

“Imagining American Democracy: An Interpretive-Hermeneutic Approach to Cultural Meaning in Collective Actor Formation Processes”

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Abstract:

This article develops an interpretive-hermeneutic approach to cultural meaning within collective action research. In particular, it analyzes how the student body of The City College of New York overcame bitter internal divisions to unify behind a strike action in the spring of 1949. Striking students demanded the dismissal of two professors, one accused of practicing anti-Semitism, the other of practicing Jim Crow segregation. The volatile divisions that inhibited unified collective action for the eight months preceding the strike were not between Jewish and Black students, but between “liberal” and “leftist” students over what tactical course of action to take in seeking the dismissal of the two professors. The dispute over tactics was not of a strategic nature, however, as students remained divided over the meaning of tactics, formal vs. extraordinary, which came to symbolize the legitimacy each side invested in actually existing democracy in the U.S. The students overcame their interpretive dispute through creatively imagining a new collective identity based on a normative vision of democratic citizenship underlying education. This article argues that by hermeneutically attending to the structuring role of the social imaginary in processes of collective actor formation, social movement scholars can, in an interrelated way, deepen the shallow conceptions of the political currently underlying research, expanding our understanding of what is politically at stake in collective action, thereby achieving more felicitous constructions of the empirical object of research.

Introduction:

On April 11, 1949, 75% of the student body of The City College of New York refused to attend classes. They were protesting the college administration’s handling of accusations of racism against two faculty members. On the one hand, William E. Knickerbocker stood accused as chairperson of administering the Romance Language Department according to an anti-Semitic agenda. Despite having been found guilty by the City Council of New York of carrying on anti-Semitic practices amounting to “reprehensible and unworthy conduct,” the college’s administration continued to laud Knickerbocker’s service to the school, flatly refusing the possibility of any wrongful action on his part.¹ On the other hand, a City College faculty investigatory committee had

found William C. Davis guilty of segregating the only City College student dormitory according to Jim-Crow principles. When Davis resigned from his post as head administrator of the student dormitory, Harry Wright, City College's President, reappointed Davis, a trained economist, to the Economics Department, even giving him a raise. The striking students picketed the school, carrying signs that read, "Bigotry has no tenure at City"; "We Are United, Bigotry Must Go!!" "Racism Has No Room At CCNY," and "We Fight for Democracy in Education," while demanding the two professors be removed from the college's faculty for practicing racism.²

The strike, which made front-page news in *The New York Times*,³ was the culminating act in what would become known as the Knickerbocker-Davis Affair (hereafter KDA). In striking, City College students, Jewish and Black alike, "lumped" together Knickerbocker's anti-Semitism and Davis' Jim-Crowism, coming to understand them as commensurate cases of American racism.⁴ While the strike was an impressive enactment of student unity, it was only achieved after eight months of contentious *intra-student conflict* between "liberal" and "leftist" students.⁵

From an instrumentalist standpoint, the dispute between liberals and leftists is peculiar. A student consensus quickly emerged around the belief that both Knickerbocker and Davis were guilty of *racist* practices. Thus, amongst the students, the facts of the two cases were not in dispute. Furthermore, all currents of student opinion converged on the goal of having both Knickerbocker and Davis dismissed from the college's faculty. Thus, the student body quickly saw it in their interests to have the two professors fired, and took such an outcome as their collective goal. Yet, despite their shared interests and goal, for eight months the student body channeled all of their political energy against each

other, fighting bitterly over the question of collective *tactics*, inhibiting collective action, and more or less leaving the college's administration and larger governing structure unchallenged.⁶

According to Polletta, the way social movement analysts have integrated culture into their analytical models has reproduced "a strategy/ideology divide whereby activists' strategic considerations are by definition non-ideological" (2006:54). As Polletta suggests, this false divide blinds analysts to the ways in which deeply meaningful normative questions are symbolically embedded in the problem of political tactics. Before unifying with leftists, liberal students consistently argued for and pursued procedural remedies to the crisis, pressing the college's administration through formal channels. Leftists, on the other hand, insisted on pursuing confrontational tactics such as sit-down demonstrations, pickets and strikes. However, while the student dispute over tactics prevented effective collective actor formation, it in no way revolved around the potential effectiveness of these two tactical repertoires. In other words, the student debate over tactics was not of a strategic nature. Thus, a series of puzzling questions emerge around the process by which City College students constructed themselves as a collective actor. If students ignored the strategic implications of various tactical courses of action, what was at stake for them in their rift over tactics? Why did the student body surrender its collective power to engage in an internecine conflict? Considering their shared interests and goal, what accounts for the hostility of the intra-student struggle? Finally, how and why did they ultimately overcome their conflict to unite in collective action?

The key to explaining *both* the intra-student conflict over tactics, as well as how students ultimately overcame their divisions to unite in collective action, is understanding

“the meanings that collective action had for the actors” themselves (Sewell 1990:532). Therefore, in this article, I bring together practice-centered theories of action (Bourdieu 1990a, 1998; Ortner 1994; Sewell 1992; Crossley 2002), with an interpretive-hermeneutic approach to cultural meaning (Taylor 1971; Cohen 1985; Sewell 2005; Reed 2011), to explain how City College students came to be a collective actor in their 1949 student strike. Such an interpretive approach to meaning is needed to supplement and expand upon prevailing models of culture and collective action that, in the case of the framing perspective (Snow et al. 1986; Snow and Benford 1992; Benford and Snow 2000; Tarrow 1998), tend to reduce cultural meanings to the strategic imperatives of already constituted actors; or in the case of New Social Movement (NSM) theorists (Touraine 1985; Melucci 1985, 1994, 1995; Offe 1985), tend to limit the political importance of culture to a politics of recognition.⁷ The peculiar case of political activists, unified by common goals, but debating tactical questions completely divorced from strategic concerns, points to a level of cultural meaning, the social imaginary (Taylor 2004; Perrin 2006), that is of general importance for collective action phenomena, but largely neglected in the literature. Indeed, underlying the student dispute over tactics, and contributing to its intensity, was a deeper normative conflict *of interpretations* over the *nature and legitimacy of American democracy*, for which the question of tactics served as a symbolic proxy.⁸ By combining an interpretive-hermeneutic approach to cultural meaning with practice-centered theories of action, researchers can open to analysis the deep normative beliefs about how society is, and how it ought to be that structure the process of collective actor formation (Oliver and Johnston 2000), *especially at the point of genesis*. In doing so, analysts can deepen the shallow conceptions of the political that

currently limit understandings of what is at stake in collective action events, enabling, in turn, more accurate constructions of the object of social movement research.

The Role of Cultural Meaning in Social Movement Processes and Collective Action Events

Scholars working within the Resource Mobilization and Political Process paradigms of social movement research have long been interested in the collective “repertoires” of political action (Tilly 1978, 2006; Tarrow 1998; McAdam, Tarrow & Tilly 2001; Taylor & Van Dyke 2004). Such structuralists have understood changes in prevailing tactical repertoires over time as indices of macro-structural historical transformations tied to modern state formation. Additionally, by insisting on the strategic intentionality of collective action tactics (Taylor & Van Dyke 2004, p. 269), even when analyzing their symbolic elements (McAdam 1996), such theorists have importantly corrected the classical model’s understanding of collective behavior as irrational outbursts akin to contagious crowd behavior (McAdam 1982). However, the important effort to return instrumental rationality to the collective actor was made at the expense of other forms of rationality and the general importance of culture within social movement processes (Cohen 1985; Calhoun 1991, 2012). Sewell has shown the neglect of cultural meaning leads to a deficient construction of the object of analysis in collective action research (Sewell 1990).

Responding to such concerns, as well as the broader cultural turn within the social sciences, sociologists since the 1980’s have increasingly examined the importance of cultural meaning in social movement processes (Williams 2004; see also, Johnston and Klandermans 1995; Polletta 2008). Developed to complement the dominant structural theories of collective action, the framing perspective has been perhaps the most

influential analytical approach to cultural meaning in collective action research (Snow et al. 1986; Snow and Benford 1992; Benford and Snow 2000; Tarrow 1998). It asserts, “by rendering events or occurrences meaningful, frames function to organize experience and guide action” (Snow et al. 1986:464); furthermore, collective action frames, as distinct from everyday framing practices, “perform this interpretive work via the focusing, articulation, and transformative functions of frames, but in ways intended to activate adherents, transform bystanders into supporters, exact concessions from targets, and demobilize antagonists” (Snow 2004:385).

In grounding itself in the symbolic interactionist tradition, the framing perspective portrays movements and their adversaries as engaged in a contest over “the social construction of reality” (Berger and Luckmann 1966), and therefore retains a theoretical role for the *constitutive* power of cultural meaning. However, in as much as it’s analytical models tend to assume pre-constituted actors strategically engaged in manipulating cultural meaning to achieve predefined ends, the framing perspective can be criticized for reproducing the culturally reductive and instrumentally biased logics of action it was meant to complement or supplant (Goldberg 2003; Hart 1996; Kane 1997; Steinberg 1999; Oliver and Johnston 2000; Zald 2000; for an exception see Ellingson 1995).

According to Steinberg, the framing perspective’s approach to culture is hampered by contradictory epistemologies, one constructivist, the other rational-actor (Steinberg 1998, 1999). On the level of meaning, focus on the way pre-existing social movement organizations attempt to achieve “frame alignment” with individual actors in order to build membership, as well as seek “frame resonance” with onlooking publics to build public support behind movement goals, belies the “dialogic,” “polyvocal,”

“polysemic” character of cultural meaning, erroneously suggesting “the transmission of meanings between actors is a largely uncomplicated process of sending and receiving messages” (Steinberg 1999, p. 739.). Thus, the framing perspective ignores the “internal structure of meaning systems” (Kane 1997, p. 254), and analyzes frames themselves in isolation from the “collective cultural structures” (Hart 1996, p. 95), and “discursive fields” (Steinberg 1999) within which they are embedded,⁹ reducing political action, according to Oliver and Johnston, to the market model of the “entrepreneur” (2000). Theoretically, when analysts subordinate cultural factors to what they assume are the anterior instrumental interests of actors, they risk missing that “culture is often not just a medium of individual or collective action, it is very much what is at stake in both the means and the ends” of action (Friedland and Mohr 2004, p. 12). Because the framing perspective tends to analyze the ways predefined groups use culture to achieve their ends,¹⁰ cultural meaning is analytically excluded from the scene of group formation itself.

In contrast, NSM theorists’ emphasis on processes of collective identity construction suggests an orientation towards cultural meaning less mired in instrumentalist assumptions (Touraine 1985; Melucci 1985, 1994, 1995; Offe 1985). However, in as much as NSM theorists understand identity movements as a “contemporary repertoire” (Polletta and Jasper 2001, p. 287), emerging from macro structural transformations to “post-industrial” (Touraine), or “informational” (Melucci) societies, they tend to limit their own insights and reproduce the structuralist assumption that the class identities of the old labor movements were an *automatic reflection* of positions within the system of production (Cohen 1985; Calhoun 1991, 2012). Instead, critics who note processes of identity construction and symbolic expression were central

to the “old movements” of the 19th and early 20th centuries (Calhoun 2012; Young 2002; Goldberg 2003) argue, “the constitution of identity, then, is a crucial concern for the study of social movements in all historical and cultural settings” (Calhoun 1991, p. 52).

Along parallel lines, scholars influenced by Bourdieu’s theoretical accounts of group formation (Bourdieu 1990b, Brubaker 2004) have emphasized the role of “classification struggles,” both between challenging movements and power holders, as well as “*within* movements over collective identity” (Goldberg 2003, p. 728). According to Bourdieu, “the social world is both the product and the stake of inseparably cognitive and political symbolic struggles over knowledge and recognition,” in which actors seek “the power to impose as legitimate the principles of construction of social reality most favorable to his or her social being (individual and collective, with, for example, struggles over the boundaries of groups) . . .” (Bourdieu 2000, p. 187). While in theory, such symbolic struggles could be waged over any symbolic terrain, Bourdieu’s focus on “social being” and the “boundaries of groups,” lends itself to a politics of group recognition. Similarly, while NSM theorists often took the achievement of cultural identity to be an end in itself for many contemporary movements, these scholars also tended to limit their treatment of cultural meaning to a politics of cultural recognition (Taylor 1994).

Beyond the instrumentalism of “tool-kit” models of culture, other threads of the cultural turn, such as analyses informed by New Institutional Theory, have addressed the constitutive power of culture (Meyer, Boli and Thomas 1987). For example, in his influential study of the politics of citizenship in France and Germany, Brubaker shows how institutionalized cultural traditions constrain how actors can understand their own

interests by prescribing the available languages within which their interests can be understood (1992). In other words, cultural meaning installs a constitutive-constraint on political action by setting the boundaries of the possible. More explicitly interested in integrating normative theory with symbolic analysis, Alexander also directs attention towards the constraining power of underlying culture-structures by showing how a stable democratic code institutionalized in U.S. civil society provides the symbolic materials through which actors interpret particular situations as unjust, giving impetus to social movements of “civil repair” (2006). While such “embedding”¹¹ theories provide non-instrumentalist accounts of culture, and importantly return normative questions to social analysis, they fail to thematize how such underlying culture-structures can, beyond their constraining/enabling relationship to political action, become the very object of political struggle themselves.

While generally classed as a NSM theorist, Cohen’s seminal article argues more broadly for an approach to collective action that proceeds methodologically “from an hermeneutic relation to the ideology or self-understanding of collective actors” (1985:676). By taking the actor’s point of view, we can gain access to the theories of society, usually nascent and not fully elaborated, that are embedded in the “forms of consciousness” of social movement practitioners (665). Cohen’s hermeneutics of the nascent “social theories” embedded in collective action links up with more recent calls from social movement scholars to go beyond the framing perspective by examining “ideologies,” or “systems of ideas which couple understandings of how the world works,” or how it is understood to be structured, “with ethical, moral, and normative principles that guide personal and collective action” (Oliver and Johnston 2000:44; Zald 2000).

Because the term “ideology” carries many pejorative connotations in everyday use, suggestive of cognitive rigidity, dogmatism and instrumentalism, I refer to the level of cultural meaning that carry the inchoate theories about the structural nature of society as the social imaginary. Taylor (2004) defines social imaginaries as “the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations” (p. 23). In contrast to elaborated social theories of elites, social imaginaries are carried by ordinary people, and, according to Taylor, hold “that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy” (ibid.). Social imaginaries, then, are the background of cultural meanings for any given social actor(s) against which any particular event or phenomenon can be understood and made meaningful.

Taking an interpretive-hermeneutic approach to the social imaginaries that structured student practices throughout the KDA opens up the puzzles of the struggle over tactics in two ways. First, because the conflict between liberals and leftists revolved around contrasting understandings of American democracy, the simplest explanation for the intra-student struggle over tactics would resolve the puzzle by noting the conflicting value systems of students that manifest in incommensurate ideologies or world-views, “completely at odds” with each other, such as those Luker found dividing pro-life and pro-choice activists (1985). However, throughout the KDA, all City College students exclusively used *the idiom* of democracy to interpret the meaning of events,¹² as opposed to the rights based idioms of political liberalism, the virtue oriented idioms of political republicanism, or the collectivist idioms of socialism or communism.¹³ Furthermore, the

idiom of democracy was the *exclusive medium* through which both liberal and leftist students made political claims. Rather than a clash of incommensurate world-views carried out between two groups who held contrasting ultimate ends, one who aimed to preserve democratic institutions and another who aimed to overthrow them,¹⁴ both liberals and leftists saw democracy as the highest political good and the most just form of life.

As Armstrong and Bernstein suggest (2008), there is a systematic connection between an actor's interpretation of her grievances, or her understanding of the nature of the domination to which she is subject, and the forms of movement and collective action she constructs (p. 81). Indeed, liberal students pursued procedural tactics because they interpreted U.S. institutions as legitimately democratic, while leftists argued social and institutional arrangements in the U.S. were not democratic. Thus, in order to unify as a collective actor, City College students had to resolve their dispute over the meaning and legitimacy of American democracy. An interpretive-hermeneutic approach is especially adept at grasping the particular ideas about society, interpretations of social relations, as well as beliefs about how society ought to be (or the social imaginary), that play a vital role within the process of group formation *at the point of genesis of the collective actor*. In turn, through understanding the actor's own interpretation of her reasons to mobilize, we can grasp the systematic relation between grievances and forms of mobilization, or the very meaning of collective action from the actor's point of view, thereby more accurately constructing the object of social movement research.

The notion that liberals and leftists held incommensurate ultimate values is also belied by the fact they overcame their divisions and unified as a collective actor. Thus, an

interpretive-hermeneutic approach opens up the student dispute over tactics in a second way. As Emirbayer and Mische have argued, there is a “creative reconstructive dimension of agency,” that involves “an *imaginative* engagement of the future” as a “crucial component of the effort of human actors” (Emirbayer and Mische 1998:984). They suggest further, actors engaged in the “projective” element of agentic action break from the taken for granted meanings that structure their interpretations by “construct(ing) changing images of where they think they are going, where they want to go, and how they can get there from where they are at present” (ibid). In addition to affording conflict, the idiom of democracy provided students *a common space of meaning* within which City College students could creatively imagine different images of social relations and project alternative meanings of democratic action and citizenship.¹⁵ In doing so, students re-imagined the deepest meanings of American political culture, and, in effect, shifted their political vision from figure to the cultural grounds upon which politics occur. ???

While taking a hermeneutic relation to cultural meaning opens up the process by which City College students became a collective actor, we cannot analyze the student arguments about the nature of American democracy as free-floating texts. In reality, the structuring effects of the democratic imaginary manifested themselves in tacit meanings embedded in political practice (Lichterman 1998), as liberal and leftist students agonistically attempted to infuse “democracy” with meanings that corresponded to their preferred interpretations of the legitimacy of U.S. institutions. Students constructed political rituals, spun political narratives (Polletta 2004), and asserted particular images of American democracy and social structure that could potentially construct a unified student body behind either formal or extraordinary tactics.

The rest of this paper will proceed in two sections. In the next section I analyze the structural location of City College within an early post-war institutional field of higher education organized and governed according to ethnically exclusionary principles. While City College was seen as exceptionally liberal and meritocratic relative to elite institutional competitors such as the exclusive Ivey League schools, and while a large majority of its student population was Jewish, I show how the exclusionary logic infiltrated even City College. Of central importance in the interpretive struggle of students over tactics was whether the symbolic boundaries drawn by Knickerbocker and Davis against Jews and Blacks were institutionalized at City College, and American life generally, as social boundaries of exclusion.¹⁶

In the subsequent section, I reconstruct the process by which the liberal and leftist students overcame their conflict over tactics to unite in the strike action, focusing on the different ways liberal and leftists attempted to realize conflicting interpretations of the meaning of American democracy in agonistic political practice, finally uniting through an imaginative engagement with American citizenship. An interpretive-hermeneutic approach reveals that at stake in this process was the meaning a unified student body qua collective actor would come to signify and represent: the affirmative belief in the existing American system as legitimately democratic, or a radical challenge to that fundamental assumption. In other words, an interpretive-hermeneutic approach to the process of collective actor formation reveals the nature of the object of analysis itself.

City College at a Crossroads

As Karabel has shown (1984, 2005), U.S. colleges and universities were driven by dual projects of knowledge production and ethnic social closure well into the 1950's. In

particular, Karabel shows how leading institutions, such as Harvard, Princeton and Yale, were “wedded to a vision of the elite colleges as gentlemanly training grounds for future leaders who would embody the highest values of Christian—and especially Anglo-Saxon—civilization” (Karabel 1984:11). The project of social closure led the “big three,” and other elite schools, to institute quotas designed to limit the number of Jews they admitted, in turn reproducing the WASP elite as privileged carrier and beneficiary of American nationhood.¹⁷

Compared to the elite schools, The City College of New York was in many ways exceptional. Established by popular referendum in 1847 to further “manhood and citizenship” (Neumann 1984, p. 45, 68; Rudy 1949),¹⁸ City College’s early 20th century liberal bona fides appear quite strong. It admitted students based entirely on their academic record, rather than their ethnic and class characteristics. Furthermore, City College was tuition free, offering an exceptional opportunity to working class and immigrant New Yorkers. These two factors combined to make City College a relative haven for working class immigrant Jews of east-European origin, who were becoming a majority of its student population as early as the 1890’s (Rudy 1947, p. 173).¹⁹ Indeed, during the first half of the 20th century City College earned a reputation as “the Harvard of the proletariat.”²⁰

City College’s official institutional identity was also strongly aligned with prevailing civic understandings of American nationhood. Dean of Students, Morton Gottschall’s response to the accusations of institutionalized anti-Semitism that emerged in conjunction with the Knickerbocker case exemplifies the school’s liberal identity:

No record is kept at the College of the religious affiliations or racial antecedents of members of the staff; no questions relating

thereto are asked at the time of appointment or thereafter. We claim no special credit for this policy, fundamental as it is to the American heritage and the spirit of true democracy.²¹

The administration's faith in its own liberalism was so strong that its initial reaction to the charges of systemic anti-Semitism "was to reject such claims with the contempt that they deserved and not to stoop to a refutation of them."²²

Despite its official organizational identity, City College was affected by the broader logics governing the field of higher education. The prestige of many elite Northeastern schools translated into political influence, allowing them to extend exclusionary logics beyond their organizational boundaries. In particular, City College's position within the field of higher education was defined by its proximity to Columbia University, which had also catered to America's ethnically defined ruling elite. In the early 20th century, under the leadership of Nicholas Murray Butler, Columbia established its reputation as the leading educational institution in the New York City region. Butler, fearing the damage too many Jewish students could inflict on Columbia's reputation, pioneered anti-Jewish quotas, funneling Jews seeking higher education towards City College and NYU.²³ Additionally, to insure Columbia's dominant regional position, Butler used his considerable political influence to stunt the growth of public higher education in New York City and New York State, especially in the areas of graduate and professional education, effectively forestalling any rivalry in status and prestige that may have come from City College or a state university system (Wechsler 1977:131-211).

Butler's policies and political activities effectively structured the market for educational opportunity in New York around pernicious zero-sum, anti-Semitic principles. Before the 1950's, City College students, most of whom were Jewish,

experienced great difficulty gaining admission to existing graduate programs, while many more New York City students were inhibited from attending college in the first place by a closed educational market. According to Gorelick (1981), the dynamics of WASP social closure not only structured City College's institutional environment, but also its internal organizational culture, noting, "like most U.S. colleges and universities at the turn of the century, CCNY was secular in form and Protestant in culture," and that the College's "institutional structure remained a form of secularized Anglo-Protestantism for some time" (p. 138).

City College students were well aware of the structure of exclusion they faced. Following World War II, a Black-Jewish civil rights coalition pursued a Fair Educational Practices Bill, modeled on the "Fair Employment Practices Act," in New York State (Wechsler 1977, p. 198).²⁴ The coalition also sought the creation of a state public university system, of which City College was proposed to be a key component. A state university would break Columbia's institutional hold over the regional market for professional degrees and its domination of the local field of higher education, thereby opening up meritocratic pathways to social inclusion. Despite official recognition of institutionalized discrimination in higher education,²⁵ President Wright caused a scandal when he came out against the Austin-Mahoney legislation in March of 1947.²⁶ The Educational Fair Practices Bill ultimately failed to pass, confirming, in the eyes of many City College students, their status as second-class citizens.

It was in the context of this broader civil rights struggle that the charges against Knickerbocker and Davis emerged. There were three basic components to the charges against Knickerbocker, which first came to light in the spring of 1945. First, he was

accused of discriminatory hiring and upgrading practices as chairperson of the Romance Language Department. Second, he was accused of falsely granting academic awards to gentiles over objectively more meritorious Jewish students. Finally, Knickerbocker was observed exhibiting a pattern of anti-Semitic statements and ideas. His official accusers, four professors from the Romance Language Department, argued Knickerbocker had created an anti-Semitic faction within the department to curtail the influence of Jewish faculty and students. One observer believed Knickerbocker's faction wished "that City College could have the same kind of pure, white, Anglo-Saxon faculty which they thought they saw in Cornell, Princeton, Williams, and even to a certain extent at Columbia and Harvard."²⁷

While the college's administration rejected evidence that anti-Semitism factored into Knickerbocker's faculty assignments, citing a clerical error they did retroactively award a Jewish student who had been passed over by Knickerbocker in favor of a gentile student. And the Administration's own investigations showed Knickerbocker to clearly exhibit a pattern of anti-Semitic statements, warning an incoming faculty member that, "these students are different," because "more than two-thirds of the students are Jewish. They are always trying to put something over; they have no respect for authority and you can't treat them like gentlemen."²⁸ Knickerbocker asked another incoming instructor if he had ever dealt with any "cheap Jews," and warned the newcomer that such described the majority of City College students, repeating the notion, "they could not be treated as gentlemen."²⁹ During WWII, Knickerbocker joked, "the Battle Hymn of the Jews" is "onward, Christian soldiers, we'll make the uniforms."³⁰ Underneath its crassness, Knickerbocker's anti-Semitism is unified symbolically in depriving Jews of social honor,

drawing a stark symbolic boundary against Jews, thereby effecting social closure against them.³¹

Emerging separately in the fall of 1947, the Davis case concerned his administration of the Army Hall student dormitory. Davis held an MA in economics and had served as a financial adviser to President Wright during the war years. After a coalition of mostly Black and Jewish student residents of Army Hall brought charges of segregated rooms, President Wright immediately assigned an official faculty investigatory committee to review the matter. Under oath, Davis admitted he tended to room Black students together, claiming the practice fit patterns of “self-segregation” he believed he observed on campus. Noting other colleges and universities also practiced paternalistic segregation, he argued he was only promoting the happiness of black students, assuming that such segregation fit their own preferences.³²

The faculty investigatory committee forcefully rejected Davis’ claims, stating, “this basis for instituting the practice of generally assigning Negroes to rooms with other Negroes seems to this committee to be very unsound indeed and to be contrary to all of the traditions of this College.”³³ The Investigatory Committee framed their report within the idiom of democracy:

It is inherent in our democracy and the goals of democratic education which City College pursues that involuntary segregation of individuals on the basis of irrelevant factors such as color or religious beliefs is detrimental not only to the individuals so segregated but to the institution as a whole.

Upon receiving the faculty committee’s report, Davis resigned his position as head administrator of Army Hall. However, President Wright transferred Davis to the

Economics Department, claiming his record as financial adviser merited transfer over dismissal.

According to Armstrong and Bernstein (2008), how actors interpret the forms of domination they are subject to is systematically connected to the forms of political action they take. At stake for City College students in the two cases was whether the symbolic boundaries drawn by the two professors were manifestations of institutionalized social boundaries, or mere aberrations. Leftists were convinced that Knickerbocker and Davis represented the true institutional character of City College, and American life generally. Responding to the initial charges against Knickerbocker, as well as the notion that high rates of political activism gave City College students a stigmatized reputation, Oscar Berland, member of American Youth for Democracy (AYD was a Communist youth group), argued the college had “a ‘bad name’ because over 90% of our students are either Negro, Jewish, or Catholic.”³⁴ Berland characterized exclusion of Jews, Blacks and Catholics as systemic by suggesting, “the fight for jobs and for a ‘good name’ must be a united fight against discrimination and unemployment. They are the roots of the problem and not straw men under our beds.”³⁵

Anatole Shub, student editor of the liberal leaning student newspaper *The Campus*,³⁶ explicitly rejected Berland’s leftist analysis of City College’s reputational problem. According to Shub, the idea that “political leftism and race are responsible for the College’s ‘bad reputation’” was overblown; while true “that Communist shennanigans (sic) have done the College great harm, and also true that Jewish students will be discriminated against, these are only minor factors.”³⁷ For liberals, the question of whether Jews suffered from discrimination was not in dispute, but rather the deeper

significance such discrimination played in determining the life chances of minority City College students.

Because both liberal and leftist currents agreed that Knickerbocker and Davis were guilty of discrimination warranting dismissal, their dispute over the legitimacy they invested in actually existing American democracy could not be pursued through the question of the guilt or innocence of the two professors. Instead, tactics became a flashpoint of intra-student conflict because they symbolized the conflicting liberal and leftist visions of American democracy. To resolve the underlying dispute, liberal and leftist students attempted, through agonistic political practice, to infuse “democracy” as a symbol with meanings that corresponded to their preferred interpretation of the legitimacy of U.S. institutions. Therefore, implied in the question of tactics was the meaning a potentially unified student body qua collective actor would come to signify and represent: the affirmative belief in the existing American system as legitimately democratic, or a radical challenge to that fundamental assumption.³⁸

Constructing the Collective Actor

The Student Sit-down

New York City’s Board of Higher Education could have avoided a year of contentious politics if it had reopened its investigation of Knickerbocker in light of a City Council report, released in the summer of 1948, that recommended his demotion and potential dismissal for “reprehensible and unworthy conduct,” tied to the accusations of anti-Semitism.³⁹ Instead, the Board exercised their jurisdiction over City College by affirming their original exoneration of Knickerbocker from all charges. Dr. Ordway Tead, the Board’s Chair, noted Knickerbocker’s 41 years of service to City College, stating,

“the board appraised the man on his total life career and the evidence was overwhelming.”⁴⁰

City College students judged differently. On September 29, 1948, just two days after the Board’s decision, two leftist groups, Students for Wallace,⁴¹ and the communist linked AYD, led a group of students in the labor tactic of a “sit-down” outside President Harry Wright’s office.⁴² City College students arriving on campus that morning were “greeted” by graffiti stating “Stop Bigotry”, “Oust Knickerbocker and Davis”, as well as graffiti that associated Knickerbocker and Davis with Nazi fascism.⁴³ Beginning in the morning, the sit-down, which grew to at least 600 students at one point, lasted all through the day and night, as a small group of evening session students were permitted to keep vigil overnight with volunteer chaperone Rev. John W. Darr Jr.⁴⁴ The sit-down began when a dozen students, one carrying a sign reading, “Join Us, Oust Jim Crow and Anti-Semitism from CCNY,” marched up to President Harry Wright’s office and upon being instructed to leave the building by a school administrator, sat on the floor of Lincoln Corridor. The demonstrators “sang folk songs to the accompaniment of a guitarist,” while “speakers kept up continuous speeches against Professor Knickerbocker and Mr. Davis.”⁴⁵

At the high point of the demonstration, Dr. John Theobald, Dean of Administration, attempted to dissuade the leftists from disruptive actions, asserting, “this procedure will not solve the problem.”⁴⁶ Rather than threatening the students, Theobald urged the students to adopt all legal and orderly means of protest to express their position on the cases. Perhaps resigned to the protest, Theobald, acting as head administrator that particular day,⁴⁷ permitted the students to remain sitting down in the Lincoln Corridor,

and was even said to have “carried on a warm exchange with various students” for half an hour.⁴⁸ Upon exiting Lincoln Corridor, Theobald announced he did not recognize the student gathering as official. Meeting with reporters, Theobald noted many students had complained about the disruption the protest was causing and attempted to portray the protest as unrepresentative and contrary to the true function of the college. In particular, he discredited the idea the protest had been a *spontaneous* expression of student discontent, instead hypothesizing that the AYD had planned the whole sit-down. In doing so, Theobald also undercut the idea that the extraordinary tactics of the student leftists represented the legitimate will of the student body.⁴⁹ Polletta suggests the narrative theme of spontaneity symbolically conveys “the indefinable moment when a group of separate individuals became a collective actor” (2006, p. 34). While Polletta emphasizes the moral meanings “spontaneity” narratives carry, “spontaneity’s” symbolic efficacy also flows from its potential to be seen as an *authentic* political emergence as against a cynical grasp at power by a minority faction. By discounting the spontaneity of the sit-down action, Theobald was attempting to undercut and divide the student body as a collective actor, and portray the interests of the protestors as cynical, rather than authentic.

Liberal student leaders joined with college administrators in delegitimizing the extraordinary tactics of the leftist led sit-down. Student council officers repeatedly urged the sit-down protesters not to do anything that would discredit the name of City College, with the Student Council Vice President saying the demonstrators were “no better than a lynch mob.”⁵⁰ Acting quickly, 18 student groups, including the Student Council Executive Committee, all four class Presidents, fraternity and sorority groups, liberal groups, a Republican group, and even two student newspapers, released a joint statement

against the sit-down tactic, claiming the sit-down came from a “small” and unrepresentative “segment of the student body.”⁵¹

In a blistering editorial that called on the student body to “fight” until the BHE removed Knickerbocker, “a man clearly guilty of anti-Semitic discrimination,” *The Campus* saved its sharpest excoriations for the “reprehensible conduct” of the sit-down protesters.⁵² Calling the sit-down the methods of “force and violence,” *The Campus* stated: “tactics like those adopted by the leaders of yesterday’s demonstrations destroy the force of the arguments for the retirement of Professor Knickerbocker.”⁵³ *The Campus* editorial evoked the highest ideals of democracy in attempting to draw a contrast with leftists. Calling for “only democratic action,” they labeled the sit-down, by contrast, “mob action,” in spite of its controlled manner. They suggested that extraordinary political tactics were by definition expressions of “force and violence,” and would only “invalidate the very principles we invoke in asking Professor Knickerbocker’s retirement.” In calling on the student body to resist the theory that “the ends justify the means,” and calling on them not to “take the law into their own hands,” the *Campus* accused those participating in the sit-down of being “as guilty of undemocratic conduct as Professor Knickerbocker.”⁵⁴

The Campus represented the liberal standpoint within the democratic idiom. Accordingly, the unfettered functioning of normal legal procedures represented the highest form of democracy. However, in attempting to uphold a procedural notion of democracy the *Campus*’ argument ran into contradictions. Two separate official municipal bodies, the Board of Higher Education and the City Council, had each

independently reviewed the Knickerbocker case and come to *opposite* conclusions. The liberal *Campus* nevertheless attempted to uphold the authority of each investigation.

Professor Knickerbocker was cleared of the charges in a democratic fashion. Whether or not we like the decision, we must uphold the method. Councilman Hart's investigating committee examined the same testimony and came to an opposite conclusion. But the Council possesses only recommendatory power. Its decision was a result of honest, unbiased study and vindicated growing student resentment against Professor Knickerbocker.

In their next breath *The Campus* called for Knickerbocker's ouster, claiming, "the overwhelming majority of the students apparently feel the same way."⁵⁵ Furthermore, *The New York Times* noted, while the sit-down was organized by leftist groups, it "also drew a number of students unaffiliated with the groups in charge."⁵⁶ *The Campus'* tortured defense of procedural politics reveals, beyond any strategic considerations, a deeper concern for the *normative meanings* of normal and extraordinary political tactics as symbolic vehicles.

The Great Hall Student Meeting

The liberal forces on the Student Council moved to gain control over the direction and tenor of student action in the two cases. Intending to fold student action back within the confines of normal political channels, they immediately called for an officially sanctioned all-student meeting to be held in the Great Hall on the day after the Lincoln Corridor sit-down. The administration approved the request. The liberal Council members intended the meeting to be purely informational, hoping that by airing the facts of the Knickerbocker case general student sentiment would turn away from confrontational tactics towards more moderate approaches for seeking Knickerbocker's removal.

The Great Hall meeting was an extraordinary scene. As many as 2,500 students packed the 2,175 seat auditorium, and the picture appearing in the *Times* showed City College faculty and administrators sitting forward in their seats intently observing the student proceedings.⁵⁷ Grasping the momentous nature of the meeting, Dean Theobald announced the administration would leniently enforce policy towards “cuts,” as at one point during the proceedings, the Assistant Dean of Student Life sent a note to all instructors requesting they “suspend (their) respective classes immediately and urge all students to go to the Great hall. Matters are being discussed which reflect on everyone connected with City College.”⁵⁸ Ordway Tead and several politicians, including Walter R. Hart, the Democratic City Council member who had issued the report condemning Knickerbocker, also attended the student meeting.

The Great Hall meeting was a collective political ritual of great emotional energy (Collins 2004), one students understood held the potential to constitute the student body as a collective actor. The volatile divide between liberals and leftists was on stark display as they struggled to steer the student body towards procedural or extraordinary tactics throughout the “stormy five-hour meeting” that *The New York Times* reported consisted of “shouting” and “near fist fights.”⁵⁹ In spite of the intentions of the liberals, and reflecting the social energy unleashed by the ritual, the informational meeting quickly moved towards adopting resolutions. According to the *Times* report, the adopted resolutions proved “that a representative group of students backed the ouster of the teacher who has been twice exonerated by the Board of Higher Education.”⁶⁰ While the Great Hall meeting revealed a student consensus supporting Knickerbocker’s removal, the combustibility of the meeting revolved around attempts by leftist students to “lump”

the Knickerbocker and Davis cases together,⁶¹ emphasizing each represented a unitary, anti-democratic structure of racism plaguing the U.S. Liberals resisted such efforts, not because they viewed the two cases as categorically different, but because they believed such a conflation violated the due process rights of each professor.

The greater student body split the difference between the two positions, coupling a resolution to petition the state Commissioner of Education to intervene by dismissing both Knickerbocker and Davis with a threat of future “mass-action.”⁶² However, during the Student Council session held two days after the Great Hall meeting, liberal students again denied the legitimacy of the spontaneous democracy exercised in the Great Hall meeting by questioning its representativeness. Most liberals on the student council would not budge on the issues of lumping the two cases together, nor on the potential use of “mass action” tactics. The two student factions deadlocked for over eleven hours, deliberating until 4 a.m., finally agreeing to put the five resolutions passed by students at the Great Hall Meeting before the entire student body in a referendum scheduled for the following Wednesday.⁶³

The Student Referendum

The events that led up to the student referendum displayed a violent rift between liberal and leftist students on the City College campus. Clearly, a large portion of the City College student body was expending great energy on the politics of the Knickerbocker and Davis cases. While liberals and leftists substantially agreed on common goals, both sides wanted Knickerbocker and Davis removed from the faculty and pledged to fight until they were, they could not agree on a common course to achieve these ends. The intra-student conflict revolved around what both sides understood to be the *social*

meaning of particular tactics, i.e. extraordinary mass action versus formal channels. The problem of tactics was so fraught because they symbolized for students deeper interpretations of the meanings of “democracy,” and the legitimacy of American democracy in particular. Liberal and leftist students asserted these deeper meanings on the morning of the student referendum, with *The Campus*, organ of liberal student sentiment at City College, publishing a “Referendum Extra!” Of the five resolutions put to the student body that day, *The Campus* favored four, including recommendations to petition the State Commissioner of Education to dismiss Knickerbocker *and* Davis, however in separate petitions.⁶⁴ The only resolution they urged students to reject was for a “sit-down” strike should President Wright fail to grant transfers out of Knickerbocker’s class. Student leftists released the first issue of a short-lived newspaper named *Free and Equal*, which urged students to vote for all five resolutions, echoing exactly the liberals on each question except for that of “mass action.”⁶⁵

In urging students to reject confrontational “mass action” by arguing such tactics would “discard the principle of democratic procedure,” *The Campus* showed that above all else the liberal theory of democracy was procedural.⁶⁶ However, the proceduralism of the liberal standpoint was systematically related to the liberal interpretation of the U.S. social structure. Because liberals believed in the U.S.’ civic nationalist identity, they had faith that they could ultimately persuade legal authorities that Knickerbocker and Davis were guilty of acts warranting their dismissal. Liberal City College students believed that the U.S.’ civic institutions had to be protected from the direct assault of mass action because it was those very institutions that protected American minorities, including Jews and blacks; therefore, the cases could not be settled through student mass action because

“a demonstration cannot ‘prove’ Knickerbocker’s discrimination.”⁶⁷ Liberals may have shared the leftist goal of ousting the two professors, but they expended greater energy defending the legitimacy of U.S. institutions from leftist mass action because liberals believed those very institutions were the epitome of democracy itself. Therefore, extraordinary politics were *un-democratic* precisely because they were confrontational, “disorderly,” and emotional. Further, *The Campus* claimed that leftist tactics “presented the student body to the public as a riotous, self-righteous mob,”⁶⁸ thereby lending credibility to the notion that City College students were outside what they believed was the U.S.’ civic mainstream.⁶⁹

In *Free and Equal*, leftists did not give instrumental reasons in support of “mass action,” instead arguing mass action embodied the highest form of democracy and represented the essence of democratic practice. An editorial addressing the meaning of “mass action” titled “Is It Democratic?” argued, “The Boston Tea Party, the American Revolution and the emancipation of the slaves are examples of mass action.” In suggesting that such examples of “mass action” were “the only possible action to have been taken by a freedom loving people,” leftists implied faith in proceduralism was politically hollow and empty. Having drawn an equivalence between mass and democratic action, they drew on the popularity of the labor movement amongst City College students to argue for the legitimacy of extraordinary tactics: “The American trade union movement was and is the essence of democratic action—despite the fact that it took one hundred and fifty years of struggle to be legally recognized.”⁷⁰ For the leftists, a tactic’s legality was in no way the measure of its normative validity.

To support the idea of mass action as the epitome of democratic practice, leftists offered a counter-narrative of the events leading to the referendum (Polletta 2006). While liberals saw the importance of the Knickerbocker case as having crystallized in the official City Council report, according to *Free and Equal*, “years of legislation and years of top level bickerings culminated in last week’s B.H.E. meeting,” resulting in “no action on the case of Knickerbocker and to ignore the case of Davis, the Jim Crowist.” For the leftists, proceduralism had only enabled official “whitewashing” of Knickerbocker and Davis’ discriminatory practices. Instead, the leftist narrative portrayed both the Lincoln Corridor sit-down and the Great Hall assembly as *spontaneous*, and therefore the authentic expression of the student will.⁷¹ Furthermore, according to the leftist narrative, all political gains made by the students toward the goal of ousting the two professors could be traced directly to the sit-down action and Great Hall assembly: “a smattering of mass action, a democratic discussion held on the floor of Lincoln Corridor for 25 hours, re-opened the Knickerbocker-Davis case. It brought the issue to the public and forced President Wright to start talks again.”⁷² Because, according to the leftist view, as public rituals, the student sit-down and mass assembly expressed the student will in an authentically democratic mode, they carried the charismatic power to alter the political impasse imposed by the college’s recalcitrant administration. Therefore, when on the eve of the referendum President Wright granted a transfer to the 18 students boycotting Knickerbocker’s Spanish class, leftists argued the victory was “a direct result of the demonstrations in Lincoln Corridor and Great Hall.”⁷³

The contrasting student interpretations of the meaning of U.S. democracy also played out over whether the two cases should be conflated in political practice. Liberals

demanded the formal due process rights of each professor as individuals be respected because, for them, the failure of the college's administration to take student demands seriously was merely an isolated failure of civic institutional practices in the U.S; a failure that could be redressed by appealing up the formal chain of authority. Leftists, on the other hand, believed Knickerbocker and Davis' racist practices were representative of U.S. institutions as a whole, and therefore viewed the college's refusal to dismiss Knickerbocker and Davis as yet another example of the gap between the U.S.' civic identity and its institutional practices: "when the lawyers, politicians, and college administrators become corrupt, when they fail to protect the right of students to be free from racial and religious persecution . . . it is up to the students to fight back to protect themselves."⁷⁴ Leftists insisted on "lumping" the two cases together because they saw them as equally representative of the pervasive racism that inhibited the realization of true democracy in America.

Leftists evoked the social boundaries they saw at the core of U.S. society in headlines in *Free and Equal* that screamed "Student Vote Can Oust Two Racists," and "Anti-Semitism and Jimcrow—Twin Threats to Democracy!"⁷⁵ According to the leftist view, the Knickerbocker and Davis cases had to be lumped together because as equivalent modes of racism, they represented the anti-democratic forces in American life: "Jim Crow and anti-Semitism are twin examples of dangerous racism, and the Davis case and the Knickerbocker case are irrevocably intertwined. It is necessary to fight bigotry wherever it appears—not only because it revolts our sense of decency, but because when minority rights are destroyed, majority rights are soon to follow."⁷⁶ According to the leftists, City College's administration was more concerned with Knickerbocker and

Davis' rights than with the rights of students to pursue their education free from discrimination: "the administration holds that these men have the right to teach in a 'free, democratically run' institution. For leftists, what was at stake was real vs. sham democracy, "anyone who practices it (discrimination) in any capacity is therefore contravening the professed policy of the college, aside from the fact that he is criminally contradicting the cornerstone of American democracy—equality.”⁷⁷

Leftists understood the political significance of the Knickerbocker-Davis Affair as a single episode in a much larger struggle to achieve real democracy in the United States. *Free and Equal* achieved this by publishing a smattering of letters representative of anti-democratic currents. One anonymous letter extolled Knickerbocker's perceived anti-Semitism stating, "there will be a day when the American people will rise up against Jewish aggression . . . If I were president I would place every one of you on Staten Island." Another letter stated, "Obnoxious sheenies like you should keep your mouth shut. City College is run for Americans, not kikes.”⁷⁸

While the ideal of democracy clearly afforded student conflict throughout the KDA, these dueling understandings of American democracy nevertheless show that both student factions made their interpretations from *within a common space of meaning*. While they struggled to define the true meaning of democracy, and how that meaning signified against the background of American institutional structures, all students affirmed democracy as the highest political good. In spite of the contentiousness of the conflict between liberals and leftists it played out in an overlapping interpretive space that would ultimately serve as the condition of possibility for both camps to jointly

imagine an alternative vision of normative citizenship, which would, in turn, serve as the symbolic vehicle through which they constructed themselves as a collective actor.

The Strike

Deadlocked for eight contentious months over the question of tactics, students may never have united as a collective actor if not for the revelations by Judge Hubert Delany, City College class of 1923. Delany, a broadly respected civil rights activist who had been chairing the Alumni Association investigatory committee into charges of discrimination against Knickerbocker and Davis, caused an uproar when he resigned, stating his belief that President Wright had “no real determination to end discrimination” at the college.⁷⁹ Following Delaney’s revelation, even *The Campus* called for a strike action, stating, “it seems our faith” in the college’s good will “has been misplaced.”⁸⁰ While the liberal acquiescence to the strike action on the heels of Delaney’s intervention may appear as if the student’s interpretive conflict could only be resolved through exogenous factors (Kaufman 2004), liberal students were not “converted” to the leftist viewpoint. Rather, the space of meaning provided by the shared idiom of democracy allowed both liberal and leftist students to creatively imagine new conceptions of democratic citizenship. It was this creative imagining that served as the symbolic vehicle through which students constituted themselves as a collective actor.

Again, the Student Council decided to put a prospective strike to a student-wide vote. Students produced flyers, leaflets, and an open letter attempting to unify support behind the strike action. Student arguments converged on a common set of themes asserting the interconnected nature of democracy, education and citizenship. Contrary to a conception of higher-education as a means to a professional career, supporters of the

strike argued that should City College students fail to strike, they would prove “that CCNY is not a student community interested in education thru (sic) democracy, but simply a degree.”⁸¹ The Open Letter conceptualized, what might be called educational citizenship, through a series of oppositions between, on the one hand, *active, public, democratic practice*, and on the other, passive, apathetic individualism by arguing, “should you (the student body) fail to vote yes on strike action you will have proven to all that you deserve nothing better in the future then (sic) you have received in the past. Should you vote no on the strike action, you will never have call for recourse on this issue.” According to the letter, for the largely minority student body, striking meant acting in public against “racism and discrimination.”⁸² However, failing to strike was akin to surrendering one’s right to speak against the discrimination City College students faced in American life, not just in these two cases, but in general.

By striking, then, City College students understood themselves to be challenging the institutionalized social boundaries that limited the life chances of minorities (including Blacks and Jews), not just at City College, but in all spheres of American life. One flyer argued individual merit and talent could not overcome institutionalized racism, stating: “we must realize that ousting Davis and Knickerbocker will do more to insure no job and graduate school discrimination against us than all the A’s . . . we can muster.”⁸³ Another argued, “discrimination in the engineering field is aimed at us, Jews, Negroes and Women . . . we can now grab an opportunity to strike a blow against discrimination by fighting for the ouster of Davis and Knickerbocker.”⁸⁴ It further argued that only picketing and boycotting could leverage firms into reforming their discriminatory cultures, asserting, “there is no real job security in hoping the employer will overlook the

fact that you are a Negro, Jew, Catholic or a member of any other minority, in considering you for employment.”⁸⁵

Contrary to a view of American democracy as offering equal treatment to individuals regardless of their race, creed or color, City College students united through a conception of citizenship that forged fundamental links between anti-racism, public political action, and democracy, meant to symbolically confront prevailing forms of social exclusion. In their Open Letter, the new liberal-leftist coalition argued that individualistic views of higher education severed any connection between education and democratic political activity, asserting, “should you vote no . . . you will have proven forever that you are an education, psych or tech major, and not a student citizen.” Furthermore, they asserted, “if after four years of having every possible cooperative action blocked and ridiculed you can still remain apathetic and calmly vote ‘no’, then you will have proven that you are not a *citizen or a student*, and do not deserve democracy in any form.”⁸⁶ The category of citizenship became the central organizing theme of the vision of democracy students enacted in their collective action because the very real stigmatization associated with political radicalism gave students, as individuals, strong incentives not to participate in the strike. Indeed, the student’s re-imagining of education and democratic citizenship as public anti-racist action proved powerful as a large majority of the City College student body would risk their futures by backing and joining in the strike.

Epilogue and Conclusion

In this paper I have developed an interpretive-hermeneutic approach to the process of collective actor formation that culminated in the City College student strike of

1949. Taking an interpretive-hermeneutic approach to how social imaginaries structure processes of collective actor formation can, in an interrelated way, expand upon the currently shallow notions of the political underlying much recent social movement research, in turn leading to more felicitous constructions of the object of analysis.

Taking an interpretive-hermeneutic relation to the social imaginaries at play in the student politics surrounding the Knickerbocker-Davis Affair reveals that while City College students were united by goals and interests, and even defined the two professor's practices as affronts to democracy, they were inhibited from coalescing as a collective actor because they pursued contrasting visions and meanings of democracy in practice. These contrasting meanings were systematically related to how they interpreted the legitimacy of the American social order and whether they understood the United States' social structure to be truly democratic. As their conflict over the democratic imaginary played out over the question of tactics, students tacitly grasped that, on the one hand, by unifying behind formal tactics they would be symbolically confirming their belief in the legitimacy of actually existing American democracy; or, on the other hand, by unifying behind extraordinary tactics they would be symbolically challenging the prevailing view that the U.S. was in reality democratic. To resolve their interpretive dispute and unite as a collective actor, City College students imagined an alternative vision of democratic citizenship founded on constitutive links between education and active anti-racist political engagement. Thus, their collective identity emerged out of an agonistic struggle over the meaning of American democracy. Yet, the collective identity students constructed was not one based on the familiar sociological categories of race, class, gender, or ethnicity; it was rather based on a normative vision of social arrangements. It

was the projection of such a normative vision that defined the nature of the student body as a collective actor, and therefore should be seen as the very symbolic substance of their collective action. Thus, an interpretive-hermeneutic approach to cultural meaning enabled an accurate construction of the object of research. In as much as beyond the struggle for resources and recognition, actors are also fundamentally motivated by normative investments in how they imagine the world is, and how they imagine it ought to be, the social imaginary plays a central structuring role in collective actor formation, especially *at the point of genesis*. Because the social imaginary and its effects are best grasped hermeneutically, taking an interpretive-hermeneutic approach to processes of collective actor formation should lead to more accurate constructions of the object of analysis in social movement research.

Taking an interpretive-hermeneutic relation to cultural meaning can also expand the limited notions of the political that have dominated collective action research. From an instrumental standpoint, the 1949 student strike was a failure. Students never achieved the dismissals of Knickerbocker or Davis, both of whom left the college of their own accord some years after the student strike. Yet, beyond instrumentalist rubrics, the strike should be understood as contributing to an important institutional transformation of City College. In radically re-imagining the meaning of democratic citizenship underlying the institutional life of City College, students challenged the college's deepest sources of institutional legitimacy. While professing to be a democratic beacon, the college administration upheld an academic tradition of passing off persistent practices of discrimination against Jews and Blacks as insignificant prejudices and harmlessly petty bigotries. However, in 1952, as elements of the Knickerbocker and Davis cases still

bounced around the courts, City College attempted to replace retiring President Harry Wright with Ralph Bunche, an African-American civil rights leader who had won a Nobel Peace Prize for his civil rights activism and prominent role in establishing The United Nations. The pursuit of Bunche marked a major break from the tradition of selecting presidents from within the existing faculty at City College. When Bunche turned down City College's offer, the college tapped Buell Gallagher, a prominent White civil rights activist and former president of the traditionally Black Talladega College, to become the school's next president.

Gallagher would prove to be an energetic champion of postwar liberalism. In the wake of the student strike he led the transformation of City College's organizational culture, as under his activist presidency the college's administration would no longer tolerate the practices of symbolic boundary drawing and open prejudice against Jews or Blacks that students had acted against in 1949.⁸⁷ While never achieving an explicit change in policy, the transformative effect of the student strike was achieved by opening up the meaning of democracy assumed to be at the core of both the institutional life of City College and the United States at large, to creative re-imagining. By challenging and unsettling the meanings of the very cultural ground from which City College drew its institutional legitimacy, striking students compelled the college to become, in practice, the liberal democratic institution it had always officially claimed to be. By expanding our analytical attention from cultural figure to the cultural ground of politics through understanding the workings of social imaginaries in collective action processes, we can expand the underlying conception of the political animating research and see that what is at stake in movements is often more than a group's share of resources, recognition and

power, but the very structures of meaning through which power works to constitute and legitimate social relations in the first place.

¹ “City Council Asks Professor’s Ouster,” *The New York Times*, June 23, 1948.

² Photographs located in Archives and Special Collections, Cohen Library, The City College of New York, New York.

³ “An Uproar on the Campus,” *The New York Times*, April 12, 1949, p.1.

⁴ On cognitive lumping, see Zerubavel (1996). For a review of the sociology of commensuration see (Espeland and Stevens 1998).

⁵ The terms “liberal” and “leftist” are used as categories of analysis, rather than categories of practice (Brubaker 2004). Interestingly, race was a unifying force amongst Black and Jewish City College students. While ethnic boundaries did exist between the two groups, they were not politically salient because both groups saw themselves, and were seen by others, as *minority* groups. Furthermore, Jews figured their own difference in terms of “race” as often as they did in terms of religion, eliding two terms of difference most often thought as conceptually distinct today.

⁶ New York City’s Board of Higher Education (BHE) held direct jurisdiction over the municipal colleges.

⁷ On processes of cultural recognition as a specific political register, see (Taylor 1994).

⁸ In arguing for an interpretive social science, Taylor suggests that the “most bitter” social conflicts emerge at the fundamental level of “common meanings” and “intersubjective meanings” (1971:31).

⁹ Snow has been sensitive to such criticisms (Snow 2004). However, his overall approach is still hampered by the contradictions between rational actor and constructivist epistemologies.

¹⁰ The framing perspective parallels many of the instrumentalist tendencies of the influential “tool-kit” conception of cultural meaning as developed by Swidler (1986).

¹¹ See Snow 2004, p. 402.

¹² Cultural idioms are transpersonal ways of thinking and talking that structure ways of seeing the world and the conceptual materials through which to make sense of it (Sewell 1980; Skocpol 1985; Brubaker 1992). Skocpol importantly distinguishes between “cultural idioms,” spaces of meanings that actors draw on to make sense of themselves and their world in concrete situations; and “ideologies,” intentional and deliberately refined political programs that provide meticulous plans, or blueprints for action and or policy (Skocpol 1985, p. 91).

¹³ For a sociological analysis that employs the traditions of political liberalism and political republicanism in the explanation of symbolic boundary construction, see (Lamont 1992, 2000). On the explanatory deficiencies of the liberal and republican traditions in regards to U.S. citizenship laws see (Smith 1997).

¹⁴ While perhaps some student members of the Communist Party may have embraced democracy cynically, regardless, most student leftists were not affiliated with the Party.

¹⁵ Perrin (2006) also emphasizes the creative aspect of the democratic imaginary.

¹⁶ On the relationship between symbolic boundaries and social boundaries, see (Lamont and Molnar 2002; Lamont 1992, 2000; Goldberg 2003).

¹⁷ On pre-war Jewish quotas see also (Synnott 1979; Steinberg 1977, 1981; Wechsler 1977, Levine 1986). On racial definitions of American nationhood that excluded those who did not descend from White, Northern European antecedents in many spheres of life through the first half of the 20th century in the U.S., see (Ngai 2004; Brodtkin 1998, Jacobson 1998, pp. 39-90; Kaufmann 2004; Roediger 2005).

¹⁸ On the history of The City College of New York generally see, Rudy (1949); Neumann (1984); Gorelick (1982). Today, The City College of New York is one of eleven senior colleges within the City University of New York, or CUNY. City College did not become officially co-educational until 1951.

¹⁹ City College did not keep data on the racial and ethnic characteristics of its student body until the late 1960's, however the Strayer Report (1944), of the New York State Legislature, estimated that in the late 30's and early 40's "at least 80 per cent of the student population is Jewish or of Jewish background" (p. 413).

²⁰ It is important to note that while City College was majority Jewish, that the majority of Jews in New York City did not attend college until after World War II (Gorelick 1981; Brodtkin 1998; Foner 2000).

²¹ See "Memorandum on Proportion of Jewish Appointments to The City College Instructional Staff", Archives and Special Collections, The City College of New York, New York.

²² (ibid.)

²³ On the various exclusionary techniques limiting Jewish enrollment at Columbia see (Wechsler 1977:131-185).

²⁴ On New York State's Fair Employment Practices Act, see (Chen 2006). On the civil rights movement in New York City, see (Biondi 2003; Hall 2005; Sugrue 2008).

²⁵ The Mayor's Committee on Unity confirmed the long held suspicions of discriminatory quotas against minorities, including Jews, "Bias in Colleges Against City Youth Charged in Report." *The New York Times*, January 23, 1946.

²⁶ *The Campus*, March 6, 1947, p. 1, Archives and Special Collections, The City College of New York, New York City.

²⁷ *Hillel News*, March 13, 1947, p. 3, Hillel Box, Archives and Special Collections, The City College of New York, New York City.

²⁸ Report of Special Committee Investigating Charges in the Romance Language Department, Knickerbocker Case, Box 5, Archives and Special Collections, The City College of New York, New York.

²⁹ (ibid.)

³⁰ (ibid.)

³¹ The interrelationship between the dynamics of social closure and ideas of social honor are fundamental to Weber's thinking about status groups in general, and ethnic and racial groups as subtypes of status groups in particular, see (Weber 1946, pp. 186-194).

³² "Transcript of Hearings Before President's Committee To Investigate Complaints of Discrimination In Army Hall," Army Hall Box, Archives and Special Collections, The City College of New York, New York.

³³ "Report to the President," in ibid.

³⁴ "Letters to the Editor," *The Campus*, November 21, 1946, Archives and Special Collections, The City College of New York, New York.

³⁵ (ibid.)

³⁶ *The Campus* was established in 1908, and was the oldest and most prestigious of the student newspapers at City College.

³⁷ *The Campus*, May 5, 1948, p. 4, Archives and Special Collections, The City College of New York, New York.

³⁸ Another way of saying this is, whether citizenship in the U.S. was properly understood as defined in open/civic, or exclusionary/ethnic terms, was a stake in the student struggle over tactics. For a similar treatment of civic and ethnic conceptions of nationhood as internal to collective action phenomena see, (Gerteis and Goolsby 2005).

³⁹ The report is quoted from "City Council Asks Professor's Ouster," *The New York Times*, June 23, 1948.

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- ⁴⁰ “Board Bars Action on Knickerbocker,” *The New York Times*, September 28, 1948.
- ⁴¹ Students for Wallace supported Henry Wallace, Progressive Party candidate for President in 1948, and former Vice President under FDR.
- ⁴² “Students Stage Sit-Down Protest; BHE Bars New Knickerbocker Probe.” *The Campus*, September 30, 1948; “‘Sit-Down’ Staged at City College Over Exoneration of Professor”. *The New York Times*, September 30, 1948.
- ⁴³ “Students Stage Sit-Down Protest.” *The Campus*, September 30, 1948.
- ⁴⁴ Rev. John W. Darr Jr. was a Congregational Minister and candidate for the State Assembly on the American Labor party ticket. “‘Sit-down’ Staged at City College Over Exoneration of Professor”. *The New York Times*, September 30, 1948.
- ⁴⁵ “Students Stage Sit-Down Protest; BHE bars New Knickerbocker Probe.” *The Campus*, September 30, 1948, p. 4.
- ⁴⁶ “Students Stage Sit-Down Protest.” *The Campus*, September 30, 1948.
- ⁴⁷ President Wright happened to be absent.
- ⁴⁸ “‘Sit-Down’ Staged at City College Over Exoneration of Professor”, *The New York Times*, September 30, 1948.
- ⁴⁹ (ibid.)
- ⁵⁰ (ibid.)
- ⁵¹ “Statement by Student Leaders.” *The Campus*, September 30, 1948.
- ⁵² “Reprehensible Conduct.” *The Campus*, September 30, 1948.
- ⁵³ Ibid.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵⁵ (ibid.)
- ⁵⁶ “‘Sit-Down’ Staged at City College Over Exoneration of Professor”, *The New York Times*, September 30, 1948.
- ⁵⁷ (ibid.)
- ⁵⁸ (ibid.)
- ⁵⁹ “2,000 Seek Ouster of Knickerbocker”. *The New York Times*, October 1, 1948.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid.
- ⁶¹ On “lumping” see Zerubavel (1996).
- ⁶² “2,000 Seek Ouster of Knickerbocker”. *The New York Times*, October 1, 1948.
- ⁶³ “Group Joins Drive on Knickerbocker.” *The New York Times*, October 3, 1948.
- ⁶⁴ “We Recommend,” *The Campus*, October 6, 1948, Archives and Special Collections, The City College of New York, New York.
- ⁶⁵ *Free and Equal*, Vol. 1, No. 1. Archives and Special Collections, The City College of New York, New York.
- ⁶⁶ “We Recommend,” *The Campus*, October 6, 1948, Archives and Special Collections, The City College of New York, New York.
- ⁶⁷ (ibid.)
- ⁶⁸ (ibid.)
- ⁶⁹ On the notion of an integrating “mainstream” culture in the U.S. of which immigrants seek to be a part, see (Alba and Nee 2005).
- ⁷⁰ “Is it Democratic?” *Free and Equal*, Vol. 1, No. 1. Archives and Special Collections, The City College of New York, New York.
- ⁷¹ See above on Polletta and spontaneity narratives (Polletta 2006).
- ⁷² (ibid.)
- ⁷³ “Extra,” *Free and Equal*, Vol. 1, No. 1. Archives and Special Collections, The City College of New York, New York.
- ⁷⁴ “Is It Democratic?” *Free and Equal*, Vol. 1, No. 1. Archives and Special Collections, The City College of New York, New York.

- ⁷⁵ *Free and Equal*, Vol. 1, No. 1. Archives and Special Collections, The City College of New York, New York.
- ⁷⁶ (ibid.)
- ⁷⁷ “Anti-Semitism and Jimcrow,” *Free and Equal*, Vol. 1, No. 1. Archives and Special Collections, The City College of New York, New York.
- ⁷⁸ “As Others See it...” *Free and Equal*, vol. 1, no. 1. Archives and Special Collections, The City College of New York, New York.
- ⁷⁹ Archives and Special Collections, *Hillel Box*. The City College of New York, New York.
- ⁸⁰ “Given Enough Rope,” *The Campus*, March 29, 1949.
- ⁸¹ Knickerbocker-Davis Box, Archives and Special Collections, City College of New York.
- ⁸² (ibid.)
- ⁸³ (ibid.)
- ⁸⁴ (ibid.)
- ⁸⁵ (ibid.)
- ⁸⁶ (ibid.)
- ⁸⁷ However, the question of “color-blind” racism in how color-blind admissions practices operated to exclude Black and Puerto Rican students in New York City would be dramatically raised by the Open Admissions crisis of 1969.

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