Figure 1 shows the way in which U.S. news and commentary disproportionately associated Obama with the term *inequality* in media coverage of his January 24 presidential address. The longer-term media trends before and after the speech show how inequality and occupy tracked each other closely but occupied separate story lines, while media items containing both terms (together in the same paragraphs or prominently featured by placement and word count in the items) were smaller in volume, but also tracked the two dominant story lines.

When this pattern of inequality, as a focus of national media attention, matured in early 2012, a number of prominent voices became associated with the inequality discussion. Figure 2 shows a semantic network map of U.S. news and

FIGURE 1
Frequency of Co-Occurring Terms in Online News and Blogs between January 16 and February 16, 2012



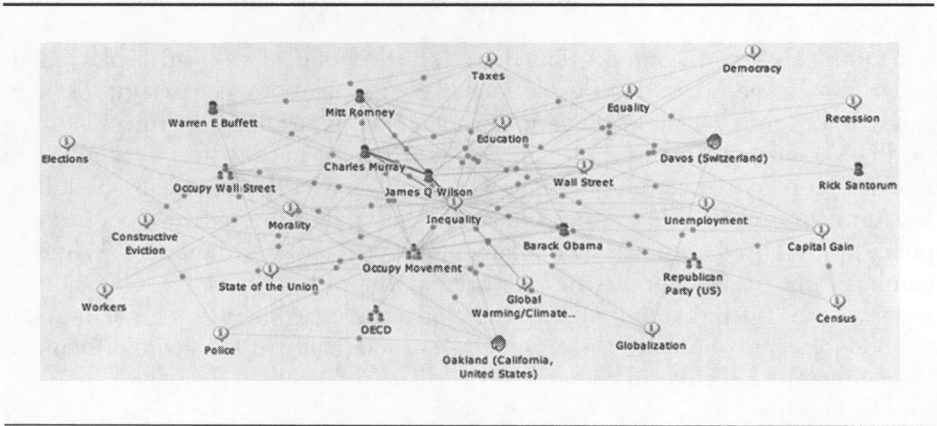
SOURCE: Silobreaker.com.

NOTE: Obama's State of the Union address occurred on January 24.

blogs based on the association patterns of terms surrounding *inequality* (and filtered for relevance of those uses of *inequality* to the terms *occupy* or *occupy movement*)⁸ in online media sites for the period January 18 to February 18, 2012.⁹ The closer another term is to *inequality*, the more items featuring that term also use the term *inequality*. Path distances represent chains of co-occurrence among documents. More distant items are less relevant to the central discourse, although they are directly related to the terms along the paths leading to the central terms.

Inequality discourse was suddenly everywhere. It spiked whenever Occupy protests popped up surrounding elite gatherings (at least whenever police clashes did not dominate the stories). There were even reports of hand-wringing among elites at the 2012 World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, where forum organizers offered Occupy protesters an ersatz headquarters outside the main conference venue. Some masters of the financial universe fretted about the growth of inequality undermining popular faith in capitalism itself. Others worried that shrinking consumer income might stall the growth engine that powered sales, profits, and jobs. The icon of late-modern capitalism, Bill Gates, delivered a speech at Davos titled "A New Approach to Capitalism in the 21st Century." And the CEO of the World Economic Forum, Klaus Schwab, issued this remarkable comment that the *New York Times* deemed fit for an occupier:

FIGURE 2
The Discourse Space Surrounding the Term *Inequality* in U.S. Online Media (News and Blogs) from January 18 to February 18, 2012



SOURCE: Silobreaker.com.

NOTE: Total items: 3,833. News (including commentary and editorials): 3,441; blogs: 381; miscellaneous: 11.

Vast numbers of people in many countries seem tired and disillusioned. Even pillars of the establishment are shaken. Klaus Schwab, executive chairman of the World Economic Forum, whose annual gathering in Davos is financed largely by corporations, recently sounded as if he were ready to pitch a tent in Zuccotti Park, the hub of the Occupy Wall Street protests until it was cleared in November.

“Capitalism, in its current form, no longer fits the world around us,” Mr. Schwab said in a statement last week. “We have failed to learn the lessons from the financial crisis of 2009.” (Ewing 2012)

Whether or not capitalism would be reformed to please many of the Occupy protesters, it is remarkable that they were able to change the economic conversation in such a short time, using such highly personalized networking organizations.

The Downside: Too Little Power, Too Many Problems

For all of the signs that the DNA of personalized politics has had an impact on public discourses, from corporate social responsibility to economic and environmental justice, there are also signs that significant structural policy changes are slow to materialize. Corporations and elites may be signaling greater responsibility for the injustices inflicted on workers, taxpayers, or the environment, but

underlying change is harder to produce. The shift to fundamentally different models of markets, resource use, energy production, or growth (much less rethinking capitalism itself) seems at best a distant ideal rather than a real political possibility.

Critical observers contend that there is little political will on display when governments keep investing in solutions likely to make things worse in the long run to shore up ever more precarious arrangements in the short run. Even the leading economists on the Left such as Paul Krugman and Joseph Stiglitz are basically unreconstructed Keynesians who simply have different ideas about how to stimulate growth. Most official analyses underlying the narrow spectrum of policy options tend to spin away fundamental causes and contradictions. Whether coming from the economists in the Obama administration or the OECD, key reports have concluded that neither the global trade regime nor the outsourcing of good jobs contributed to the chronic rise of inequality or the acute difficulties in pulling out of the world economic crisis. The politically safe analyses pointed to seemingly derivative factors such as technological change and the deregulation of job markets (Pfanner 2012).

And so, *growth* remains the god term of our time, and only growth is touted inside the circles of power as the solution to humanity's ills. Yet growth and its attendant externalities of resource depletion and environmental damage are also clearly associated with the host of current political ills. Following from this, one criticism of consumer politics and other contemporary lifestyle participation forms is that the goals are often not aimed at slowing consumption but at making it a bit friendlier to workers and the environment. It is easy to see why many activists shy away from a fuller embrace of sustainable societies as their political goal. The brand of consumer politics dedicated to minimizing consumer lifestyles (sometimes known as voluntary simplicity) is hard to make attractive to citizen-consumers who think their lifestyles require continual out-fitting and upgrading.

If majorities of publics lack the will to make voluntary radical changes, the lack of will among their leaders is compounded many times over. Without leadership, publics are not likely to feel comfortable undergoing the sacrifices necessary to change current economic models. Given their close proximity to big business and its foreshortened "profit or die" time horizon, it is hardly surprising that most political elites, even on the Left, are far removed from being able to fundamentally change course. As a result, they continue to go through the motions at summits with little will to overcome collective inertia. For example, the annual UN climate summits following the Kyoto Treaty have resulted in one disappointment after another for activists. Similarly, the frustrated hopes for harnessing banks and financial systems are painful reminders about how much power those institutions wield over those who would regulate them.

The ironic situation is that the whole system of relations involving environment, energy, and economy seems tied to clearly understood human practices, but their evolved complexities may be beyond human capacity to change. It is not

clear whether these problems should be cast as failures of the political challengers (whether conventional social movements or DNA connectives) or as measures of the magnitude of the problems themselves, and of the power imbalances that sway decision-makers.

Conclusion

Social fragmentation and the decline of group loyalties have given rise to an era of personalized politics in which individual expression displaces collective action frames in the embrace of political causes. The rise of personalized forms of political participation is perhaps the defining change in the political culture of our era. This trend can be spotted in the rise of large-scale, rapidly forming political participation aimed at a variety of targets, ranging from parties and candidates, to corporations, brands, and transnational organizations. The group-based “identity politics” of the “new social movements” that arose after the 1960s still exist, but the recent period has seen more diverse mobilizations in which individuals are mobilized around personal lifestyle values to engage with multiple causes such as economic justice (fair trade, inequality, and development policies), environmental protection, and worker and human rights. This large-scale individualized collective action is often coordinated through digital media technologies, sometimes with political organizations playing an enabling role, and sometimes with crowds using layers of social media to coordinate action.

Some of these politics have specific consumerist styles, as in the many expressions of concern about the social or environmental realities beyond the brand image of popular products. Beyond consumer and lifestyle actions, large individualized collectivities have also emerged around broader political agendas with the help of various social and digital media. The so-called Arab Spring and various uprisings in Europe and the United States following the world financial crisis suggest more general political capacities of individualized collective action. Protest formations, such as the *indignados* in Spain and Occupy protests in the United States and elsewhere, have focused attention on failings of the pervasive neoliberal economic regime that became politically dominant during the recent era of globalization. Not only have these protests triggered debate in the mass media, but public discussion space has opened to a range of critics who argue that the neoliberal regime is headed for an inevitable and painful meltdown that may force the adoption of more sustainable practices (Gilding 2011; Martenson 2011).

In the meantime, it seems a positive sign that some politicians, including the long-conciliatory Barack Obama, began to talk about sustainability, while captains of industry such as Bill Gates called for new variants on capitalism. These shifts in discourse and perceptions are clearly related to opportunities seized by contemporary activists. If the crisis and accompanying protests pointed out the flaws of the dominant political and economic regimes, the political remedies were not as immediately obvious. Conventional solutions such as pressuring parties or

forming new ones may not make much difference when innovative choices seem limited by crisis conditions. Thus, it may be unreasonable to fault connective action formations and their loosely tied communication-based organization for lack of more fundamental change. Many of the issues in the globalized polity have long been the focus of more conventionally organized challengers, from unions to social movements, with no better results. What seems clear is that the DNA of personalized politics has succeeded more than many other forms of protests in occupying the contemporary political discourse space.

Notes

1. The first winner was Charles A. Lindbergh in 1927, and others have included Mohandas Ghandi, Franklin Roosevelt (twice), Hitler, Stalin, De Gaulle, Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr., Bill Gates, and Mark Zuckerberg, along with astronauts, scientists, popes, and business leaders.

2. While this ethos of diversity and inclusiveness seems to have fueled greater volumes of personalized politics on the Left, there are interesting examples on the Right as well, such as the Tea Party, which gathered a broad spectrum of discontent under its antigovernment action frame. The ways in which the boundaries of political sentiment may be policed differently by these loose-tied Left- or Right-leaning networks is an interesting empirical question.

3. Individuation may also be associated with many authoritarian states that have undermined civil society and thus help to account for the rise of digitally networked uprisings in Egypt and elsewhere.

4. In the case of the Robin Hood Tax, the campaign featured Google maps dotted with tiny Robin Hood caps across the British landscape. Clicking on a cap revealed personal testimonials about why an individual supported the tax. The Occupy protests quickly adopted the slogan of "We are the 99%," which began on a Tumbler micro-blog where individuals took desktop photos of themselves holding up a short account of their personal challenges in the 99 percent.

5. Before the economic crash of 2008, U.S. consumer spending on goods and services accounted for more than 60 percent of jobs and a similar amount of GDP. Some estimates of the contribution of the consumer economy to GDP were even higher. The global economic crash and its surrounding energy and environmental issues may well mark the end of an economic era.

6. It should be noted that this economic justice agenda had long been advocated by a broad spectrum of collective action, including conventional social movements and hybrid NGO advocacy networks that engaged large publics. Yet the more personalized "connective action" networks somehow seized the opportunity and raised the level of discussion. A more complete overview of how personalized participation fits into larger schemes of collective action is presented in Bennett and Segerberg (2011).

7. Based on Silobreaker searches on November 20, 2011, and December 8, 2011, for the co-occurrence of *inequality* and *occupy* and third term co-occurrences in all U.S. news and blogs online.

8. Silobreaker enables terms, such as *inequality*, that may have many other uses in other contexts to be filtered by relevance in association with other terms (in this case, *occupy*). The relevance algorithms represent prominence of placement of terms in documents, frequency of co-occurrence, and paths of co-association with other terms.

9. The appearance of Charles Murray and James Q. Wilson here reflects the buzz surrounding Murray's controversial and just-published book arguing that inequality is not a structural economic problem involving power and advantage in the economic game but more the result of the degradation of family values among low-income Americans.

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