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# Introduction

## HOW ABOUT A BIGGER BOX?

### Making Problems

Social advocates turn conditions into social *problems*. They craft compelling claims about the problems, and build campaigns to solve them. It is hard work with uncertain prospects. How do social advocates make the claims and sustain the relationships of collective problem solving? Those became the central questions of this study.<sup>1</sup>

The best way to answer them was to follow the action, making lots of comparisons along the way. I spent four years observing and participating alongside social advocates working on housing problems in Los Angeles. My observations gave me close-up views of four campaigns, three coalitions—two in depth—and twelve organizations. The advocates pressed for more affordable housing, fought gentrification, and promoted the kinds of urban development that could benefit low-income residents. Some of them pointed out health, environmental, and safety problems as part of their fight for housing. I followed some of the advocates to different organizations and settings; I followed some dissenters in one of the coalitions to a competing coalition. I observed several organizations and projects that publicized homelessness or served homeless people to better understand what made “homelessness” and “housing” into such separate issues for a lot of advocates. And I took on work stints at the office of an affordable housing developer to see how they planned and financed, built, and leased the housing that advocates fought for. I compared campaigns, coalitions, organizational settings, claims about housing, and claims about homelessness. To contextualize the ethnographic findings, the study draws in evidence from hundreds of documents, and dozens of hours of audio- and videotaped city hall deliberation.

Many studies already investigate the rhetoric and organizing techniques that empower social problem solving. Claims making and relationship

building became my central focus because LA housing advocates carried out these big tasks in such perplexing ways. Let's listen in.

*Puzzling over Claims Making: Why Isn't Imitation Flattering?  
Why Isn't Housing about Compassion?*

Housing advocates and I were at a town hall meeting in a working-class neighborhood of weathered bungalows and stucco box apartments with a good view of the hillside Hollywood sign. Solicitous city planning department staff and chirpy interns greeted people who gave their Saturday morning to learn more about what "affordable housing" is, and why Los Angeles needs more of it. Attendees perused booths with display boards documenting housing conditions in the city. The planning department's associate director was telling an informally gathered audience at one poster display that the vast majority of housing built in Los Angeles was affordable only to people who earned more than \$135,000 a year. The posters conveyed the same reality with graphs and charts. I had tagged along with two campaign organizers from Housing Justice (HJ), a broad coalition of nonprofit, affordable housing developers, tenant organizations, and labor groups—one of the two main coalitions in this study. The coalition was pushing a proposal for a citywide affordable housing mandate. The campaign organizers smirked at the display boards and sounded suspicious of the whole affair.

Why weren't they happy that a city administrator was using exactly the same language and signal statistic that HJ circulars used to document the dearth of housing opportunities for low- and moderate-income people? Why was this not a satisfying sign that municipal agencies endorsed the coalition's way of framing Los Angeles' housing problems? Isn't that what activists would want?

Meanwhile, advocates with Inquilinos del Sur de Los Angeles / Tenants of South Los Angeles (ISLA), the other coalition, were warily monitoring some new construction projects in the working-class, largely Latinx neighborhoods south of downtown. ISLA's way of relating to claims making was not so easy to understand either. It brought tenant groups, community development organizations, and nonprofit health providers together to challenge new real estate developments that were hastening the exit of lower-income people of color from those neighborhoods. Surveys by ISLA staff documented what residents already had been saying: many longtime neighbors were moving out as rents went up. The area was becoming more appealing to wealthier and whiter tenants. A similar dynamic was happening in surrounding neighborhoods, where a recently repackaged downtown scene of upscale apartments, chic lofts, nightlife, and shopping was enticing affluent professionals to make their homes alongside the financial towers corralled just east of the Harbor Freeway.<sup>2</sup>

One plan to erect a massive, luxury apartment on a block with a hospital, in a largely lower-income neighborhood, had agitated ISLA activists for months. Suddenly, though, they set aside the central focus of their antigentrification campaign, gathered allies, and learned what they could from sympathetic city officials in private meetings after an ISLA activist heard a bulldozer demolishing part of the medical facility that some local parents depended on for specialized pediatric care. Alarmed ISLA advocates and residents lined up inside the theatrically ornate city hall chamber where the city planning commission held its hearings, each filling the allotted two minutes of individual speaker time with reasons why commissioners should reject the proposed upscale complex and protect the hospital. Most appealed to fairness and opportunity. Almost none called the plans for the huge apartment complex and shrunken hospital a failure of compassion, and precious few said the development would diminish their quality of life.

ISLA staff had already made it clear that they cared about their constituents as people trying to live decent lives. They lamented the flight of longtime local residents to cheaper housing far away. One said that when she heard the bulldozer start in on the clinic, it felt like a punch to the stomach. Another led a consciousness-raising tour of the neighborhood, pointing to ample evidence that city planning routines had led to inhospitable uses of local space—a freeway right next to a house and a gas station next to a century-old church. So why didn't languages of caring or quality of life enter more into the appeals ISLA advocates and their constituents made at city hall?

*Puzzling over Relationship Building: Why Can't  
We Stand (with) Our Allies?*

The ethnographer found relationship building no less puzzling. Tenant advocates and nonprofit housing developers had crowded onto city hall's steps one early spring day. It was the long-planned kickoff rally for the HJ coalition's campaign to promote affordable housing legislation. Camera shots captured tenant advocates braving the LA noonday sun, clutching colorful banners with brash messages; they stood just behind a row of dark-suited nonprofit housing developers and religious leaders. After the rally, tenant advocates complained bitterly that what really took bravery was the group photo session with the affordable housing developers—their *allies*. A HJ staff person got an earful and spent precious phone time talking the tenant advocates down. This was the campaign's long-awaited public launch, a chance to perform broad-based enthusiasm for better housing policies. Why were the advocates so bitter about the photo opportunity? As the campaign intensified, so did rancor between different factions of the coalition. The lines of division were not so obvious.

Proponents of extremely low-income and precariously housed people stood on *both* sides, but the tension was unmistakable.

Why was it so hard for these allies to fashion a collaborative *modus vivendi*, even if only long enough for city council to vote on a housing mandate? It turns out that coalition leaders were hardly strangers to one another. Some organizations in the coalition had been working off and on for over eight years toward the goal of affordable housing legislation. If passed, the mandate would cover far more renters than current mandates in any of the other 170 US cities with similar municipal ordinances in 2008. This would be a historic victory with national reverberations. The activists had so much shared experience and struggle, and so much to win. To paraphrase the now-famous Angeleno whose police beating precipitated riots in 1992: Why couldn't they just get along?

To solve puzzles like these, this book offers a cultural and action-focused sociological approach. Following the action closely, I show how symbolic categories of a larger culture empower and limit the strategic claims that advocates and their opponents can make. I demonstrate that when advocates organize meetings, public events, or entire campaigns, they do so in line with culturally patterned ways of coordinating relationships. In this way, we can explain perplexing scenarios like the ones I just pictured and more. Beyond the case of housing advocacy in Los Angeles, this approach gives us a more accurate and ultimately useful view of how social advocates take on two fundamental tasks of collective, social problem solving. These tasks go together for advocates, and pair closely in scholarly thinking as well.

A lot of research has conceived of social advocacy groups as savvy operators carrying out these tasks strategically. This book shows that as advocates strategize, they are embedded in cultural and social contexts every step of the way. These contexts shape advocates' notions of what counts as savvy—and in which situations—what counts as a win, and how to get there. Solving social problems, in other words, depends a lot on *how* advocates pursue the solutions, not just what their solutions are. There are distinct ways to be strategic, with different trade-offs. My arguments depend on a different conceptual box from the one sociologists most often use to understand social advocacy. It will help to introduce that box informally here before unpacking it systematically in chapter 1.

## Another Box

There are lots of questions to ask about social advocacy, and different ways to study it. Over the past forty years, many studies have considered social advocates to think and act rather like businesspeople: they make investments in rhetoric and people, taking risks for a goal that lies waiting in an uncertain

future. They want to influence bystanders and institutional authorities to “buy” their message. They start new relationships efficiently and try to hold onto them, somewhat as businesses want to develop a market for their product and entice loyal shoppers. Of course the commercial metaphors are not perfect; for social advocates, the point of the “sales” and “marketing” is to win resources, power, or honor for some constituency, not primarily for their own private gain. Still, thinking in metaphors from the world of entrepreneurialism, these studies have taught us a lot about why social movements emerge, why they succeed or fail, and why some recruit members more effectively than others. The entrepreneur image captures some memorable scenarios from my time among housing advocates.

While useful for important questions, the entrepreneur image limits what we can know about the everyday world of social advocacy. It invites us to imagine advocates and advocacy groups as striving in constant, uniform pursuit of a win. It sounds safe enough to assume that advocates want to win, and I would not argue otherwise. The point is that when this image deeply informs our research questions, it becomes easy to assume that the very meaning of “working toward a goal” is obvious and unremarkable. We do not say much about where advocates’ ideas about goals come from. We don’t ask what holding a goal means to advocates. And we underplay questions about how activists know when they have succeeded. That is why I found it more useful to make this a study of collective, social problem solving instead of highlighting entrepreneurial actors and social movement organizations. I use a different terminology, with a long history in social thought.

When people work together, voluntarily, to address problems they think should matter to others, they are engaging in *civic action*.<sup>3</sup> There are different ways to do civic action. Civic action may or may not be contentious; that is part of what actors decide as they figure out how to address problems. Civic action may or may not address government, and may take up issues that are local, national, or global. Participants are relatively free to decide how to coordinate their collective effort rather than assuming their action is mandated or completely scripted by preexisting institutional rules and roles. Participants are the ones who decide what counts as “improving,” and for whom. Civic action is not necessarily prodemocracy, prosocial, or virtuous. Participants in civic action act in relation to some shared understanding of “society,” no matter how expansive or restrictive. Put simply, civic action happens when citizens work together to steer society, identifying problems and collaborating on solving them.<sup>4</sup>

Developing claims and sustaining relationships are central civic tasks that come with seemingly inevitable surprises as well as teachable moments. Social philosopher John Dewey wrote that when people work collectively on social

problems, they discover things about the social world and respond to unpredicted contingencies as the action unfolds. They do not simply execute plans made in advance. Dewey's ideas about collective action and the conduct of social research will inform arguments throughout this book. Thinking alongside Dewey in light of contemporary developments in sociology, I will argue that there are powerful, cultural contexts that *pattern* the unfolding action of social problem solving, conditioning what social advocates can say and do together.

This book shows how civic action works. Practical as well as sociologically valuable insights await when we view social movements, nonprofit organizations, and volunteering projects from the standpoint of civic action. Welcome to the bigger box.

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Appreciating the bigger box's benefits will be easier if we first address two potential challenges to this whole project. To some specialist readers, it may sound as if I am simply rediscovering the massive body of research on civic engagement and the nonprofit sector. While I will draw on important insights from that research tradition, this study is different. Many prominent studies of civic engagement measure an individual's beliefs, orientations, or social resources, and treat these as the impetus for acts we conventionally consider "civic," like voting, joining a volunteer group, or contacting elected officials.<sup>5</sup> With the focus I have introduced here, in contrast, "civic" refers to ongoing, collective action, not internal beliefs, individual attitudes, or resources, nor single acts that emerge from individual beliefs and attitudes. Of course, the beliefs and attitudes are part of action. But "civic action" spotlights *patterns of collective action* over time. It is a different conceptual box.

Civic action does not map so closely onto ideas about a civic "sector" either. Distinctions between market, state, and a "third"—or "nonprofit" or "civic"—sector are common in sociological views of public life, but assumptions about a sector get in the way of practical differences that matter in a study of civic action.<sup>6</sup> The idea of sectoral distinctions echoes US folk notions of a sharp line dividing everyday people and governmental agents. This understanding distorts US historical and current realities. Chapter 9 shows that nonprofit professionals who build affordable housing are in some ways much more like outsourced governmental actors than civic ones. The sectoral metaphor is even less adept at capturing the long-standing institutional realities of many other societies.<sup>7</sup> The various sectoral tags—"nonprofit," "voluntary," or "third"—each refer to a different collection of organizations, and each overlaps only partly with the arena of ordinary people's collective, problem-solving efforts.<sup>8</sup>



Even if we restrict our notion of a civic sector to collective, grassroots problem solving, we still have to bear the risky assumptions that go with talk of a sector. Many studies implicitly, if not explicitly, hold that a civic sector hosts and promotes “democratic skills,” or sacrificial, citizenly commitments that other sectors do not readily host.<sup>9</sup>

As the world of housing advocacy in Los Angeles demonstrates vividly, however, different kinds of civic action promote and depend on different kinds of skills. They prize different virtues. The differences matter a lot to advocates, but they fade when we imagine a sector defined by generic virtues and skills, or aggregate “social capital” that other sectors supposedly lack.<sup>10</sup> It is more illuminating to follow action we can define as civic, whether or not we find that action to be virtuous, prosocial, or democratic. We do not have to think that all kinds of collective problem solving are laudable. We need a concept that can accommodate lots of differences—political, cultural, social, and national.

A second, stronger objection is that the groups in this book that fight for more affordable housing will sound quite a lot like social movement participants as we know them from other studies. Social movements are made up of collective actors, often organizations, that challenge governmental or other institutional powers.<sup>11</sup> The housing advocates in this study pressured municipal legislators and property-owning entities for more affordable housing, so why not just say this is a study of social movement organizations? If I want to focus more on culture and everyday action, why don't I just make this a study of social movement culture and action? Why bother introducing a new, less familiar sounding conceptual box?

Housing advocates were doing the kinds of things social movements do sometimes. But I wanted to understand closely *how* housing advocates do their work. The social movement “box” is useful for a variety of questions, but would have ended up leaving out important parts of the “how,” and distorting or else excluding some of the relevant actors too.

To start with, how did social advocates set off the “social movement” part of their organization from other parts, and how did they negotiate the parts? The sponsor of the HJ coalition, for example, was the Western Housing Association (WHA), a trade association of nonprofit housing developers, nonprofit social service agencies, and several banks—not the usual image of a social movement organization. The trade association hired community organizers who would *create* a temporary, local social movement from among labor unions, community organizations, and churches to pressure municipal leaders. The category of civic action obviated the need to classify which, if any, activities I was studying belonged to a social movement organization.

The bigger box opened up room for following advocacy beyond what usually counts as part of a social movement. Following the action occasionally led



me to advocates acting like political lobbyists or consultants at city hall, or once in a while, like business partners—more literally than what the entrepreneurial model of action says metaphorically. Sometimes these advocates were from the same organizations that held feisty rallies and packed city hall meetings with loud supporters. With a broad focus on civic action, we may ask how and why advocates address problems in diverse ways, whether or not they are part of an identifiable social movement, and whether or not their strategies and tactics look like what we think social movements do.

To be fair, social movement scholarship does portray activists inside as well as outside powerful institutions.<sup>12</sup> Movement activists, classically understood as outsiders, sometimes participate in governance, advise elected officials and state agencies, or partner with businesses. Studies of these processes frequently invoke some notion of hybridity, institutional tension, or professional or personal ambivalence. These signal that activists are crossing lines since most of the time, they do not intend to become governing agents or institutional elites themselves, or adjuncts to corporations and bureaucracies in the greater scheme of things.<sup>13</sup> If our goal is to explain outcomes of social movements, then it may be fine to count hybrid activists who “wear two hats” as part of a social movement, if we can agree on some criteria for counting. But I needed more tools for exploring how and when advocates crossed institutional lines and juggled different kinds of action. Working with blanket categories that locate actors as either inside or outside a social movement would have chopped away some of the tangle of relationships that make up social advocacy.

The civic action framework’s bigger box also helped me pay attention to a wider set of actors. Social movement scholarship already views movement organizations in “multiorganizational fields” where allies and adversaries contend with each other, and where media, the state, and larger publics play important roles too.<sup>14</sup> This is a helpful move. With the notion of civic action, we may also discover relations between social movement actors and other collective problem solvers, beyond the allies, adversaries, or bystanders that theorists have already identified.<sup>15</sup> For example, to understand LA housing advocates’ public arguments, or their “claims,” it turned out to be useful to compare what they asserted with what interest or volunteer group members maintained. I wanted to understand, for instance, why ISLA coalition advocates devalued environmentalist-sounding, quality-of-life arguments about urban development when they were fighting tenant displacement. Why couldn’t they argue for environmentally sustainable housing opportunities for low-income people? I discovered it was not that they didn’t care about the environment, safety, or even neighborhood aesthetics; they brought these up on their own in some settings. To grasp the pattern, it helped to understand

that these advocates made their claims in relation to the arguments that representatives from neighborhood and business improvement associations made. These interest groups counted as civic actors too, but conceiving of them as part of a social movement or countermovement, with the imagery and assumptions that accompany those terms, would be a conceptually forced fit. Something similar happened with HJ advocates, who spent time at coordinating committee meetings grimly envisioning what neighborhood association members might say about affordable housing at city hall or on their own local turf. Housing advocates' claims formed in relation to and ricocheted off those of a variety of groups, not all of which were organized primarily to challenge one or more big institutions, as social movement groups are.<sup>16</sup>

The bigger box also helped me find out why advocates' goals made sense to them. Why did it *make sense* to HJ advocates to mount a citywide campaign for a housing ordinance instead of some other, less legislation-centered campaign to begin with? By the same token, why did it make more sense to advocates in the ISLA coalition to fight for a clutch of local neighborhoods, and why were ISLA advocates cool to HJ's efforts on a citywide campaign that could have benefited them greatly? These questions are different from asking what makes advocates win or lose a given campaign. They require a different kind of inquiry into goals, outcomes, and the meaning of success, which I explain more in chapter 6.

There is at least one other reason to go with the bigger box. Focusing intently on forms of action and less on the entrepreneurial actor relieved me of the temptation to ignore an inconvenient reality. Among LA housing advocates, it was not always clear *who*—which organization or coalition—was the actor in a situation. Maybe the problem was me; I just was not observing the right things. Yet experienced antigentrification activists in one coalition I studied puzzled aloud during a long coalition meeting about who they were, organizationally. They misidentified one of their own leaders along the way, making me realize how practical this existential-sounding problem could be. I was confused too. Moreover, in one of the coalitions, I noticed the same advocates identifying themselves with different organizations depending on the setting and audience. Different organizational identities cued different understandings of trust and loyalty. The civic action box can accommodate the differences rather than trying to make them disappear by inserting an ever-present collective actor into the story. Focusing intently on capacities or outcomes of individual or collective *actors* would have obscured the interesting ambiguity regarding who is the actor, thus mischaracterizing some of the action.

Turning to the bigger box helped me address questions that bedevil advocates as much as they intrigue researchers. In the case of LA housing

advocates, why did people who agreed on basic issues have such a hard time working together? Why were seemingly interrelated issues—housing and environmental sustainability, say—harder for some advocates to combine in their work than housing and health? Why was homelessness not more commonly treated as a housing issue? This book will show that we can address these questions, at once practical and scholarly, when we pay more attention to cultural contexts than the entrepreneurial actor model leads us to do. We need to zoom in on cultural patterns of everyday group action, and we need to zoom out to cultural parameters that limit what advocates can say about social problems, where, and to whom.

For scholars, this call for a bigger box is also an invitation to a bigger community of inquiry. We usually identify ourselves with smaller disciplinary boxes dedicated to social movement research, or civic engagement studies or scholarship on nonprofit organizations, but recently, researchers have been helping bring a larger scholarly community into being.<sup>17</sup> Students of Latin American political activism have been developing terms of inquiry that sidestep the popular tendency to call the polite kinds of people's action "civic," and label the contentious kinds as "social movement" or "activist."<sup>18</sup> These scholars point out that "civic" does not always enhance people power, as neo-Tocquevillians would imagine. But neither does it always mean a charade of grassroots participation that only legitimates state or corporate power, as critical writers sometimes suppose. Western European scholars show us the value of research that spans academic niches devoted to social movements, civic engagement, interest groups, or the construction of social problems.<sup>19</sup> It is not a new idea that the sociology of both public problems and social movements share common themes. Sociologist Herbert Blumer (1969) argued long ago that people figure out which conditions are problems through collective action; Dewey (1927) wrote the classic account of that process forty years earlier.<sup>20</sup> Yet social problems and social movements have tended to remain separate topics for social scientists. The concept of civic action contributes to an interdisciplinary community-building project that would connect the dots for a bigger picture of collective problem solving, whether contentious or not, elite driven or widely participatory.

US social movement scholars have been finding empirical uses for the "civic" box too. They use it to categorize the many public projects that "blend" social movement-style contention with volunteer service and community education efforts that scholars do not usually highlight when writing about social movements. Having combed through thirty years of publicized events in Chicago, one prominent study found that the great majority of those events included "community" and nonpolitical activity as well as the claims making we typically expect to hear from social movement activists.<sup>21</sup> These events

were community festivals, charity promotions, educational or ethnic solidarity events, or municipal hearings where people aired grievances. Relatively few of the events included the activity most typically associated with social movements: protest.<sup>22</sup>

The bigger box is likely to be equally good at picking up public advocacy-related events in Los Angeles. One of my housing coalitions organized street fairs with speakers who educated and advocated against gentrification alongside aerobics trainers as well as health promoters staffing informational tables, ready to teach passersby how to brush their teeth. Another coalition packed mayor-sponsored “town hall” meetings to speak up for affordable housing. For some purposes including my own, it is better to distinguish different lines of collective action than to lean on sometimes-unreliable distinctions between what is or isn’t part of a social movement—all the more since a clear, consensual definition of that category has eluded researchers.<sup>23</sup>

Collective, social problem solving is this book’s object of investigation. Housing advocacy in Los Angeles was a good, if challenging, site for following civic action.

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