Western Wars and Peace Activism
Social Movements in Global Mass-Mediated Politics

M A R T I N   S H A W

In February 2003, some of the largest ever globally coordinated street protests took place against the proposed attack on Iraq by the United States and the United Kingdom. In London, between one and two million people took part. Whatever the correct figure for the number of participants, even the police agreed that this was the largest demonstration on record. By April 2003, however, US and UK forces had launched their attack, deposed the Saddam Hussein regime, and 'won' their war. In the same interval, the peace movement shrank from massive mobilizations to a largely irrelevant rump of small political organizations. The movement's criticisms of American power reverberated through post-war politics, not least in Britain where Prime Minister Tony Blair suffered seemingly irreversible political damage. But it had disappeared as a mass political force. Although, by general consent, the USA had not prepared its rule in Iraq as successfully as its war, so that the post-war situation was marked by chronic failures in physical and social security, the peace movement offered no coherent voice in this crisis. Politicians, journalists and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) made damaging criticisms of US-UK policy, but no significant mass activist voice was heard.

How can we explain the paradox of the meteoric rise and fall of street protest? What does this example tell us about the nature and causes of the successes and failures of peace movements? How distinctive was this case, and how far does it fit into a pattern that can be discerned in earlier movements? What is the relationship between the character of current Western wars and the dilemmas of peace movements? How far do the politics of the movements and their modes of operation explain their limitations? In what ways does the fact that both wars and movements exist in a globally mass-mediated political environment explain the experiences? How far are the lessons of peace movements applicable more generally to contemporary social movements? These are some of the questions raised by this case, which this essay will try to explore in a general historical perspective. I write as a sociologist whose work has combined an interest in media and social movements with research on contemporary war and genocide (as well as personal experience as a peace movement activist in an earlier period).

The context of Iraq
Sociologists have often sought to explain social movements in terms of general social characteristics, such as the nature of the social groups that support them (for example, Parkin's 1968 idea of 'middle-class radicalism') and the general values of their supporters

(e.g. Inglehart, 1977). However, as Mattausch (1989) argued in a study of the 1980s nuclear disarmament movements, these kinds of accounts 'explain away' the professed causes around which movements campaign, treating them as epiphenomena of more general social causes. Social science will give a more convincing account of people's actions, he argued, if it takes seriously their manifest, conscious as well as supposed, latent reasons for engaging in them. In the case of the movement against war in Iraq, our first port of call should be to examine the threat by the USA and UK to attack Iraq, the rationale and history of the conflict that led to this threat, and the reasons why millions of people responded to this threat by taking to the streets and other forms of protest. Clearly the numbers of protestors were of a historically significant order– something very specific must have been going on to make so many people protest. Thus we need to examine both the immediate political context of the threat of war, and behind that the larger contexts of contemporary world politics and war to which this specific crisis referred.

The outbreak of large protest movements is not easily predictable. Big movements, like the disarmament movements of the early 1980s, often arise as if from nowhere and their rapid success takes even their organizers by surprise. Few who had observed the rather small-scale, muted protests against the 2001-02 war in Afghanistan – or indeed the 1991 Gulf War (for an account of the British case, see Shaw 1996) – would have expected the massive actions against the 2003 Iraq War. Explanations must generally be post hoc: it is mainly in retrospect that opposition to the recent war appears to be over-determined, in contrast to these other cases. However, with the benefit of hindsight, it is quite clear that the war on Iraq was crucially different from other wars in which Western states have been involved in recent decades. This Western campaign was not a more or less direct response to provocative military action by an enemy state or movement, as were the British campaign in the Falklands, the Gulf War, NATO's campaign over Kosovo and the Afghanistan campaign. Uniquely, this was a 'pre-emptive' strike, according to a radical new US strategic doctrine that had little legitimacy outside the USA. Partly because of this different context, unlike any of the other cases, the USA's proposed war had virtually no active support from major states either within or outside the West. Britain's support, resulting from Blair going out on a limb against the weight of opinion in his party and even his government, gave the USA a fig leaf of international credibility – but it was not enough, and indeed it provoked intense hostility within the UK. The many months of build-up to war, the failed Blair-led attempts to secure international legitimacy, and President Bush's clear determination to go to war despite the opposition of the UN majority and despite the ongoing weapons inspections, all created an atmosphere of intense crisis.

In this context, the anti-war movements on the streets of the world's cities were able to build up a massive base of support over a series of demonstrations, with an unprecedented breadth of political legitimacy. Protestors were cutting with the grain of public opinion (even in the countries where governments gave some kind of support to the war, polls often showed large-scale opposition: of over 90% in Spain, 80% in Italy, 60% in the UK and 40-50% in the USA). In all cases they could claim to be speaking alongside the UN majority, and in many cases, such as France, Germany and Russia, they were on the same side as their governments. Because of these various kinds of international and national legitimacy, movements also

received unusually favourable media coverage. Indeed many national and regional newspapers echoed their opposition to the war. In Britain, for example, not only the traditionally anti-war *Guardian* but also the tabloid *Daily Mirror* saw the possibility of audience gains through speaking for the opposition to military action.

From 'Stop Cruise Missiles' to 'Stop the War'

In many senses, then, the context for the recent anti-war movement was uniquely favourable, and this was the largest 'peace' movement since the campaigns against nuclear weapons twenty years earlier. However, unlike those earlier movements in which mass protests (demonstrations, sit-downs, peace camps, etc. involving hundreds of thousands) built up over about two years from their origins in late 1979 to their 1982 peak, and only gradually subsided after about 1984, the recent movement was, as we have noted, very short-lived. Although it built up over about six months, its decline was extremely rapid.

The reasons for this difference are obviously connected to the nature of the realities against which the movements were protesting. The nuclear disarmament movements of the 1980s took their cue from NATO's November 1979 decision to introduce new intermediate-range Pershing II and cruise missiles into six Western European countries. The decisions required several years of preparations, and in some cases parliamentary approvals, to be implemented. Until missiles were actually installed, it remained possible to block their installation on a country-by-country basis. National elections provided focal points for opposition: it was not until after conservative victories in German and British elections in the first half of 1983 that the decisions taken by NATO were clearly secure, and in the Netherlands it was 1986 before there was a national basis to go ahead.

In the case of actual wars, rather than weapons decisions, clearly the dynamics are different. In none of the Western wars of the last two decades, to which I referred above, was the build-up period to conflict longer than six months. In all cases, the main phase of armed conflict was even shorter, no more than three months, and military success more or less complete and (apparently) relatively low-cost in terms of life. Despite (or because of) huge and intensive bombardments, only around one hundred fifty Americans and forty Britons died in the main phase of combat in Iraq, and many of these were casualties of accidents and from 'friendly fire'. Civilian deaths have been estimated in a range of 6,100-7,800 (Iraq Body Count, 2003). Iraqi military deaths are unnumbered.

In contrast, the Vietnam War had been prolonged, costly and unsuccessful: the main phase of US involvement lasted a decade, from 1965 to 1975, there were several peaks of fighting, and tens of thousands of US military personnel died together with hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese fighters and civilians. A huge anti-war movement arose, the most important political movement in the USA since the Second World War and one with worldwide ramifications, linked in the minds of many establishment figures to adverse media coverage in the first 'television war'. In fact, academic studies (e.g. Hallin, 1986; Mandelbaum, 1987) showed that adverse coverage mostly followed rather than caused military difficulties and political opposition to the war.

However, it was from the understanding of the 'Vietnam syndrome' as a product of television coverage that the US and other Western governments concluded that it was

necessary to avoid long wars and large-scale casualties, and to manage media coverage to avoid damaging political effects. Hence the (so far mostly successful) preference of the USA, UK and NATO for quick military fixes, through intense, mostly aerial bombardment (although in Iraq artillery was also important), risking relatively few military lives. And hence the evolution, through the Falklands, Gulf and Kosovo campaigns, of a model of media management that attempted to direct journalistic attention and (in the latter two cases) massage the effects of Western military action on local civilians.

It was these models of combined war fighting and media control that were deployed in Iraq to limit the war. Although the Iraqi resistance in the second week of the war encouraged critics to believe that they would not be so successful this time, in the event the USA was able to prevail (to the extent of overthrowing Saddam and gaining overall control of Iraq) even more quickly than in 1991. It seems improbable that any anti-war movement could have made great headway in these conditions: focused on preventing the war, the movements were largely irrelevant once the war was begun; and calling for 'stopping the war', they had little to contribute once Bush's forces sped towards their 'victory'. Thus the difficulties of any anti-war movement in contemporary conditions are starkly underlined. Despite the largest mobilization in recent history (and huge international political opposition), the USA was undeterred. Only if this mobilization had gained overwhelming ground where it mattered to Bush politically (i.e. in US public opinion) would it have been likely to make a difference to the outcome. Alternatively, only if the war had (like Vietnam) lasted years rather than months, had gone badly for the USA and had led to very substantial (and apparently pointless) deaths, would the movement have been likely to impact on the actual outcome of the war.

Dynamics of demonstration movements and global mass media

I have suggested that mainstream media (television, newspaper and radio) coverage of the 2003 anti-war movement was probably uniquely favourable. It has long been an article of faith in all protest movements that 'the media' are a homogenous, hostile force, which misrepresents and distorts their aims. While studies have shown that there is truth in these beliefs (most stations and papers usually take their cues more from governments and corporations than from protestors), they nonetheless obscure the fundamental dependence of many late modern social movements on mainstream mass media. Without media coverage, would movements – especially protest movements – be able to develop with the rapidity that we saw in the recent Iraqi conflict?

To appreciate the significance of media to late-modern movements, let us consider the very different situation a century ago. Early modern social movements, especially labour movements, parties and unions, developed in the nineteenth century at a time when the press was much more restricted and electronic media had not been invented. They developed extensive face-to-face organization, based on elaborate hierarchical structures of local, regional, national and international organization. Alongside and through these structures, they also developed their own media of communication – labour and socialist newspapers that were widely read in the working class. The German workers' movement, in many ways the prime model, was famously analysed by Roberto Michels (1915) as a state within a state. Later analyses of the Western working class in

its formative and classical periods before the Second World War emphasised its 'hermetic', closed world (Anderson and Nairn, 1965).

Media, as well as political developments, in the twentieth century transformed this situation. Many historic labour movements, like Germany's, were in any case destroyed or weakened by totalitarianism and war. Electronic media (radio, cinema and television) developed either as state monopolies or as commercial enterprises, largely bypassing traditional workers' movements. Labour papers tended to pass out of movement hands – Britain's *Daily Herald*, metamorphosing into the *Sun* and eventually becoming the tabloid flagship of Rupert Murdoch's media empire, is the most notorious case. Where workers' organizations survived or revived, they did so utilizing their traditional organizational and cultural structures. The functions of labour movements, institutionalised in wage-negotiation, electioneering, etc., enabled such resilience despite often hostile mass media.

The 'new' social movements that developed from the mid-1950s onwards were of a different type. Although they tended, as Parkin and others noted, to be strongly based on the 'middle class' (more specifically, the educated, professional and state-employed middle class, including students), their aims were not to represent that class as such. They had no 'natural' social functions embedded in the ongoing self-organization of a social group, comparable to those of unions, or in institutionalised politics, like parties. Instead, these movements were often organized around specific goals – opposition to nuclear weapons, apartheid and racial discrimination, wars, environmental pollution, etc. – that were in principle of concern to people of any group. Only some 'new' movements sought to organize groups, like women and gays, who were previously largely unorganized, and to represent their specific values and interests.

Because these movements were organized around specific issues, or sought to organize very broad unorganized groups that did not always have 'natural' foci for organization, they nearly always relied significantly on mass media to gain public attention. The British Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) for example, the first major anti-nuclear weapons organization at the centre of the 1958-64 'Ban the Bomb' movement, was launched through letters in the press (Taylor, 1988). Although CND later evolved a local group structure, its leaders saw it from the start as a public actor establishing its presence through established institutions – parties, churches, unions, etc., as well as the media. However, as CND became the centre of a social movement, mobilizing people into action on the streets, it also became more rather than less dependent on mass media. Press and, increasingly, television coverage of demonstrations were a powerful mobilizer of new people onto future demonstrations, alongside the sort of direct propaganda (leaflets, local meetings, etc.) that CND itself produced. Interestingly, the more direct forms of action favoured by the more radical wing of the movement (sit-downs, blockades, etc.) were ones which were more likely to have visual impact in the new medium of television (which took off in Britain after 1955) than the more traditional, law-abiding actions initiated by the CND establishment. Although radicals were more suspicious of the media, their mobilizations depended considerably on the notoriety that civil disobedience brought them in the newspapers and television news. Although mainstream media may have largely represented these events in negative, censorious terms, sympathisers (especially young people) would often

deconstruct these accounts, so that notoriety only increased their attraction.

Since demonstration-based movements often launched actions at short notice in response to events that were reported in the media, they were often equally dependent – before the internet – on media to publicise what they were planning. As a local and regional organizer of European Nuclear Disarmament and CND in the early 1980s, I would send out written notices of events and activate 'telephone trees' that would spread urgent information quickly to activists. However I always knew that a mention in the local newspaper or on the radio would be a more effective mobilizer, reaching a larger number of people and giving the action more credibility than something publicised only via movement channels. Television and the press were vital for building the dynamics of demonstration movements. The success of one march, reported in the media, often leads to significantly increased turnouts for future demonstrations. Even negative coverage can draw in wider circles of sympathisers: they learn that they are not alone, that others are already acting, and that action is publicly significant.

There is therefore a cycle of demonstration-coverage, larger demonstration-even greater coverage, even larger demonstration, and so on, up to the point where the maximum marching constituency has been mobilized, or it is clear that goals are not going to be met, or activists become exhausted, or some combination of these factors. It is noteworthy that Mandelbaum (1987), in generally dismissing the idea that television coverage 'caused' the US failure in Vietnam, nevertheless credited it with one major effect: to fan the cycle of anti-war protests. This demonstration-media cycle also operates internationally, as stories and pictures of demonstrations in one country encourage people in others to follow suit. Thus in the 1960s, the first television decade across the Western world, anti-Vietnam War and student protests spread rapidly from the USA to Europe, Japan and beyond. These effects can be seen in the very rapid build-up of protests against the Iraq war: however the cycle was cut off by the launching of the war and the rapid success of the US and UK forces.

Changing Politics, Organization and Media of Peace Protest

Although we can trace major similarities between peace movements in the 1960s and today, it is clear that much has changed. Important changes in the media of communication certainly facilitate protest. The internet enables activist groups and movement organizations to make their ideas available directly to potential sympathisers via websites, and to communicate instantly with large numbers of supporters via email (the telephone tree seems like a technique from another age). Of course, it is very obvious that globalisation of communications has facilitated global protest. (The paradox of 'anti-globalisation' activists 'using' globalisation has become a well-worn cliché of journalists writing about the movement). Movements' web presences may also strengthen their visibility in the mainstream media, since it becomes much easier for journalists to obtain authoritative statements of movement goals, contact activists, etc. Moreover, in the worlds of television and newspapers that are ever more niche-oriented, any sizeable activist cause is likely to find outlets that will cater for its views and activities.

Nevertheless, the virtual disappearance of the anti-war movement, with which I began

this essay, underlines the fact that technical fixes are not enough, and cannot offset fundamental political difficulties. Peace politics has become more complicated in the last decade, and not only due to the USA's invention of the 'quick fix war'. During the Cold War, the overriding threat of nuclear destruction appeared to simplify much of the politics of peace. The slogan 'Better Red than Dead' was maliciously attributed to pacifists, but it did sum up (in a distorted way) the simple fact that the threat of the total destruction of human society seemed to negate any possible political goal for which it might be carried out. Of course, nuclear pacifism still allowed other wars to be fought, and peace politics itself was divided between pacifists who supported no wars and revolutionaries who supported wars of national liberation and other struggles against Western and colonial power. However the Cold War meant that peace politics tended to be the province of those who opposed the West's world role as well as its nuclear strategy.

Even during the Cold War, peace movements struggled with the paradoxes of this position. In the 1980s, the emergence of opposition within the Soviet bloc highlighted the contradictions in the Western nuclear disarmament movement's tendency to reduce the Cold War to an 'equal' conflict over weapons. Eastern European oppositionists often demanded that Western activists support their demands for human rights and what would now be called 'regime change' (Kaldor, 1990). The Western movements were increasingly divided between those who emphasised the linkage of human rights and democracy in the Soviet bloc with nuclear disarmament in dismantling the Cold War (see e.g. Edward Thompson's 1982 polemic), and those who felt that linkage diluted the core issue of nuclear disarmament. The irony of the decade was that the Western movement was largely defeated, and declined, after 1984; the Cold War unwound afterwards as a result of elite détente between Mikhail Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan, beginning around 1986; and it was the seeds sown by the small groups of dissidents that sprouted into the massive democracy movements in countries like East Germany and Czechoslovakia, definitively ending the Cold War in 1989. The decade began with mass protest movements against nuclear weapons in Western European capitals; it ended with mass democracy movements in Eastern European capitals. The links between the two were essential to ending the Cold War.

This dilemma has been magnified in the 'new wars' (as Kaldor, 1999, has called wars that combine international and civil conflict based on identity politics) of the 1990s and 2000s. Anti-war movements have tended to respond to specific Western campaigns as discrete events (for example, the small protest movements against the Gulf, Kosovo and Afghan wars; the huge movement over Iraq). However these campaigns have often been responses to crises that lie within state and society in the zone of conflict. And the effect of Western military intervention is often to transform those crises.

Anti-war movements focused exclusively on 'stopping the war' often appear naïve in their attitudes to underlying conditions. Thus my study of the peace movement in 1990 showed that the movement had no answers to the new problems posed by the Iraqi rebellions and Saddam Hussein's repression immediately after the Gulf War (Shaw, 1996). The recent movement against the USA's Iraqi war was effective in highlighting the lack of legitimacy in the manifest case for war, based on 'weapons of mass destruction'. It did not, however, offer a credible answer to the underlying issue of the war, namely the totalitarian

regime of Saddam, and the latent case (often stressed by Bush and Blair) for removing this regime. Thus the curious divergence between the demands of Western-left and Islamist anti-war activists and the ambivalence felt by many Iraqi exiles (not to mention activists within Iraq), who willed the USA to remove their torturer. The anti-war movement was effective, but it would have been more so if it had actually advocated a credible alternative method of removing Saddam. But that would have taken the movement into the complex politics of the United Nations, sovereignty and international justice, which was probably impossible for a very loose and broad coalition to achieve.

Likewise, as I pointed out above, a simple demand to 'stop the war' left the movement with little to say when the USA predictably did the stop the war, having claimed 'victory' over Saddam, after barely four weeks. This was, of course, the point at which the contradictions of US policy were most sharply revealed. The administration that had spent tens of billions of dollars preparing for war had spent only a tiny fraction of this preparing for post-war administration. The USA had not put planning and resources into restoring basic services, so that electricity and clean water continued to be cut off from millions of Iraqis – not for days, but for weeks and months after the 'victory'. Trigger-happy US troops were quick to shoot Iraqi civilians and ask questions after. Despite the obvious contradictions between different Iraqi factions, the USA had little idea of how to go about constructing a new Iraqi government. Law and order proved fragile, and killings both of US soldiers and of Iraqis continued at a serious rate not just in the immediate aftermath of the war, but for a long time afterwards. (This is written in September 2003, five months after the USA's success, and there appears no early end to any of these problems). Thus the continuing crisis of Iraqi society and politics posed many issues that a movement that had opposed war should have contributed to. Once again, however, the seeming necessity of simple focus in 'movement' politics made such a contribution difficult, if not impossible, to achieve.

One conclusion that we could draw is that a mass demonstration movement is a blunt instrument. In an intense crisis, which poses one seemingly simple question above all others, such movements offer ways in which large numbers of people can offer an answer, and influence more conventional political processes in parliaments, governments etc. But when issues become more complex, and the single question is replaced by many questions, this kind of movement could be less relevant. Indeed we could posit a functional specialisation, since clearly while movements as such often don't offer more complex answers, organizations that are related to and overlap with them – NGOs – do develop more sophisticated and complex analyses and recommendations, and offer alternative, more consistent modes of ongoing pressure. The history of activism, like that of media, in the last two decades could be seen as a movement towards more sophisticated, diverse and specialised forms of action and organization.

However an alternative answer to the limitations of protest movements is that, even within these constraints, they often suffer from over-simplified politics. As in the 1980s, it actually weakens the cause of peace if movements don't offer alternatives to war rather than a simple 'no'. In the twenty-first century, the protagonists in local conflicts, like Saddam's regime, are often perpetrators of gross human rights abuses or even geno-cidists. It is not enough to say that the West should not wage war against them, and to say

this is an issue for their own people: they need to be removed from power and the world community has a duty of solidarity with the oppressed. Simple anti-Western politics, such as fuelled much of the organizing of anti-war protests, are not enough.

Anti-War and Other Social Movements
This essay started by arguing that we need to take the specific characters of social movements seriously: a 'one size fits all' analysis will not work. However, it is obvious that anti-war movements do not exist in a vacuum, unrelated to other kinds of contemporary social movement. The movement against the Iraq War clearly mobilized networks and constituencies that had already been mobilized, not only by earlier campaigns against the US war in Afghanistan, but also by the 'anti-globalization' movement which had organized a new generation of young activists since the late 1990s. Indeed, this relationship repeated a general pattern throughout the history of 'new' social movements in the second half of the twentieth century. There has been constant cross-fertilization of ideas, tactics and activists, so that one movement often leads to another.

However, the specific form of each movement depends on its aims and the structural conditions to which it responds. As I have argued elsewhere (Shaw, 1994), some movements, like the movement against the Iraq War, respond to very specific crises. This means that they tend to be narrowly focussed and find it difficult, as movements, to go beyond their initial objects. Other movements (historically women's movements are good examples) are more diversely based in a range of issues. Clearly the 'anti-globalization' movement is closer to the latter model, which may be why it has lasted longer than the anti-war movement. However the 'anti-globalisation' movement was also, arguably, very incoherently focused, so much that 'anti-globalization' was an inherently implausible idea – not just because activists needed the technology and infrastructure of globalization, but also because global change also offers possibilities for progressive development (as some activists with the new preference for 'global justice movement' use as a way of describing it).

Conclusions
This essay has used a discussion arising from the anti-war movement over Iraq to advance arguments about the changing relations of social movements, media and global politics. Historically, modern social movements (in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) were strongly rooted in subordinate classes in national societies. Their aims centred on class interests and international issues in relation to these; they were closely linked to class-based parties; and their modes of action integrated their social bases through face-to-face organization and printed media. Late modern ('new') movements (in the second half of the twentieth century), in contrast, were based primarily among educated middle class youth. Their aims centred on universal, chiefly global issues; they integrated their bases both through more flexible modes of organization and via mass media dominated by television; and they were often successful to the extent that they pursued single issues free from party agendas.

I have suggested that in the post-1989 global era, simultaneous changes in the political and media contexts have created a crisis of movement activism, with major new challenges and opportunities. The argument of this paper is that so far movements have responded better to
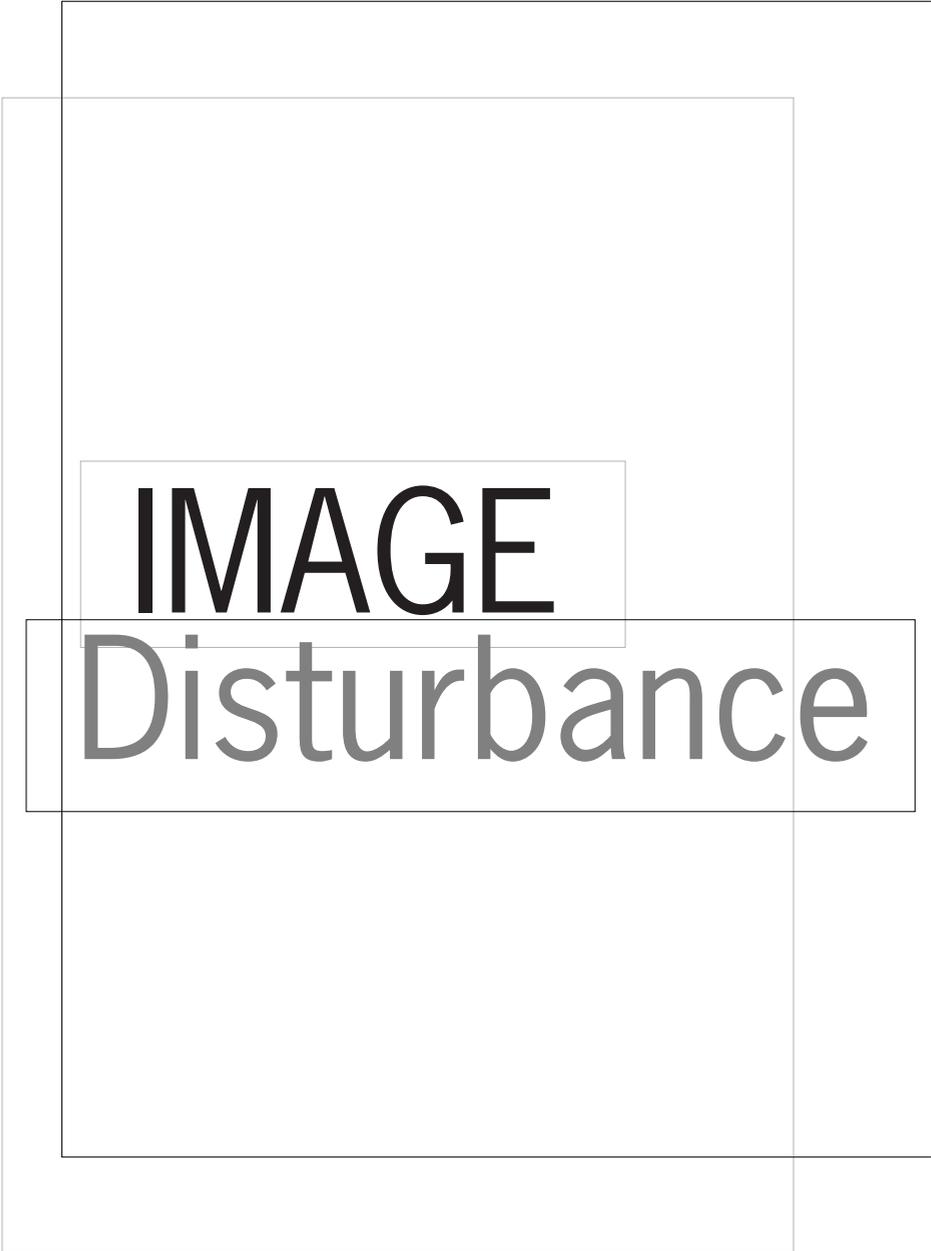
new media than to the transformed political and ideological conditions of the global era. While some herald a new era of movement activism in the twenty-first century, I shall contend that movement politics remains in crisis: the changed political environment has created political and organizational dilemmas that movements have not and may not overcome.

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