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TOWARD AN INTERPRETIVE APPROACH TO SOCIAL MOVEMENT LEADERSHIP

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The concept of a leader is one of the most fundamental to the study of collective behavior. It is also one of the most poorly theorized, primarily because social movement theorists continue to (1) assume that leaders must be affiliated with an organization and (2) argue over who “counts” as a leader. This paper offers two alternative approaches. I argue, first, that our current conceptualization must be broadened to include individuals who are unaffiliated with an organization. Second, I suggest that rather than debating who qualifies and does not qualify as a movement leader, we would do better to take an interpretive approach to the study of leadership; that is, we should treat as a leader any individual who is perceived as one — be it by the public, the media, politicians, or other movement participants. These two approaches will result in a much fuller theoretical picture of movement leaders.

One of the most fundamental concepts in social movement theory is that of a leader. The importance of leaders to movements seems self-evident. Leaders inspire, motivate, and sometimes directly organize a movement’s participants; they represent and frame a movement’s messages and goals; they mobilize resources, and create and exploit opportunities; finally, they publicly shoulder the responsibility for the movement’s outcomes, successes, and failures. Leaders, in short, often personify their movement. Indeed, it is nearly impossible to think of a major social or revolutionary movement in world history without simultaneously thinking about the leader, or leaders, who spearheaded it. As Aldon Morris (2000: 451) has put it:

[Leadership] deserves a central place in movement theorizing because it interjects human agency into collective action and affects the mobilization and outcomes of movements. Thus a major task of movement theory is to unpack the ‘black box’ of movement leadership so that we can develop more robust models of how collective action emerges and is sustained.
Understanding leaders, in other words, is crucial to understanding the trajectory of movements—and to advancing social movement theory.

As important as leadership is to understanding social movements, it is woefully undertheorized, as scholars have recently begun to point out. We know much less than we should about how leaders rise, the ways in which they interact with one another, and how they influence the emergence, existence, and decline of movements (cf., Aminzade et al. 2001; Ganz 2004; Morris 2000; Morris and Staggenborg 2004; Schussman and Earl 2004). Two shortcomings are particularly problematic: a narrow conceptualization of leadership, which insists that leaders must be affiliated with a social movement organization (SMO), and an equally narrow definition of who “counts” as a movement leader, which includes only those individuals whom movement scholars have judged to be leaders. This paper attempts a fuller theory of leadership by highlighting and offering alternatives to both.

It is important to point out from the beginning that there are good reasons for movement analysts’ failure to adequately theorize social movement leadership. Clifford Bob (2005:46) recently pointed to one of them: “Scholars often downplay the role of individuals, instead highlighting historical or economic trends as key sources of change.” This approach is, of course, especially prevalent among sociologists, who typically highlight the structural and cultural rather than the biographical. Morris and Staggenborg (2004: 171) offer a second reason for sociologists’ inadequate conceptualization of leadership; namely, “a failure to fully integrate agency and structure in theories of social movements.” They succinctly state the dilemma faced by scholars who study leaders: “A focus on great leaders risks neglect of structural opportunities and obstacles to collective action, while an emphasis on structures of opportunity risks slighting human agency” (p. 171). Theorizing movement leadership, then, has not been an easy task.

The Organizational Basis of Movement Leadership

When they have not ignored it altogether, American sociologists have viewed the study of movement leadership quite narrowly over the past four decades; that is, through the lens of resource
mobilization (RM) theory. Our reliance on RM theory has caused us to focus almost exclusively on leaders who are affiliated with social movement organizations (SMOs); that is, formal, titled, "official" leaders (Bob and Nepstad 2007). Leaders and activists who have operated independently of any SMO have been almost completely ignored in the past 40 years’ worth of research on social and revolutionary movements.

Sociologists’ undue emphasis on the organizational aspect of leadership was established in the early 1970s. Before the ascendance of resource mobilization at that time, scholars of social and revolutionary movements held a much more nuanced view of movement leaders. Rex Hopper (1950), for example, differentiated among two types of agitator, as well as the prophet, the reformer, the statesman, and the administrator-executive. Each of these five general types of leader, Hopper argued, was more or less prominent during each of his four theorized stages of a revolutionary movement, and each fulfilled a very different function.

Rudolph Heberle (1951) distinguished movement leaders from officials or functionaries. The primary difference between them is that the latter hold an office while the former need not. As a result, the official’s authority is institution-based; that is,

obedience is due to persons exercising the authority of office only by virtue of the formal legality of their commands and only within the scope of authority of the office. The prototype of this kind of authority wielder in social movements is the elected officer . . . on all levels of the organization. (Heberle 1951:288)

Regardless of officers’ personal abilities and skills, “the degree of authority which they exercise legitimately is determined by statutes defining the functions of their offices” (Heberle 1951: 288).

By contrast, movement leaders may or may not hold an office. Heberle (1951: 287, emphasis added) thought it better to reserve the term “for those individuals who, whether they hold an office or not, take the lead in group action . . .” Rather than exercising what Weber called “rational” authority, leaders’ authority is of the charismatic type. This distinction, which Heberle outlined more than a half-century ago, between leaders and officials remains important because it allowed movement scholars to apply to social movements Weber’s (1947) discussion of the types of legitimate authority. With the rise of resource mobilization theory, we erased
the difference between those movement leaders who hold an office in an organization and those who do not; doing so also effectively erased Weber’s crucial distinction between rational and charismatic authority.

Drawing on both Hopper’s (1950) and Heberle’s (1951) work, Lewis Killian (1964: 440) could accurately claim as late as the mid-1960s that “there is general agreement that different types of leaders are involved [in a social movement].” Killian (1964: 441-43) himself described three broad categories of leader: the charismatic, the administrative, and the intellectual. Unfortunately, subsequent scholars, riding the wave of resource mobilization, focused solely on Killian’s administrative leader—an individual who is concerned primarily with “the mechanics of organization, finances, and diplomacy” (p. 442). The charismatic and intellectual leadership types were quickly forgotten, and thus the nuances of leadership were glossed over.

It was just two years after Killian’s (1964) work that Zald and Ash (1966) published their classic article about the growth, decay, and change of social movement organizations. By highlighting the importance to movements of resources and organizations, the authors not only gave birth to resource mobilization theory, but introduced the narrow conceptualization of movement leadership that dominates the literature to this day (see, especially, pp. 338-9). McCarthy and Zald’s (1977, 1973) subsequent statements of RM theory, which emphasized even more strongly the importance of movement organizations, solidified the notion that one cannot, by definition, be a movement leader if one is not part of a movement’s formal organizational structure.

Aldon Morris’s (1984: 279) well-known study of the civil rights movement, for example, suggested that “[Martin Luther] King and other charismatic leaders facilitated the mobilization of the movement because they had both organizational backing and charisma . . . [and] demonstrated that in the civil rights movement charisma and organization were conjoined from the very beginning and were mutually reinforcing.” Charisma, in other words, was not enough for leaders to mobilize the movement; Dr. King and other leaders also needed organizational support. That is, they needed to be officially recognized by at least one SMO as formal, visible, titled spokes people.
Doug McAdam (1982) had, in fact, concluded two years prior to Morris' (1984) study that the civil rights movement's leaders came from three organizations in particular: black churches, colleges and universities, and local chapters of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). McAdam, like Morris (1984) two years later, left no theoretical room for leaders who did not emerge from one of these three organizations. Part of the problem was that he relied only on "descriptive accounts of the various direct action campaigns conducted during the early years of the movement" in analyzing the movement's leadership patterns (p. 133). By McAdam's own admission, his list of leaders is incomplete: "No claim is made that this table [which lists indigenous leaders] is exhaustive" (p. 133).

More importantly, McAdam writes: "Nor was any effort made to verify the accuracy of designating any of these individuals as leaders" (p. 133). Aside from the obvious methodological shortcoming this represents, McAdam unintentionally highlights a major problem with our decades-old conceptualization of leadership; namely, that it has relied, simply and solely, on a researcher's own judgment about who "counts" as a leader. It is no wonder that McAdam described as "remarkable" the "absence of leaders independent of the three institutions" (p. 133), for the accounts that he used as his only data source "leave little doubt as to the dominant leadership role played by individuals drawn from these three institutions" (p. 133). As a result, McAdam was forced to conclude that leaders who were independent of these institutions simply did not exist.

Elaborating on the RM perspective a few years after McAdam (1982) and Morris (1984), Suzanne Staggenborg (1988: 586; emphasis added) also focused solely on "types of leadership in SMOs" of the pro-choice movement, without ever considering the possible existence of any types of leadership outside of the movement's SMOs. She distinguished among three types of SMO leader: professional managers (paid movement careerists), volunteer leaders (who are not paid), and non professional staff leaders (who may or may not be paid, but are not movement careerists). Staggenborg (1988: 587, emphasis added) casually noted that all three were "by definition, involved in organizational decision making." This tautological argument has organizational
bias at its heart: If one is only looking at leaders of organizations, then naturally one will conclude that these same leaders, by definition, are involved in organizational decision-making.²

It would not be until two decades after the rise of RM theory that a handful of sociologists finally began to question this narrow conceptualization of leadership as being biased toward formal organizations (cf., Buechler 1993). The general critique offered by this very small body of work was that social movement leaders are not always or necessarily formal, titled, “official” spokes persons—a fact that was clearly understood, by Hopper (1950), Heberle (1951), Killian (1964) and others in the previous generation of social movement scholars. Ironically, the researchers who leveled this criticism during the 1990s left their own work open to it.

Barnett (1993), for example, demonstrated that black women had been ignored in discussions of civil rights movement leadership. She argued that scholars of the civil rights movement had typically focused on elite professionals within the movement, such as ministers, and on elite supporters from outside the movement. They had also, she maintained, emphasized the importance of three groups of male leaders—“organization heads-political leaders,” “Young Turks-shock troops,” and “revolutionaries-separatists”—almost every single one of whom was affiliated with civil rights SMOs (e.g., the NAACP, the Congress of Racial Equality [CORE], the Black Panthers, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference [SCLC], and the Black Muslims). Barnett, by contrast, pointed to numerous black women who played important leadership roles in the civil rights movement. As insightful as Barnett’s study continues to be, it is, in my view, guilty of the same bias toward formal organizations that had marked earlier work: Nearly all of the female leaders Barnett used as examples of “organization heads-political leaders,” “Young Turks-shock troops,” and “revolutionaries-separatists” were affiliated with one or more of the movement’s formal organizations (Barnett 1993: 178).

Belinda Robnett (1997, 1996) attempted to overcome this problem by focusing on women in the civil rights movement who acted as “bridge leaders.” She demonstrated that women in the movement were often steered away from formal leadership positions, solely because of their gender. These women had no
choice but to take on informal leadership roles. Specifically, they became "bridges" between "the formal organization and adherents and potential constituents" (1996: 1667). Like Barnett (1993), however, Robnett's examples were, by her own admission, all connected to—and usually members of—the movement's formal organizations: "The activities of African-American women in the civil rights movement provided the bridges necessary to cross boundaries between the personal lives of potential constituents and adherents and the political life of civil rights movement organizations" (1996: 1664). The bias toward leaders who were connected to SMOs continued.

At about the same time, Herda-Rapp (1998: 343) argued that the vast majority of social movement theory conceptualized leadership in a way that "disregards extraorganizational leadership and the nuances of informal leadership." She was undoubtedly correct. But her case study of Hattie Kendrick's role in the U.S. civil rights movement seemed to negate her own argument. For one, Kendrick began as a "visible formal" leader who was affiliated with an SMO, becoming an "informal, extra-organizational and autonomous" leader only later in her career. Second, Herda-Rapp used the example of Hattie Kendrick to expand Robnett's (1996) concept of a "bridge leader"; that is, she considered Kendrick a leader who was "engaged in micromobilization, linking the local community to the movement organization and its leadership in a one-on-one interactive style" (Herda-Rapp 1998: 344). Hattie Kendrick, according to Herda-Rapp's interpretation, served as a bridge not only between the movement's formal leaders and the community, but also between the formal leaders themselves and between movement generations.

Toward an Interpretive Understanding of Leadership: Dr. Jack Kevorkian as a Leader of the Right-to-die Movement

Over the past two decades, movement scholars—even those who have attempted to critique the bias toward organizational leadership—have typically operated under the assumption that leaders must be formally associated with a movement organization (see also, e.g., Effler 2010; Jasper 1997; Stevens 2001). By doing so, they have repeated the mistake made by their predecessors. This section makes a case for defining a movement leader not solely as
someone who is treated as a leader by a particular scholar, or as someone who is affiliated with an SMO, but simply as someone who is perceived as a leader.

My primary example is Dr. Jack Kevorkian and the American right-to-die (RTD) movement, but I could have used any number of historical figures to make the argument that follows: T. E. Lawrence (or “Lawrence of Arabia”) and so-called “spiritual leaders” like the Dalai Lama spring immediately to mind. There are many others, as we will see in the concluding section. I offer no special reason for focusing on Kevorkian, other than the fact that he, and the movement he led for nearly a decade, have been all but ignored by social movement scholars.

First, what is a leader? Morris and Staggenborg (2004:171), two experts on the role of leadership in movements, recently offered the following definition of leaders: “strategic decision-makers who inspire and organize others to participate in social movements.” Using this as a working definition, the next question that arises is: Was Jack Kevorkian, in fact, a leader of the RTD movement?

On one hand, Kevorkian certainly made strategic decisions, such as assisting in two suicides just two weeks before the November 1991 vote on Washington state’s ill-fated Initiative 119. These two assisted deaths, according to the most authoritative historian of the right-to-die movement, “likely helped to scuttle” I-119, the passage of which would have legalized euthanasia (Dowbiggin 2003:167). Kevorkian also inspired others to participate, directly and indirectly, in the RTD movement, whether through protesting or actually carrying out the assisted suicides of loved ones. One of the first, and certainly the most famous, of these cases was that of Bertram and Virginia Harper. The elderly couple flew to Michigan “for the specific purpose of allowing the wife to commit suicide, in the belief that the Michigan authorities would respond leniently” (“Michigan Charging Murder After a 2d Assisted Suicide” 1990). Why did the Harpers hold such a belief? Because they had “learn[ed] from news accounts on the Kevorkian case [of Janet Adkins] that the state had no law that specifically bars helping a person commit suicide” (“Michigan Charging Murder After a 2d Assisted Suicide” 1990). In other words, the Harpers drew their inspiration directly from the news of Kevorkian’s assistance in Adkins’ suicide nearly three months earlier; the
Adkins case was what prompted 69-year-old Virginia Harper, who was suffering from breast cancer, to take sleeping pills and pull a plastic bag over her head at the Comfort Inn in Romulus, MI, in the presence of her 72-year-old husband (who was subsequently charged with murder) and their daughter (who was not charged).

On the other hand, and in spite of all this, what Kevorkian did not do was directly organize others' participation in the RTD movement. Thus, according to Morris and Staggenborg (2004), as well as most other movement scholars since the early 1970s, he simply does not qualify as a movement leader. But here, again, we see the bias toward organizations among social movement theorists regarding who qualifies, from movement theorists' perspective, as a "leader."

But why must one directly organize others to be considered a movement leader? Responding to Robnett's (1997) argument that leaders need not fill "formal" roles in an SMO, Morris and Staggenborg (2004) offer two reasons: They "worry that this line of analysis could lead to an overly broad definition of leadership and to [the] neglect of power dynamics in movement leadership" (Morris and Staggenborg 2004: 177). To the contrary, I have suggested that our definition of leadership needs to be broadened; it is much too narrow to encompass the range of movement leadership types. And, regarding Morris and Staggenborg's (2004) second concern, social movement theorists have traditionally done a poor job of studying power dynamics among movement leaders (Aminzade, Goldstone, and Perry 2001), so we have nothing to lose on this front.

Morris and Staggenborg (2004: 177) are also reluctant to "collapse the distinction between formal leadership and movement spokespersons." The reason is simple: Individuals whom they define as "formal movement leaders"—Lenin, Gandhi, Mao, and the like—"set movement goals, determined strategies and tactics, and shaped outcomes." Movement spokespersons, on the other hand, "may put themselves forward or are selected by the mass media as 'stars' but are not accountable leaders at all" (p. 177). But they do not consider the possibility that an individual may simultaneously occupy the statuses of leader and spokesperson.

Dr. Kevorkian neither set the RTD movement's goals nor determined its strategies and tactics, but he certainly shaped its
outcomes. He also became an unaccountable media "star" in the process. So does he qualify as a formal leader? Or was he more of a spokesperson? I do not claim to know the definitive answer to either question. What I do know is that drawing the boundary so definitively and so rigidly between leaders, spokespersons, and everyone else, as Morris and Staggenborg (2004) attempt to do, is more likely to stifle theoretical developments in our approach to movement leadership than it is to lead to a fuller understanding of the nature of movement leadership.

Clifford Bob and Sharon Nepstad (2007) recently offered a conceptualization of leadership that is very different—and much more general—than Morris and Staggenborg's (2004). Bob and Nepstad (2007) define as a leader any individual who simply "exercise[s] significant authority within a movement" (p. 1373). Such a person is "acknowledged by the movement itself, third parties, the media, and opponents as its 'leader.' This may be because of the resources he or she wields, the numbers of followers she or he commands, his or her symbolic importance to the movement, or other reasons" (p. 1373). By this definition, Jack Kevorkian clearly does qualify as a leader of the RTD movement—precisely because Bob and Nepstad (2007) do not insist on the organizational requirement and because they take an interpretive approach to leadership; that is, they leave it up to various groups to decide who they recognize as a leader rather than assuming that scholars can and should make that judgment themselves.

The point in all of this is that movement theorists' subjective judgments of who counts, and who does not count, as a leader of a social movement contain more than a little bias—a bias toward direct organizing and toward formal organizations that is a remnant of the dominance of the resource mobilization approach during the 1970s and 80s. I suggest that instead of "objectively" defining and identifying leaders based on whether they organize others, or whether they inspire others, or whether they attract resources, we define and identify leaders based on a simpler criterion: whether they are perceived as leaders. In other words, I suggest that we attempt an interpretive understanding of movement leadership.

This is not a novel argument. Heberle (1951: 133, emphasis added) wrote the following about movement leadership 60 years ago: "Most social movements show . . . the phenomenon of the
great personal leader, the great spellbinder and agitator. These men... do not intend to be personal leaders, but, to the masses, they symbolize the cause for which they are living.” Not only does he make no mention of organizations, but he points to the importance of an interpretive approach to leadership. Throughout the discussion that follows, it is crucial to keep in mind that whether an individual fits our theoretical models of movement leadership is much less important than whether that individual is perceived as a leader.

There can be no doubt that between 1990 and 1999, Jack Kevorkian symbolized the right-to-die and, as I demonstrate below, was perceived as a leader of the American RTD movement by four different groups: (1) the general public, (2) “official” and “formal” RTD movement leaders, and (3) politicians.

The Public. A smiling, almost nonchalant Jack Kevorkian appeared on the cover of Time magazine in May 1993; he made appearances on television programs like Donahue and 60 Minutes; he was the subject of op-ed pieces, newspaper cartoons, and popular jokes; “Kevorkianism” and “Kevorkianesque” entered the popular lexicon. Dr. Kevorkian quickly became, and then remained, quite literally, the face of the RTD movement as far as the public was concerned. Posters, of course, were among the first to pick up on Kevorkian’s celebrity, and they responded accordingly. Gallup, the National Opinion Research Center, Roper, and a host of other national polling firms regularly devoted questionnaire items specifically to Jack Kevorkian. They did not do the same for Derek Humphry or any of the movement’s other “official” leaders. And their focus on Kevorkian served both to establish his leadership and to reinforce his status as a leader in the eyes of the public.

The mass media’s role in Kevorkian’s rise to the status of movement leader cannot be overemphasized. As Todd Gitlin (2003) argued, the media have the power to make and break both movements and their leaders. Rather than abdicating his celebrity status, as some New Left leaders like Staughton Lynd, Mario Savio, and Robert Moses did (Gitlin 2003: 176-78), Kevorkian successfully “pyramided” it — that is, he used it to build up a cache of celebrity (see Gitlin 2003: 166). With each new media appearance, his celebrity and his leadership were reinforced and further legitimated in the eyes of the public (see also Gailey 2003). Kevorkian undoubtedly personified the RTD movement during the 1990s.
The RTD Movement’s Established Leadership. The “official” and “formal” leadership of the RTD movement—that is, the leaders who were affiliated with the movement’s SMOs—also recognized Kevorkian’s leadership role. A press release published by the Hemlock Society in October 1989 called Kevorkian “a brave pioneer”, and the founder of Michigan’s Hemlock chapter lent strong support to him (Dowbiggin 2003: 166). Derek Humphry and Ann Wickett (1986: 137), the co-founders of the Hemlock Society, summed up Kevorkian’s contribution to the movement in this way: “... it cannot be denied that his has been the most significant impact on death in the U.S. in this century. Few others have possessed the courage, determination, and integrity to accomplish what he has done.”

The judgments from formal RTD leaders were not always flattering. Derek Humphry (1992: 40) famously referred to Kevorkian as a “loose cannon”, which implied that he was a rogue activist who was unable to be restrained by any organization. In fact, an executive director of another prominent RTD SMO, Compassion in Dying, called Kevorkian “a rogue doctor who should be thrown in jail” (quoted in Fox et al. 1999: 129). Interestingly, it was precisely during the times that official movement leaders condemned Kevorkian that rank-and-file members rose to his defense. Derek Humphry’s “loose cannon” comment, for example, brought public protests from several Hemlock Society chapters and published letters supporting Kevorkian.

Politicians. A number of politicians and other public officials also indirectly recognized Kevorkian’s leadership in the RTD movement when they sought to pass legislation banning his “suicide machine”, assisted suicide, or even the doctor himself. The first and most outspoken was Michigan State Senator Fred Dillingham, who introduced a bill shortly after Janet Adkins’ death that made assisting in a suicide a felony. He feared that Michigan would quickly become “a haven, the place to go” for people who wished to kill themselves (Schmidt 1990). The penalty for doing so, under Dillingham’s proposal, was up to four years in prison and a fine of up to $2,000 (Schmidt 1990). Dillingham seemed to take Kevorkian’s actions personally: “My feeling is we need to punch Kevorkian’s lights out right now,” he said. “He’s proven himself to be a danger” (Wilkerson 1991).
The Governor of Michigan, John Engler, also wanted to put a stop to Kevorkian’s crusade, which, by the summer of 1992, had left four bodies in its wake. Before Michigan “become[s] known as the suicide state,” as Governor Engler put it in May 1992, he asked that a bill before the State Legislature be sped up. The bill would forbid anyone from helping another person commit suicide (“Kevorkian Provided the Gas for Woman’s Suicide” 1992). Governor Engler signed the bill on February 27, 2003, and took the opportunity to publicly denounce Kevorkian’s actions as “murder,” and to vow to prosecute the doctor if he helped anyone die after the law took effect. “I want to sign it today as a protest to what Mr. Kevorkian has done,” he said. In the typical rhetoric of politicians, Engler continued: “The methods of Mr. Jack Kevorkian, and I stress ‘Mr.’ since his license to practice medicine has been suspended [in Michigan], are wrong because he has deliberately flouted the law and taken it upon himself to be his own judge, jury, and executioner in Michigan.” Michigan State Senator Douglas Carl, who voted for the law, added: “We can’t have somebody marching around preying on depressed people who think they may be hopelessly ill. We can’t have somebody going around indiscriminately snuffing out people’s lives” (Smith 1993). From Michigan’s State Senate to its Governor’s Mansion, then, public officials singled out Kevorkian as the leader of the movement for the right to die.

**Reconceptualizing Movement Leadership**

Even though I have used him as my primary example of a leader that does not fit our current conceptualization of leadership, Jack Kevorkian was not a unique type of movement leader. History offers plenty of examples of individuals who were widely perceived and treated as leaders of mass movements but were never affiliated with any formal organization; Tenzin Gyatso (the current Dalai Lama) is a current example. T. E. Lawrence (or “Lawrence of Arabia”) also comes to mind, as do many of the leaders of the American independence movement. Indeed, in describing himself as the anonymous author of *Common Sense*, Thomas Paine wrote the following in the pamphlet’s Introduction: “he is unconnected with any Party, and under no sort of Influence public or private, but the influence of reason and principle” (Paine 1997: 2). These are hardly the words of a man who is affiliated with, or holds membership in,
an organization of any kind. Paine, Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Franklin—the list of organizationally unaffiliated leaders of the American Revolution is as long as it is distinguished. A conceptualization of leadership that omits historical giants and contemporary cultural icons such as these is at best incomplete, and at worst invalid.

Incorporating the organizationally unaffiliated into our theories about, and conceptualizations of, movement leadership has at least two major benefits. First, if we hope to arrive at a full understanding of movement leadership, we simply cannot continue to study only “formal” and “official” leaders who are affiliated with established SMOs. I share Morris and Staggenborg’s (2004: 177) concern about “retain[ing] any analytic meaning for the concept of leadership,” but they believe that maintaining a narrow definition of leadership is the way to do so. As I have argued here, I believe that we must broaden our definition of a social movement leader if we are to thoroughly understand the various types of leadership—both within and outside of SMOs—under which movements coalesce and move forward. We must include the informal, the unofficial, the unaffiliated—any individual, in short, who is widely thought of as a leader.

For example, in an important new line of inquiry into movements that emerge online, or “e-movements”, Earl and Schussman (2003) showed that website managers and concept designers in the strategic voting movement were not at all constrained by the kinds of organizational pressures that movement scholars have traditionally pointed to. A related piece of research by the same authors concluded that “movement leadership need not be predicated on political experience or activist training”; in other words, “leadership can be generated by a set of conditions that are broader than prior research suggests” (Schussman and Earl (2004: 459). Restricting ourselves to organizationally affiliated leaders will lead to the stagnation of theorizing about leadership.

A second benefit of broadening our conceptualization of movement leadership is a deeper understanding of the relationships among individual leaders. As Aminzade, Goldstone, and Perry (2001: 126) have pointed out, “[s]urprisingly little scholarship . . . has sought to determine the effect that variation in
leadership dynamics . . . have [sic] on the course and outcomes of contentious politics." One scholar’s book or another’s paper about one particular movement leader might be interesting and informative, but it inevitably ignores that particular leader’s relationship with other leaders.  

Every social movement is led by more than one person, and the American RTD movement during the 1990s was no different. To insist that only Jack Kevorkian is worthy of our attention is to tell only part of the RTD movement’s story. As the founder and director of the movement’s largest SMO, the Hemlock Society, Derek Humphry was also a recognized leader of the movement. These two men forged a relationship, however tenuous, over the course of a decade, and the changing nature of that relationship had clear and direct effects on the RTD movement’s trajectory during that time. The problem, then, which Aminzade, Goldstone, and Perry (2001) recently highlighted, becomes one of examining the relationships among a movement’s recognized leaders, and the consequences those relationships have for the course and outcome of a movement. But if such an analysis were to focus only on organizationally affiliated leaders of the RTD movement, Kevorkian would be left out altogether and we would miss a crucial aspect of the movement’s life-course during the 1990s; namely, the relationship between its two most important leaders.

Conclusion

This article set out to accomplish two goals. First, it sought to make a general argument for an interpretive understanding of social movement leadership. In the process, it made the case for a conceptualization of leadership that includes organizationally unaffiliated leaders. We simply cannot continue to decide for ourselves who qualifies as a leader and who does not. As I have shown, that approach leads to ignoring some of the most important movement leaders in world history. In the interests of advancing social movement theory and of arriving at a fuller understanding of the nature of movements, we must assume an interpretive approach; that is, we must subordinate our own judgments to those of the public and the media. We must also look beyond organizations for the leaders of social movements. For some of the most consequential figures in human history did not belong to any
formal group, either as a leader or as a member. They were, rather, individuals who sought, and ultimately effected, social change—only without the support and resources of an organization. Perhaps they, if only because they are often thought of as mavericks and outsiders and rogues, are the movement leaders who are most deserving of our scholarly attention.

Notes

1. Sociologists have often treated movement leaders as a “given”—in other words, as people that are simply assumed to be there and to be important; or, as McAdam (2001: 225) has put it, “as the inevitable byproduct of more general mobilization processes.” Jasper (1997: 217), however, has made the important point that this is not the case in other fields: “Among political scientists and psychologists, biographies of protest leaders have remained popular even while, under the spell of structure and rationalism, sociologists rejected this source of understanding.”

2. Political scientists have also traditionally been rigid in their insistence that movement leaders must be affiliated with movement organizations. Forty years ago, Roche and Sachs (1969) distinguished between leaders who are “bureaucrats” and those who are “enthusiasts.” This fundamental distinction survives, in various forms, in both the political science and sociological literatures on movement leadership, whether it has been termed “task-oriented” versus “people-oriented”, “rationalized” versus “charismatic”, or “self-effacing” versus “self-aggrandizing” (see Aminzade, Goldstone, and Perry 2001). Both types of leader, however, were assumed by Roche and Sachs, and by the overwhelming majority of subsequent researchers, to be affiliated with at least one SMO.

3. For a notable exception, see Ganz (2009).

4. In addition, Kevorkian was neither an “entrepreneur” (Kleidman 1986; Staggenborg 1988) nor a “celebrity” (Gitlin 2003) proper, as scholars have defined these types of movement leader.

5. This list should be contrasted with those leaders of the Revolution who were affiliated with an organization; namely, the Sons of Liberty. These men included John and Samuel Adams, Paul Revere, and John Hancock. In my view, the fact that some of the “Founding Fathers” were affiliated with a formal organization while most were not only serves to illustrate my point that membership in an organization should not be a prerequisite for being recognized as a movement leader. For if we continue to argue that it should be, then the Adams cousins, Revere, and Hancock will be rightfully thought of as leaders while Washington, Jefferson, Paine, Franklin, Madison, Monroe, and the rest will not.

6. Again, for an important exception, see Ganz (2009).
References


