Narratives of Defeat: Explaining the Effects of Loss in Social Movements

Karen Beckwith, Case Western Reserve University

Loss in social movement campaigns is commonplace; as in any political contestation, some parties win and some lose. For social movements, the costs of defeat can be enormous, yet such defeats rarely result in the demise of the movement itself. Instead, social movement activists who lose persist in their efforts and engage in repeated attempts to achieve their goals—often, to achieve the same goals. How do losers persevere? One answer to this question may be found in the narratives of defeat articulated by a social movement after loss. This article develops the concept of a narrative of defeat and presents a typology of defeat narratives to hypothesize about how narratives of defeat might effect remobilization efforts, using examples from labor movements in Great Britain and the United States. The article concludes with reflections on the strategic utility of narratives of defeat and suggestions for further research.
contribute to the movement’s recovery and second tries. A social movement may be best positioned for remobilization when activists and leaders construct a narrative of defeat that, after loss, emphasizes the lessons learned from the defeat and offers a postdefeat strategy taking into account those lessons. The most successful narratives of defeat, those most likely to situate a social movement for remobilization, are likely to be those that identify and articulate political learning from loss.

This article briefly reviews recent work on political loss more generally—in war and in social movements—to locate more specifically how loss might be framed by those who lose and how narratives of defeat might be related to subsequent remobilization attempts. Second, I review political science and social movements scholarship on narrative as a concept for analysis, from which I develop the concept of a narrative of defeat and offer an initial typology of defeat narratives. Using examples from the labor movement in Great Britain and the United States to identify different defeat narratives, I hypothesize about relationships between types of defeat narratives and the likelihood of social movement remobilization. Finally, I conclude that narratives of defeat may have positive consequences for remobilization and offer suggestions for future research.

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS, OUTCOMES, AND LOSS
Few scholars have studied loss in the context of social movement activism. Studies of social movement loss have sought primarily to explain failure, by identifying tactical errors, missed opportunities, and comparative advantages of opponents (Banaszak 1996; Piven and Cloward 1979; Rosenblum 1995; Sawyers and Meyer 1999; Suh 2001). Fewer still have focused on the effects of loss, and those few who study effects have focused primarily on the negative consequences of loss (e.g., Gaventa 1980; Mansbridge 1986; Woliver 1993; see however, Gupta 2009; Meyer 2006). Their findings do not emphasize possible positive consequences of loss, such as strategic innovation and successful second tries, nor can they explain them. Identifying narratives of defeat in social movements can serve to explain positive outcomes of losing.

Framing Victory and Defeat
How do social movement activists and other political actors, having experienced evident loss, frame and interpret that experience, and with what potential consequences? In *Failing to Win*, Johnson and Tierney (2006) investigate how loss in international conflict is framed and how perceptions of outcomes—even in cases of evident loss—can transform the meaning of defeat. They ask how we “account for substantive failure on the ground accompanied by widespread perceptions of success, or alternatively, for success on the ground perceived as failure” (2006, 4). Although Johnson and Tierney focus on how observers and activists construct victory from defeat and impose perceptions of defeat upon their apparently victorious opponents, their work illuminates issues of the impacts of loss on future opportunities for both victor and vanquished.

Johnson and Tierney develop a framework for assessing outcome in international conflict, comparing actual outcome to perceived outcome. By actual outcome, or “material outcome” (2006, 25), they mean “the success of each side’s strategy, or how effectively the sides use their resources given the particular environment to make gains (especially those that constitute their core aims)” (27; emphasis in original). To evaluate actual or material outcome, Johnson and Tierney identify five components, each of which may vary by its levels of importance and of difficulty; these include material gains such as (1) absolute gains; (2) gains relative to the opponent; and (3) achievement of core goals; and success in achieving material aims, such as (4) an improved position, postconflict, over the previous status quo (“the price of peace”); and (5) “optimal policy,” where “the policy chosen by the actors achieved the best possible result of all available policies” (25–26). Actual victories can also be evaluated in terms of how important the material achievement was, e.g., “capturing 50,000 soldiers warrants more credit than capturing 50 soldiers” (27). Furthermore, Johnson and Tierney argue that the “greater difficulty of a gain or aim (measured in terms of likely costs incurred in its attainment) also produces extra credit for successfully achieving it (compared with other gains and aims)” (27; emphasis in original).

Perceptions of victory and defeat, however, vary across individuals and also vary across time. Johnson and Tierney argue that “perceptions favoring victory or defeat can become fixed by mind-sets, salient events, and social pressures so that people are bound to see one side as the winner, regardless of what happens on the ground” (2006, 39). Johnson and Tierney use the term “match-fixing” to describe the process by which actors to a conflict, and observers of it, endeavor to shape perceptions of outcome (see Chap. 3). One major factor shaping perceptions of outcome is the set of “cultural biases” or “beliefs about [a society’s past] that are based on stories and myths that develop and change over time” (Schacter 1995, 3; see also Stone 1989, 294; Voss 1996). Similarly, Snow and Benford argue that the most potent collective action frames are those that “[ring] true with extant beliefs, myths, folktales and the like” (1992, 141). The extent to which a social movement’s
narrative history resonates with its underlying beliefs, traditions, and symbols, and the skill with which the movement fits them to its aims and goals, are potentially powerful explanatory variables for shaping understandings of actual collective action outcomes and likely future possibilities. In short, loss can be interpreted, even beyond actual events, and such interpretations may constitute a resource for a social movement, especially when the movement hopes to remobilize.

**Narrative in Social Movements**

In the last two decades, social movement scholars have turned their attention to narrative as a means of addressing conceptual gaps in the literature on social movement framing, discourse analysis, identity construction, public narrative (Ganz 2010, 533–40), the role of emotion and of historical memory in social movements, and meaning making ( Büthe 2002; Davis 2002, 24–25; Fine 2002, 230–31; Katz- enstein 1998, 16–22; Mayer 2014; Polletta 1998; Stone 1989). Few, however, have employed narrative in social movements to understand defeat (although see Jones and McBeth 2010).

Narrative is a form of repeated discourse, in which selected events are linked sequentially, in causal terms, with an identifiable temporal starting point and a conclusion. This definition recognizes that the process of narrative construction is selective; as Patterson and Monroe observe, “we do not narrate all the details of any experience; what we choose to narrate is generally noteworthy because it stands out by posing a problem or exception” (1998, 320). These details and selected events are ordered, with respect for actual chronology. Hence, the process requires the selection of an identifiable starting point for the narrative which serves to locate the audience (the readers or the listeners) on familiar terrain, preparing the audience for reception of the narrative content. Finally, narrative requires constructions of causality, which lead the audience to a conclusion. The ordering of events has a purpose “that provides [the narrative] rationale as a unitary whole and for which . . . the story is told” (Davis 2002, 13). The conclusion “concludes” by ending the narrative and by drawing lessons for the audience. Hence, narratives serve a general purpose, which is to explain and to connect identity and agency (Patterson and Monroe 1998, 325; Young 2000, 73) and to attribute “cause, blame, and responsibility” (Stone 1989, 282). As Davis writes, “Stories do not just configure the past in light of the present and future, they also create experiences for and request certain responses from their audience” (2002, 12).

Narratives, however, cannot be made just as the narrators please. Not only is narrative constrained by “a limited stock of possible story lines [and] extant cultural understandings” (Polletta 1998, 424), narrative in social movements is constrained by actual evidence. There are evidenti- tial boundaries, marked by “material outcomes” (Johnson and Tierney 2006, 25–26), which a narrative cannot violate and whose chronology and sequence cannot be rearranged. Narratives in social movements nonetheless cannot be seen as complete, factually accurate events chronologies. While dependent upon and constrained by evidence, narratives are selective, interpretive constructions, and hence multiple narratives can be produced from similar—or even the same—social movements. In addition, the absence of information and the exclusion of some events may be as important, and potentially as revealing, as the substance of the narrative. Narrative scholars have identified the absence of events or interpretations as including those that are considered “commonplace” or “unremarkable” (Patterson and Monroe 1998, 329) and which do not, in the narrative context, require explanation because they are known and unambiguous.

Finally, narrative construction is a social process that “engages people in a communicative relationship” (Davis 2002, 19). In social movements, narratives both construct and reinforce the collective identity of the audience, providing collective reassurance and invoking historical memory. Moreover, articulation of narrative comes from multiple speakers—social movement leaders, activists and campaign participants, and the mass media—and are received by multiple audiences. Although leaders or key activists are often identified as the source of narrative in social movements, and although individual participants may construct a narrative about their own lives and their relationship to a social movement (Rothenberg 2002), narratives are also constructed in the process of participants jointly constructing and reconstructing the narrative of the social movement, telling each other not only about themselves but about their understanding of the movement. Participants jointly construct, shape, and reinforce social movement narratives in the context of group interviews, consciousness-raising sessions, strategy and planning meetings, and collective media presentations. In this regard, where participants come together to discuss the movement, the narrators are also the audience.

---

2. Davis refers to this as “the basic description” (2002, 11); see also Polletta (1998).

3. Davis identifies possible conclusions of narratives as providing a moral, making a point or presenting a theme in “the unfolding of a story” (2002, 13).
NARRATIVES OF DEFEAT

This article focuses upon narratives of defeat, the stories that social movements tell about the losing outcomes of conflict. In this section, I define narratives of defeat and discuss their particularity as narratives. Second, I develop a typology of common narrative claims regarding defeat. Third, I hypothesize that narratives of defeat are likely to have consequences for remobilization: some defeat narratives may be more likely to prepare a social movement for remobilization and second tries, while other narratives may instead confirm defeat and may be unlikely to lead to remobilization.

Narratives of defeat are a form of social movement discourse, in which selected events are linked sequentially, in causal terms, to explain loss. These narratives employ identifiable temporal starting and ending points and draw conclusions that explain the defeat. Some, but not all, narratives of defeat offer explicit lessons for the future. First and foremost, a narrative of defeat—the story that a social movement tells about the losing outcome of conflict—recognizes some element of loss.

Second, a narrative of defeat can be strategically crafted to make the loss appear better than, or at least different from, what the actual facts might suggest. Narratives of defeat are constrained by actual evidence, such as the number of workers fired or the number of strikers arrested, but the selection of events, their sequencing, and their interpretation can produce a story about the loss experience and the causes of loss. As a result, it is possible for social movement actors (as well as their opponents) to construct multiple defeat narratives. In some cases, multiple actors engage in narrative contests, constructing competing narratives about loss outcomes.

Third, the strength and acceptance of defeat narratives depend upon how well they resonate with already held beliefs. Positive interpretations of loss that resonate with social movement traditions, collective identity, and collective action frames are likely to find welcome among social movement activists and supporters; these traditions, identities, and frames constitute a context for understanding and accepting positive interpretations of social movement campaign outcomes, even in a situation of actual loss (Benford 2002, 54–55).

Finally, narratives of defeat may shape political opportunities for future social movement campaigns. Narratives of defeat are likely to have the impact of what Voss refers to as a “fortifying myth”: “an ideological element that allows activists to frame defeats so that they are understandable and so that belief in the efficacy of the movement can be sustained until new political opportunities emerge” (1996, 253–54). Narratives of defeat differ, however, from fortifying myths. First, they exist independently of their actual impact; that is, narratives of defeat function as independent variables that may serve to recast the political opportunity context positively for future attempts or that may powerfully confirm a defeat in ways that foreclose any subsequent social movement campaign. Second, narratives of defeat may or may not contain strictly ideological elements; it is how their content matches social movement frame components that facilitates their likely impact in shaping future political opportunities; that is, how activists and supporters come to understand their experience of defeat and their prospects for the future.

Framing actual defeat as a positive outcome involves recasting the aims of the defeated actors and valorizing their defense. When a new campaign goal is identified under such circumstances, the campaign outcome may be framed not as an actual victory but rather as success in preventing the opponent from prevailing. In claiming some modicum of success, even in actual defeat, the campaign outcome appears not as an advance of policy or goal, but rather as a defensive success. The defeated party may assert that, given the range of all possible bad outcomes, it nonetheless managed to prevent the worst from happening and held off an even more dreadful result, one that the victor had hoped to inflict. Schivelbusch (2001), in his work on cultures of defeat, makes a similar claim in regard to losing parties in war. Schivelbusch examined three major defeats: the Confederacy in the US Civil War, France in the Franco-Prussian War, and Germany in the First World War; he found that in each case the vanquished party was able to reconstruct some measure of collective identity and to valorize its defeat: "the losing side attains a dignity in its own eyes. . . . the heroic loser is left with . . . the satisfaction of having fought bravely and honorably, if hopelessly, to the bitter end" (2001, 17).

Even a limited narrative of defeat may reinforce collective identity, valorizing having at least engaged in the struggle or conflict and providing a positive assessment of the activists which may—or may not—serve as a resource for future mobilization. For example, a labor movement campaign to achieve specific contract goals or working-condition improvements can fail—that is, those ends are

4. Social movements and policy advocates employ narratives strategically, to socialize the scope of the conflict, to “call in reinforcements,” to recast the conditions that might lead to defeat, and to contain possible opposition (Jones and McBeth 2010, 345). Narratives of defeat may have similar strategic uses by social movements that have suffered losing outcomes.
not achieved—but the movement may construct a narrative of defeat that frames the outcome as nonetheless positive. Among many potential claims, a narrative of defeat may emphasize that the movement and its supporters have stood firm, as they have in the past; they have defended their community, as did those who came before them; they helped to reveal the perfidy of their opponents to the wider public; they increased community solidarity and energized activists, demonstrating that, at some level, they cannot be defeated (Voss 1998, 142–47).

Not all social movements make such defiant claims in defeat. Some movement actors construct narratives of defeat that reinforce the actual negative outcome of their campaign. Meyer (2006, 202) notes the inability or unwillingness of some activists to claim credit even for partial victories and remarks on their narrative embrace of self-blame and self-criticism for what is only partial defeat. Moreover, some movements make no claims whatsoever, failing to construct any narrative of defeat, whether positive or negative. Voss, for example, found that the Knights of Labor, in decline, were silent and concluded that the complete absence of any postconflict framing by Knights of Labor leaders contributed to the organization’s demise. Following actual losses and decline, “there [are] virtually no articles or published speeches assessing the reasons for the Knights’ collapse that appeared anywhere in the country. Neither are there martyrs, nor brave projections of how, next time, the working class would triumph over its enemies. Indeed, there is no sense at all of a next time” (1996, 253).

Despite the emphasis on actual outcome framing and on disparate conflict cases, the research reviewed above suggests that a narrative of defeat—its content, its frames, its resonance with national myths—has an impact upon post-defeat phenomena. As Meyer writes, “In organizing for the future, activists must make sense of the events of the past, explaining previous triumphs and defeats by constructing narratives that resonate with popular beliefs and shared values even as they challenge them” (2006, 206). In contexts where there is widespread agreement about who really lost, perceptions of defeat can position social movement activists for future encounters; a narrative of defeat can recast the outcome in positive terms, to the advantage of those who should be among the vanquished but, in fact, are not vanquished at all.

**Types of Narratives of Defeat and Their Impact on Remobilization in the Labor Movement**

Table 1 presents a categorization of types of narratives of defeat and their likely impact on social movements remobilization. As is common in social movement scholarship, this classification is developed from specific examples from a single movement, in this case, the labor movement, and from a specific set of contests: strikes involving labor union contract bargaining efforts. I employ examples from labor movements and from contract strikes because my field research on mining strikes in Britain and the United States and interviews with strike field organizers and union leaders have allowed me to understand the process by which strike activists explain, or narrate, the experience of social movement campaign outcomes, such as strike resolutions, both in cases of victory (where a strike succeeds in wresting positive contract provisions from management) and of defeat (where a strike produces no material gains and multiple material losses). These examples from the labor movement are illustrative rather than dispositive, and the focus on a single movement, across types of narratives, should diminish the possibility of narrative variation attributable to movement differences (e.g., between race-based movements and peace movements), while remaining potentially generalizable to other social movement campaigns that end in defeat.

Collective bargaining strikes in the labor movement offer a strong test of the relationship between narratives of defeat and remobilization efforts. First, the regularity and frequency of contract expiration means that remobilization opportunities present themselves with known regularity and relative frequency; that is, the next contract expiration date is known, and hence the next remobilization opportunity is identified in advance. Hence, there are multiple cases available for analysis involving the same issues and often the same actors. These actors recognize that there will be opportunities for second tries and therefore should be more likely to have a range of narratives of defeat available and to prepare narratives of defeat that are targeted at future conflicts. In the labor movement, given known recurrence of similar conflict around a similar set of issues and concerns, narratives of defeat may be crucial for sustaining activists after defeat and for preparing them for future mobilization—since the failure to remobilize in these contexts can result in the death of the union (Golden 1997).

Second, victory and defeat are readily identifiable in collective bargaining strikes. A labor union that fails to secure a new contract has clearly lost; where contract provisions remain the same, entail concessions and cutbacks, and/or meet the union’s demands on specific bargaining issues, victory and defeat on discrete contract components are also relatively clear. Moreover, the conclusion of a successful or failed contract negotiation is fixed; strike activism and conflict cease at the point of a signed collective bargaining
agreement.5 Although a labor union may engage in “match fixing” in regard to a postconflict narrative and may frame the outcome as a victory, the terms of the conflict are relatively clear during the conflict, and contract terms are less susceptible to match fixing than may be the case in other social movement campaigns, where success in influencing public discourse, gaining media coverage, and garnering elite support are more open to interpretation and more difficult to measure. Therefore, in collective bargaining strikes, where defeat is evident, a narrative of defeat can be more readily identified as a narrative resulting from defeat.

Table 1 does not account for all possible narratives of defeat but captures several that are evident in the labor movement and offers an initial template for mapping additional defeat narratives evident in other social movements.6 First, a narrative of defeat can recognize and accept actual defeat as a learning opportunity. Social movement leaders and actors recognize defeat and understand it as a source of learning for the next anticipated encounter. In this narrative, defeat is recognized and acknowledged; the events that constitute the defeat are ordered and interpreted as key pieces of evidence that inform understanding of the defeat; and the narrative is explicit about the lessons drawn from the loss.

An example of a narrative of defeat as a learning opportunity is the 1984 United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) strike against Massey Coal. The UMWA leadership initiated selective strikes at several Massey coal operations and subsidiaries in Kentucky and West Virginia to bring Massey operations into the 1984 Bituminous Coal Operators Association agreement. In response to the strike, Massey closed some coal mines, “engaged in a lockout” (Brisbin 2002, 106), hired replacement workers at multiple sites, and instituted a security policy involving armed guards and surveillance cameras. Massey eventually sold several mining operations and continued work at its nonunion mines.

The strike ended in December 1985, with a National Labor Relations Board ruling that “required Massey to bargain as a single employer and offer a right to reinstatement to all UMWA members as ‘unfair labor practice’ strikers. . . . Both Massey and the UMWA claimed victory” (Brisbin 2002, 114). Nonetheless, it took until November 1988 for Massey to sign a new contract; during this time, UMWA members worked under the conditions of the previous (pre-1984) contract. “Under the contract many Massey subsidiaries and contract mines remained nonunion . . . Massey . . . laid off union miners and concentrated production at nonunion mines;” and the UMWA lost an appeal in federal court concerning Massey’s status as a single entity employer (Brisbin 2002, 114).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Defeat Narrative</th>
<th>Likely Impact on Remobilization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Defeat as a Learning Opportunity.</strong> Accepts defeat as a learning opportunity; includes assertions of “we won’t let this happen again,” “we will do things differently next time,” “we learned what doesn’t work.”</td>
<td>Likely to support remobilization.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Defeat as Defiant Survival.</strong> Accepts partial defeat; includes assertions of “we gave as good as we got;” “we weren’t beaten down;” “they don’t want to go through this again;” made the best of what could have been a much worse outcome; anticipates future attempts (Johnson and Tierney 2006)</td>
<td>Likely to support remobilization.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Defeat as the Good Fight.</strong> Valorizes defeat; valorizes the struggle itself. Primarily descriptive and draws no conclusions.</td>
<td>Unlikely to support remobilization.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Defeat as Cheating.</strong> Blames the opponent for cheating, going outside the normal repertoire of contention; claims opponents changed the rules, never behaved like that before. Signals a strategic weakness.</td>
<td>No remobilization; strategic mistake; missed a change in repertoire.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Defeat as Betrayal.</strong> Asserts betrayal by one’s own side as explanation for defeat. Signals a structural weakness.</td>
<td>No remobilization; strong signal that one cannot even rely on one’s own movement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No narrative of defeat (Voss 1996).</td>
<td>No remobilization.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

5. Cases of continuing conflict following a contract agreement, with renegade local unions engaging in disruptive activities, are unusual (and, moreover, such action is subject to internal discipline and legal sanctions). Opposition and contention, however, may persist as union members prepare for subsequent, future contract negotiations, rather than targeting the concluded contract, poststrike. Strikes that end without a contract resolution are often followed by continuing negotiations and labor strife (Cohen 2003).

6. For a taxonomy of narratives in the black civil rights movement, see Couto (1993, 64–65).
Although the UMWA initially declared victory in the Massey strike, the leadership recounted the Massey experience as a loss. In constructing this defeat narrative, the union leadership articulated several lessons of this defeat, a defeat so harrowing that Eddie Burke, a key UMWA field organizer, referred to it as “a scorched earth” strike, one in which everyone lost. One lesson was that the union could not win a strike under the existing labor laws, requiring a future willingness to violate the law regardless of the costs. Cecil Roberts, then UMWA Vice President, made clear: “if you obey the law, you obey the state courts and the federal courts and the National Labor Relations Board . . . you’re never, ever going be able to win a strike in this country. . . .” A second lesson was that the UMWA could not tolerate indiscipline or strike-related violence among its members; hence, the UMWA would have to shift its strategy and employ a community-based campaign of widespread nonviolent civil disobedience. These lessons were expressed in the UMWA’s narrative of defeat in the Massey strike, as recounted by Roberts:

we pretty much lost that strike. It taught us a number of lessons and the least of which was that violence doesn’t work in today’s environment because federal, state agencies, federal government courts, both state and federal, the state police, all the branches of the government come down on you and break the strike. Those forces will always be used against you, but you’ve got to find a way to compete with them also on some level. . . . [W]e just decided that if we were going to win [the Pittston strike], we could not comply with the state laws and federal laws, but we could also not be in a confrontational mode, with violence, because the federal government, the state government is all too powerful to be dealing in that manner with those agencies and entities.

The narrative of the defeat in the Massey strike emphasized the constraints of labor law and the impact of undisciplined violence upon the strike outcome. These narrative components emphasized the need for changes in strike strategy (Beckwith 2000) and regendered strike behavior to facilitate nonviolent mass civil disobedience (Beckwith 2001). Union leaders were committed to and reiterated this narrative, to which union members and community members were receptive in the approach to what became the 1989–90 Pittsburgh Coal strike. The narrative of defeat provided the basis for recasting the strategic context within which that next strike would take place (Brisbin 2002; Yancey 1990). In short, the narrative of the Massey defeat helped to establish a more favorable (or less certainly unfavorable) political opportunity structure in which the UMWA conducted the Pittston strike strategy, one within which Pittston Coal and the Commonwealth of Virginia were poorly positioned to respond. As Burke concluded, “we learned a lot at Massey.”

Social movement actors articulate a second type of narrative: a narrative of defeat as defiant survival. This defeat narrative similarly recognizes and accepts actual defeat but recuperates defeat as a partial victory by recasting the movement’s goals to include valorizing the struggle itself, and it orders and interprets events as encounters where the movement was not defeated at discrete points in the process. This defeat narrative incorporates examples of limited success, where a battle was won in what became a losing war. Successfully blocking the road to a factory, requiring the opponent to answer charges before a court, and achieving a favorable ruling from the National Labor Relations Board are examples of events that are identified in the narrative as evidence that the social movement has stood its ground, has not been completely defeated, and is a likely future contender. Claims such as “we still have our dignity,” “we stood up for ourselves,” “they didn’t beat us down,” and “we’ll get them next time” appear in these defeat narratives and give notice of continuing presence. This defeat narrative also involves stories about the price the social movement has exacted from the opponent. Acknowledging defeat, the movement narrative constructs a causal chain of events that demonstrate how the social movement “made them pay,” with the result that “they won’t want to go through this again.” A narrative of defeat as defiant survival identifies “gains relative to the opponent” (Johnson and Tierney 2006, 25–26), where the weaker party, unable to defeat the stronger opponent, nonetheless inflicts pain and damage and communicates this as the likely cost of future encounters. Envisioning future encounters where the social movement is likely to prevail, a narrative of defeat as defiant survival may serve to prepare the social movement for future mobilization and hence is likely to foster remobilization, rather than retreat, unobtrusive mobilization, or abeyance.

Table 1 presents three additional narratives of defeat (1) as the good fight, (2) as cheating, and (3) as betrayal. A narrative of defeat as the good fight is similar to a narrative of defeat as defiant survival: it acknowledges defeat; it celebrates limited successes; and it valorizes the struggle. Narratives of defeat as the good fight differ from those of defiant survival, however, in that they do no more than valorize the struggle. They make no assertions about future fights; they do not warn opponents of a “next time”; they do not engage opponents by explicit, defiant reference to them; they make no claims about continuing resistance. Because these types of defeat narratives also draw only limited conclusions, in this regard they remain partial narratives. Endings to narratives of defeat as the good fight are often simply endings, rather than conclusions.

The 1984–85 National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) strike in Britain, against the National Coal Board (NCB), is an example of a loss that included a “good fight” defeat narrative. Lasting a year, the strike failed to prevent the closure of any targeted mines; it resulted in job loss for thousands (Winterton and Winterton 1989, 44) and arrests of over 9,700 persons (Reed and Adamson 1985). The Nottinghamshire NUM broke away, crossed picket lines to return to work, and formed a competing Union of Democratic Mineworkers (Winterton and Winterton 1989, 227–31). Characterized as “loss without limit,” the strike was a major defeat for the NUM. Because the NUM was a federated union, competing narratives—or at least multiple narratives—of defeat were likely. One narrative was that of “the good fight.” Winterton and Winterton quote NUM President Arthur Scargill on the issue of the end of the strike and the return to work:

A lot of people will look at this struggle and try to pick out what advances have been made and to do that would be to miss the point. The greatest achievement is the struggle itself, because we have already shown that provided we are prepared to fight against their policies we can prevent their implementation . . . their struggle will inspire workers not only in this country but abroad, who have a completely new outlook as far as the fight for jobs is concerned. (1989, 205)

Valorization of the fact of having engaged in the struggle is a typical ending to a narrative of defeat as the good fight, which is not likely to position a social movement for re-mobilization in the future. This is not to say that such defeat narratives have no merit. To the contrary, narratives of defeat as the good fight may help to construct and to sustain a social movement’s collective identity; they include information about the movement’s efforts and its opponents’ strategic behavior; they feature movement heroes as exemplars; and they identify the boundaries of the social movement’s community. Although such narratives could potentially be used to name those participants, groups, or communities from whom it may be possible to draw support in the future, and to identify what to anticipate in the future, narratives of defeat as the good fight are distinguished primarily by their descriptive nature and their recounting of events, which are not employed as the basis of drawing conclusions about future campaigns or potential conflicts.

Two additional narratives of defeat are evident after a social movement campaign loss: narratives of defeat by cheating and defeat by betrayal. These are complete narratives, insofar as they produce a causal sequence of events that leads to conclusions about the reasons for loss. Although each defeat narrative identifies a set of explanations for defeat, these reasons are more likely to confirm defeat than to explain it.

Defeat by cheating is a defeat narrative that explains the social movement’s loss as the result of opponents violating or evading the usual rules of engagement in a social movement campaign. The reason for the defeat is located as the fault of external actors who were expected to behave differently in interaction with the movement. A narrative of defeat by cheating provides an explanation of loss and constructs a hypothetical counter-narrative of victory: what could have happened if opponents had complied with known patterns of interaction which, in the past, had been the norm and which had served the social movement well. This type of narrative signals a strategic weakness in the movement or the movement campaign: a failure to recognize a shift in repertoire by one’s opponents. A social movement’s claims of opponents’ “violation of rules” or norms is an indication that the opponents engaged in strategic innovation, for which the social movement was unprepared.

An example of a narrative of defeat by cheating emerged from the 1984–85 NUM strike against the National Coal Board. In interactions in previous encounters with the British government, the NUM had relied on the strike and mass picketing to stop work at mines, coal-processing plants, and fuel stations, tactics that had been successful in mining strikes in 1971 and 1974. These tactical successes were reconfirmed by the NUM’s threat to strike in 1981, a threat sufficient to cause the Thatcher government to retreat (Beynon 1985, 13–16). The Thatcher government withdrew, however, to strategize and to prepare for future encounters with the NUM. “Conservative strategy was aimed not at avoiding the crisis but rather at delaying its manifestation.
until the state was prepared” (Winterton and Winterton 1989, 22). By 1983, the Thatcher government was ready to engage the NUM.

With the NCB’s March 1984 announcement of the plan to close Cortonwood Colliery, the NUM responded with picketing, walkouts, and an eventual strike that involved the entirety of British coal mining. The NUM strike strategy relied heavily on mass picketing, to which the government responded by sending the Metropolitan Police force to the coalfield communities to keep order and to ensure that miners willing to cross picket lines could get to work: an unusual use of state coercive forces and a shift in the state’s response to striking miners. The Metropolitan Police responded to mass picketing in ways unanticipated by the NUM: they attacked and arrested picketers, including women, and they were actively violent, even in the context of peaceful picketing. Miners and their supporters recounted both the unprovoked, targeted aggression of the Metropolitan Police and its unanticipated nature; they also expressed their outrage and dismay at this behavior. Beynon identifies changed behavior on the part of the police as early as 1983, as “a clear signal that picketing in 1984 was going to be a lot different. . . . With the closure of exit points on the M6, the use of police in riot gear, the stories of direct and unprovoked attacks by police on pickets, . . . the writing was clearly on the wall” (1985, 17). Part of the narrative of defeat of the 1984–85 miners’ strike includes this narrative of defeat by cheating—that the government changed the rules of engagement between striking miners and the state.11

The narrative of defeat as betrayal is one that constructs the reason for defeat as the fault of other actors—others who should have been supportive of the social movement’s campaign, but were not. This defeat narrative locates loss in the actions of those presumably internal to the movement, but who acted against the movement or, at best, failed to provide the kind of assistance that was both expected and seen to be necessary for success. In short, actors in the movement itself withheld support in the moment of need and hence were the source of defeat. Like a cheating defeat narrative, a narrative of defeat by betrayal not only provides an explanation of loss, it also constructs a hypothetical counternarrative of victory: what could have happened if only other actors had supported the campaign. In defeat by betrayal, the counternarrative hypothesizes a victory that would have materialized had internal actors behaved differently. A defeat by betrayal narrative signals a structural weakness in the movement or in a movement campaign: a split among internal actors and unwillingness among some to support the action.

This narrative is evident in several major strike losses in the United States and Britain. In the labor movement, betrayal accusations and the narratives of defeat that are constructed from them generally identify other union actors as having betrayed the striking workforce. Betrayal narratives point to the unwillingness of international or national union leadership to support strike action, to authorize a strike in a timely way, to provide resources to striking local workers, and/or to negotiate in the true interests of striking union members. Other unions, seen as likely allies, that do not support a strike or union campaign also come to be identified as betraying their fellow trade unionists and contributing to their defeat. Finally, those within a single union, who break away from the union or who present an internal challenge to strike action and decisions about the campaign, are named as traitors whose perfidy is identified as a, if not the, source of ultimate defeat.

An example of a narrative of defeat as betrayal is the 1985 strike by the United Food and Commercial Worker’s local union P-9, in Austin, Minnesota. Local union members who worked as cutters, butchers, and meat packers struck against the Hormel Company in response to wage cuts (Kuhle, Knox, and Ross 1992). The P-9 leadership engaged in direct negotiations with Hormel, sought arbitration (which P-9 lost), and undertook a corporate campaign, engaging in protests and demonstrations that led, ultimately, to the strike in Austin and its spread to other Hormel plants. From the outset, P-9 had little support from UFCW international leadership, and the relationship between P-9 and the UFCW eventually turned into “a running feud” (Kuhle, Knox, and Ross 1992, 55; Schleuning 1994, 10). William Wynn, UFCW president, eventually “ordered an end to the strike and directed all strikers to return to work;” and placed the local union in trusteeship (Kuhle, Knox, and Ross 1992, 59), removing the entire local leadership and seizing P-9’s offices and records.

A narrative of defeat by betrayal was developing during the course of the strike itself. “Local P-9 had taken up the fight . . . only to experience the irony of being destroyed by its international. P-9 had a new message for unionized workers all across America . . . : watch your back; your own

---

11. A defeat narrative of cheating is not a necessary response to strategic innovation by one’s opponents. For example, the defeat of the Albany campaign in the black civil rights movement in the United States has been attributed to the innovative response of local law enforcement (Chong 1991, 185–90), but the movement appears not to have developed a narrative of defeat by cheating as an explanation. Similarly, strategic innovations by mining firms in the United States during the 1980s led the UMWA to their own strategic innovations rather than to an embrace of a narrative of defeat by cheating (Hudson 1993).
union may work against you” (Schleuning 1994, 12; Compa 1986, 14). Rachleff claims that “UFCW president William Wynn and National Packinghouse Division Director Lewie Anderson openly opposed the campaign against Hormel from the very start” and that the “UFCW leadership continued behind the scenes . . . to undermine the strike, with the frequent collusion of other labor leaders” (1993, 82). Rachleff concludes, “the United Food and Commercial Workers Union leadership and the entire superstructure of the AFL-CIO were instrumental in crushing P-9. In the end, their role was probably the crucial one. Had they stood with P-9 . . . it is entirely possible that the combined forces of Hormel and the state might have been turned upside down” (81).

This typology of defeat narratives identifies those likely to emerge from the recognition of loss in a social movement campaign: narratives of defeat as political learning, defiant survival, the good fight, cheating, and/or betrayal. The categorization of potentially common defeat narratives is not intended, however, to suggest that defeat narratives are used separately or even sequentially by social movements. Which narratives and how many, whether they are employed separately or simultaneously, and when are questions for empirical testing. Their actual use by social movements should not be read into the typology itself, which is a heuristic device for asking questions about social movements in campaign defeats and their possible remobilization opportunities.

CONCLUSION: BEYOND THE LABOR MOVEMENT?
Narratives of defeat are likely to be evidenced across a range of failed social movement campaigns, beyond these examples from the labor movement, and common defeat narratives recur (see, e.g., Mansbridge [1986] for the ERA campaign and Meyer [1990, 255] for the nuclear freeze campaign). Acknowledging defeat, these narratives recast defeat and give it meaning: as an opportunity for political learning in what is envisioned as preparation for future encounters (defeat as political learning); as a defiant effort that can be repeated to a different outcome (defeat as defiant survival); as a noble effort that should be valued (defeat as the good fight); as a loss engineered by those who violated the rules (defeat by cheating) or betrayed the cause (defeat by betrayal). In some cases of loss in a social movement campaign, a dominant narrative of defeat is evident; in other cases, multiple defeat narratives are produced, sometimes by the same social movement actors. Narratives of defeat offer considerable insight into the meanings that these actors attribute to their experiences of loss in social movement campaigns; they are also likely to predict and to explain subsequent mobilization attempts—or lack of remobilization. And, as Voss (1996) suggests, failure to develop any narrative of defeat may signal the demise of the entire movement.

The typology offered here contributes to understanding the role of narrative in political conflict by encompassing negative political outcomes and by suggesting how narratives might be strategically deployed by social movements hoping to recover from defeat. This typology of narratives of defeat offers possibilities for further development for understanding how those suffering policy or electoral defeat might signal their likelihood of recovery by articulating specific defeat narratives—or, conversely, making clear the unlikelihood of a second try by blaming others for the negative outcome, accusing opponents of cheating or, ultimately, failing to present a narrative for understanding defeat—even in contexts of favorable political opportunity structures and ample resources (Sawyers and Meyer 1999). Moreover, the focus on narratives of defeat and their potential impact on subsequent mobilization explicitly addresses the issue of social movement campaigns as having cumulative effects, rather than treating each campaign as a fresh start.

Narratives of defeat are unlikely to be limited to a single movement. Labor movements employ a range of defeat narratives, even in the same movement and sometimes in the same labor union, suggesting that actors in other social movements are likely to do the same. Indeed, labor movements with a continuity of experience in contentious engagement with employers, management, and the state may already have a set of narratives of defeat ready to deploy; that a range of multiple defeat narratives is evident within this single movement suggests that these narratives may be more generally employed, in defeat, by other movements. Beyond different movements, different types of campaigns may shape the defeat narrative that movement actors are able to offer. Social movements may be constrained by the heterogeneity of the campaign constituency (e.g., the presence of multiple activist audiences), the broad or narrow scope of the campaign (e.g., comprehensive vs. single issue), and whether or not the movement’s campaign was centralized in a single social movement organization (e.g., a single labor union) or involved a coalition of groups with multiple leaders (e.g., the US peace movement). Moreover, the nature of the defeat may constrain the range of defeat narratives available to a social movement. Clarity of defeat may be more likely to produce a single defeat narrative than might be the case where defeat appears more ambiguous. Where the stated goals of the movement have shifted or moderated across time (see Meyer 1990 on the peace move-
ment), where a social movement may have won on some issues but lost on others, or where social movement actors disagree internally about the extent of defeat and/or the reasons for it (as in the P-9 UFCW strike), multiple defeat narratives may be more typical.

Additional factors contribute to remobilization attempts, including shifts in the political opportunity structure, changes in movement leadership, access to resources, and policy reforms, among others. These factors are likely to shape the type of defeat narrative and to facilitate the connection of discrete components of a social movement’s campaign to specific elements of that narrative. How these factors interact with narratives of defeat may help to explain the transformation of material outcomes of defeat into remobilization attempts that produce successful outcomes in the future. The typology developed herein presents a first step for future research identifying the presence and types of narratives of defeat and for testing the impact of such narratives upon remobilization attempts and subsequent successful outcomes.

Defeat narratives are likely to be transformed across time. In the aftermath of loss, some social movement activists and supporters exit; new participants are eventually recruited. As new leaders emerge, they may envision and articulate new, retrospective narratives of defeat, more optimistic about the past and more selective of discrete experiences that undergird a new narrative, serving to open up new opportunities for mobilization. Across time, social movement leaders and activists may be able to develop a more positive narrative of their history, showing that all is not lost when a social movement loses.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I presented earlier versions of this article at Cornell University, the European University Institute, the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, the Wissenschaftszentrum für Sozialforzung Berlin, and the Working Group of the CWRU Department of Political Science. I am grateful to those who provided critical comments, including Lee Ann Banaszak, Lorenzo Bosi, David Meyer, Donatella della Porta, Dieter Rucht, Sidney Tarrow, and my CWRU colleagues.

REFERENCES


