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*Sociological Theory*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (Nov., 1997), 249-276.

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Sat Sep 13 20:56:40 2003

# Theorizing Meaning Construction in Social Movements: Symbolic Structures and Interpretation during the Irish Land War, 1879–1882\*

ANNE E. KANE

*University of Texas, Austin*

*Though the process of meaning construction is widely recognized to be a crucial factor in the mobilization, unfolding, and outcomes of social movements, the conditions and mechanisms that allow meaning construction and cultural transformation are often misconceptualized and/or underanalyzed. Following a “tool kit” perspective on culture, dominant social movement theory locates meaning only as it is embodied in concrete social practices. Meaning construction from this perspective is a matter of manipulating static symbols and meaning to achieve goals. I argue instead that meaning is located in the structure of culture, and that the condition and mechanism of meaning construction and transformation are, respectively, the metaphoric nature of symbolic systems, and individual and collective interpretation of those systems in the face of concrete events. This theory is demonstrated by analyzing, through textual analysis, meaning construction during the Irish Land War, 1879–1882, showing how diverse social groups constructed new and emergent symbolic meanings and how transformed collective understandings contributed to specific, yet unpredictable, political action and movement outcomes. The theoretical model and empirical case demonstrates that social movement analysis must examine the metaphoric logic of symbolic systems and the interpretive process by which people construct meaning in order to fully explain the role of culture in social movements, the agency of movement participants, and the contingency of the course and outcomes of social movements.*

## INTRODUCTION

Culture—systems of meaning embodied in symbols by which people understand their experience of the world, and in turn act upon it<sup>1</sup>—is now widely acknowledged to be of causal significance in all sorts of historical events, transformations, and processes. Many recent analyses of social movements, revolutions, state- and nation-building, class formation, even geopolitics include culture as an explanatory component of how, for instance, people are mobilized and build political alliances; why they resist and revolt against capitalist and state authority; why they identify themselves as members of nations, nations in opposition to other nations; and how they develop practices and procedures of work.<sup>2</sup> Why? Because after more than three decades of intense theoretical and empirical work, it has been effectively demonstrated that the cultural dimension of social action is as consti-

\*Address correspondence to the author at Department of Sociology, University of Texas, Austin, TX 78712; email: aekane@jeeves.la.utexas.edu. The research for this paper was supported partly by a Summer Research Grant from the University of Texas, Austin. I am grateful to Jeffrey Alexander, Andrew Roth, Hannah Kully, Steven Sherwood, Jennifer DeRose, John R. Hall, Mustafa Emirbayer, Rachel Parker-Gwin, Susan Gonzalez-Baker, William Gamson, Steve Hart, Craig Calhoun, and the anonymous reviewers of *Sociological Theory* for comments and suggestions on this and earlier drafts. I also thank William Sewell, Jr. and Marc Steinberg for sharing their unpublished work, which helped my thinking on certain issues. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Annual Meetings of the ASA, New York, 1996.

<sup>1</sup> This definition, like many similar to it, is derived from Geertz 1973, p. 89.

<sup>2</sup> As proof, culture is now being taken seriously by previously skeptical scholars such as Charles Tilly (1995) and Michael Mann (1993).

tutive of social structure, social order, and social change as material forces. Yet, along with establishing the autonomy of culture<sup>3</sup> and thus its capacity for causal significance, cultural sociologists and historians show that culture is constantly transformed through social action “enabled and constrained” by social structure. Thus, the recursivity of meaning, action, and structure—or more specifically, the mutual transformation of social structure, social action, and cultural systems—has become the focus of many recent works of historical, political, and cultural sociology (e.g., Biernacki 1995; Brubaker 1992; Ellingson 1995; Hall 1995; Jacobs 1996; Lamont 1992; Sewell 1985, 1996b; Somers 1993; Steinberg 1994; Wuthnow 1990).

Underlying the reciprocity of social action, social structuring, and the reproduction and transformation of cultural systems is meaning construction—the process of using cultural models to make sense of experience (Shore 1996:319). Constituted of symbolic structures that people use to understand life and reproduce its social manifestations, culture tends to be a “resilient pattern that provides for the continuity of social life” (Hays 1994:70).<sup>4</sup> But if symbolic structures are strong and flexible—which they are—then how and why do meaning and culture change? This question is crucial to understanding both meaning and how meaning affects the unfolding and outcomes of historical events. I understand meaning to be an *emergent* product of a construction process involving the analytically separable variables of cultural meaning, people’s interests (from spiritual to power), social structural conditions, and contingent events. Therefore, to understand how meaning is constructed we must find the conditions and mechanisms that bring together these variables and facilitate and allow change.

Drawing on semiotic, structural anthropologic, and hermeneutic theory, I propose an explanation of how meaning is constructed and cultural systems transformed in historical events, particularly those precipitated by and involving social movements.<sup>5</sup> I argue that meaning construction must be analyzed in the first and the last instance in reference to the internal, or the semiotic, structure of symbolic systems. Here I am not claiming a causal priority of semiotic systems over human agency, contingent events, or structural conditions, but that people do refer first to cultural models as they try to make sense of situations and shape their strategies for action. My first theoretical assertion, then, is that the locus of meaning and therefore the condition for meaning construction is symbolic structures. More specifically, I assert that the autonomous quality of culture rests on the *metaphoric* nature of symbols and the patterned relationship of symbols within a structure, and that this characteristic of symbols is a fundamental key to how meaning is constructed and why it can change. As metaphors, symbols strongly but ambiguously signify social relationships, conditions, and experiences through associations of similarity and difference between separate entities. Symbols connote multiple meanings and evoke various emotions associated with particular meanings. Because they are polysemous, symbols are transformable. The

<sup>3</sup> Because cultural systems are structures composed of symbolic elements, patterns, and processes of self-reproduction and transformation which transcend the immediate context for action, we can say that culture is “relatively” and “analytically” autonomous, i.e., independent, of other social structures. Of course, culture is interrelated (mutually informing and informed) with concrete social and material life. In doing cultural analysis it is important to understand both the “analytic and concrete” autonomy of culture (Kane 1991). “Only by [first] strongly separating culture in an analytic sense from both action and social structure . . . , and then reconfiguring it in particular and specific models with action and social structure . . . , can we determine the causal significance of culture (Alexander and Smith 1993:158–59; see also Alexander 1990; Biernacki 1995; Sewell 1985, 1996; Somers 1995a).

<sup>4</sup> There are numerous, and conflicting, theories regarding why and how culture maintains social stability. Recent theoretical work includes Alexander and Smith 1993; Bourdieu 1977, 1984; Giddens 1984; Sahlin 1981; and Sewell 1992a.

<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that meaning construction and meaning transformation are not being conflated here: when people use cultural models to make sense of experience, they do not always change those models, though change is always possible, due to the nature of cultural models.

particular power and specific use of symbols is dependent both on their relationship to other symbols in a symbolic structure and on how people interpret them.

In the attempt to make sense of experience, people bring together, through *interpretation*, the components of meaning—cultural models, individual and collective memory, structural conditions, and current events. Therefore, my second assertion is that interpretation is the key mechanism of meaning construction and meaning transformation. In real life, interpretation is a process that recursively stretches from private thoughts to public articulations to collective interactions and practical activity, and not necessarily in that order. And in the end, collective action and social practices consolidate cultural meaning, “conventionalizing” and institutionalizing it (Mach 1993:25). However, *analytically* social action is the “last stop” in the interpretive process of meaning construction. Because meaning is embodied in the specific arrangement of symbols in cultural models, and cultural models are the first point of reference when people interpret experience, these structures should be the initial theoretical and analytic focus in studying meaning construction. In no case should the internal structure of culture be omitted from the analysis of meaning construction.

I demonstrate this conceptualization by analyzing meaning construction and transformation during the Irish Land War of 1879–1882. Though this social movement against the Irish landlord system and the British government continued in ebbs and flows until 1903, the events during the period I explore here were the most widespread, dynamic, and formatively portentous. The Irish Land War began as a tenant farmer protest movement against high rents, evictions, and landlord intransigence in the face of an agrarian crisis precipitated by the European-wide agricultural depression of the late 1870s and Ireland’s consecutive crop failures in 1878 and 1879. Seizing the opportunity for mass mobilization and renewal of Irish political energy, the nationalist movement immediately harnessed itself to the agrarian agitation. The Land War developed into the pivotal movement, according to most analysts,<sup>6</sup> against the landlord system and British domination in Ireland. The immediate result of this first phase of the land movement was the Land Act of 1881, which drastically changed the structure of Irish land tenure.<sup>7</sup>

The Land War is an excellent vehicle for the investigation of meaning construction in social movements not because of its successful outcome, but because the success of the movement was so unlikely.<sup>8</sup> With the exception of the Catholic Emancipation movement of the 1820s, no previous campaign for Irish independence, tenant rights, or Catholic freedom had been productive, due largely to the inability of nationalists, tenant farmers, and the Church to formulate shared understandings of these issues. In fact, the three groups had historically thwarted the goals of each other, and thus themselves, in protecting their own self-perceived interests.<sup>9</sup> The diverse cultural orientations of these groups (which I discuss below), due in part to their differential experience of British rule, led to near

<sup>6</sup> These include but are not limited to Larkin 1975; Bew 1978; Clark 1979; Moody 1982; Jordan 1994; O’Callaghan 1994; and Bull 1996.

<sup>7</sup> By establishing commissions to determine fair rents and by allowing tenants the right to sell their interest in a holding (based on improvements they might have made), the Act essentially created a form of co-possession between landlord and tenant, whereas before the landlord had absolute rights.

<sup>8</sup> Some analysts question the success of the movement, as measured by the Land Act of 1881: it did not achieve the stated goal of the movement—peasant proprietary, and worse, thousands of tenants who were in arrears could not benefit from the terms of the Act (Bew 1978; Jordan 1994). However, other analysts (including this one) measure the movement’s success in terms of its eventual outcome—contributing to the eventual termination of landlordism in Ireland and to the independence movement. More important, as a social movement that garnered the support of the majority of the Irish population and was able to force the government’s hand in reform, the land movement can be judged successful.

<sup>9</sup> These previous movements include the Repeal Movement and the Young Irelander Movement (1840s), the Catholic Education Movement (“University Question,” 1840s), the Tenant Right Movement (1850s and 1870s), the Fenian Movement (1860s), the Amnesty Movement (1868), and the Home Rule Movement (1870s). On these movements and the inability of Irish social groups to form alliances, see Comerford 1989; MacDonagh 1989; and Larkin 1980, 1987, 1990.

intractable political divisions among them. Furthermore, these groups fragmented internally along “class”—small, middle, and large farmers; political—constitutional federalists and radical separatists; and doctrinal—ultramontane and Irish patriotic (within the Gallican tradition)—lines. Conflict within the groups produced as big an obstacle to political alliance and movement mobilization as conflict between the groups. What then made the land movement that erupted in 1879 different? How do we account for the successful alliance and mobilization of the tenants, nationalists, and Catholic Church during the Land War?

Elsewhere I have argued that the Irish tenant farmers, nationalists, and clergy were able to forge an alliance largely because they constructed a new ideology, one that encompassed yet transcended the diverse and conflicting symbolic systems brought to the land movement by these and other groups (Kane 1994, 1996). Here I take the argument one step further and attempt to develop its more general theoretical implications: as meaning construction allows people to come to shared understandings (the basis of identity, ideology, frames, and specific discourse), and shared understandings are crucial to alliances, solidarity, and mobilization, being able to explain and analyze meaning construction is fundamental to understanding political alliance and mobilization in, as well as the outcomes of, social movements.

The applicability of my explanation of how and why meaning construction occurs is not limited to social movement analysis; it can be extended to a range of collective action and social phenomena. However, for important reasons social movements are particularly rich mines for studying collective meaning construction. First, the complicated contexts in which movements occur allow analysis of the interplay of diverse variables in collective action. Especially relevant is the contention between power holders and those making demands for structural change, and the diversity of the movement participants and “discourse communities” (Fraser 1992; Jacobs 1996). Other forms of collective action—such as riots or strikes—may not afford enough components and complex dynamics for theoretical generalization. Second, the relatively long duration of social movements allows for the emergence of patterns of action, impacted by diverse variables, which may be fleeting in outbursts of other types of collective action. Finally, social movements are not only good “laboratories” for researching meaning construction, they are a major component of modern social life (e.g., Alexander 1996; Tarrow 1994). Because social movements are crucial arenas of social action and structuring, developing strong theories of social movement meaning construction is imperative to understanding their wider historical consequences.

## CULTURAL SOCIOLOGY OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Varied “constructionist” perspectives drive influential and innovative studies of culture in social movements (e.g., Benford 1993; Berezin 1994; Ellingson 1995; Gamson 1992; Polletta 1996; Steinberg 1994; Tarrow 1994; Voss 1994). However, social movement analysts divide over two main theoretical issues concerning culture. First, analysts disagree over the locus of meaning: Do we find meaning in the symbolic structure of culture systems, or is it manifest in concrete practices? Second, movement analysts disagree over who is doing the meaning construction, and why. Theorists taking one side of the first issue usually side similarly on the second. For example, William Sewell, Jr., takes the autonomy of symbolic structures seriously and recognizes that a wide variety of participants contribute to meaning construction in contingent and conditioned historical events (1985, 1996b, 1996c). On the other hand, Robert Wuthnow sidesteps meaning and looks at symbolic construction and manipulation as the preserve of various types of elites engaged in power struggles (1987, 1990). Granted, Wuthnow’s work seems to take an extreme stand, as he

has advocated giving up the “problem of meaning” in order to avoid idealism in cultural analysis. Yet, I cite Wuthnow because the problem as he perceives it is that meaning is unknowable, concealed in both the internal worlds of individuals and in structures of culture (Kane 1996; see also Calhoun 1992; Rambo and Chan 1990). Wuthnow does not deny the importance of meaning, only its capacity to be empirically studied. And Wuthnow’s understanding, and avoidance, of meaning is an important part of a broader current of cultural analysis, a “culture-as-practice” perspective.<sup>10</sup>

This perspective concentrates on social practices and institutions within which people use culture in order to explain the power of symbolic systems in maintaining social orders and contributing to social transformations (Bourdieu 1977; Lamont 1992; Powell and DiMaggio 1991; Swidler 1995). It largely ignores meaning as it is embedded in autonomous symbolic structures, and instead defines meaning as “context, as the other practices in which a text or ritual is embedded” (Swidler 1995:28). Furthermore, interpretation can only be analyzed from its concrete social manifestation. Meaning construction, from this theoretical perspective, occurs from the use of culture (public symbols, practices, power) in concrete situations, whether extraordinary or everyday.

Clearly, social practices must be a major concern in analyzing meaning construction. To its credit, this emphasis on practice has contributed to understanding cultural meanings as contradictory, contestable, fragmented, and changeable. It has also revealed how practical action founded on power relations, struggle, and instrumental intentions influences meaning construction. Moreover, it is clear that practices are essential to establishing, reproducing, and transforming cultural systems. After all, the “cultural convention which in the last instance determines [symbolic] meaning” is the collective use in social interaction of symbolic elements, codes, and systems (Mach 1993:25). However, by concentrating exclusively on practices and ignoring the internal structure of symbolic systems and how the metaphoric nature of symbols contributes to the variability of individual and collective interpretation, the culture-as-practices perspective has no anchor for analyzing meaning construction. Analysts working within this perspective usually follow one of two misguided paths to understanding meaning construction.

One path, exemplified by “neo-institutionalism,” offers a theory of practical action and cultural construction that is highly structured and static. Practical action, generally conceived in instrumental terms, determines cultural norms which, once established, become rule-like and embodied in institutions. These “shared cognitions” circumscribe what has meaning and what actions are possible. Once a pattern of cognition is institutionalized, its reproduction is assured through “taken-for-granted” and routine social interaction (Meyer and Rowan 1991; DiMaggio and Powell 1991; Zucker 1983). The recursivity of this model—in which interpretation is really habit, and symbolic elements, as rules, have but one meaning—negates the contingency, agency, and emotion involved in meaning construction. Consequently, theorizing cultural change is problematic in this model.

Following the second path, represented by the “tool kit” view of culture (Swidler 1986, 1995), analysts conceptualize symbolic meaning as fragmented, or at least “fragmentable.” In other words, meaning is not derived from coherent structures of symbolic elements; therefore, cultural elements can be mixed and matched to suit specific circumstantial needs. This perspective seems to be the theoretical basis of the emerging orthodoxy on culture in social movements; and as it is operationalized in social movement analysis, culture tends to be analyzed as a tool or resource, and meaning construction as an instrumental and rational process, usually dominated by organizations and leaders. Many social movement analysts now discuss meaning construction as “framing,” “the conscious stra-

<sup>10</sup> I borrow the term “culture-as-practice” as it is used by Sewell (1996c).

tegic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action" (McAdam, MacCarthy, and Zald 1996:6; see also Snow and Benford 1992). In keeping with the tool kit vision of culture, researchers employing frame analysis concentrate on how "symbols, values, meanings, icons, and beliefs are adapted and molded to suit the movement's aims" (Johnston and Klandermans 1995:9; see also Swidler 1995). Not only does this type of analysis ignore the internal structure of meaning systems, indeed the content of meaning systems, it assumes that symbolic elements—and what they mean—do not change, that they are just manipulated to convey different meanings.

To be sure, social movement analysts who employ frame analysis have made significant contributions to understanding important components in the process of meaning construction. For example, from his career-long work on social movements, William Gamson demonstrates that political consciousness derives from the interplay "between individuals who operate actively in the construction of meaning and socio-cultural processes that offer meanings that are frequently contested" (1992:67). Using his conceptualization of "micromobilization," Gamson theorizes the mechanisms of interactions—in demonstrations, meetings, and a host of other "encounters"—in which meaning construction occurs (1992:71–73).

What Gamson and other practitioners of framing analysis do not recognize or analyze, however, is the "autonomy" of culture structures. Although the causal significance of culture in social movements is taken seriously within frame analysis, culture as semicoherent (Sewell 1996c), relatively autonomous (Alexander 1990) systems of meaning is not. By excluding the structural logic of cultural models, and how people interpret those models, in the analysis of meaning construction, frame analysts tend to misconstrue cultural causality in social movements and often inadequately analyze the outcomes.

For example, one new work on the Irish Land War that looks explicitly at meaning construction using the assumptions (though not the terminology) of frame analysis is Margaret O'Callaghan's *British High Politics and a Nationalist Ireland*. O'Callaghan is correct to suggest "that the most significant aspect of the Land War was the construction of new myths through the language and imagery used by Nationalist organisers"; but wrong in concluding that "All significant transformations wrought were due to central leadership and control" (1994:7). In O'Callaghan's account, the interaction between the nationalist political organization in Ireland and British government policy determined the course of events during the Land War and the transformation of Irish political culture. O'Callaghan's analysis does clarify for the case of the Land War a crucial component in social movements: "the intimate and symbiotic connection" between the dominant and contending powers, explored here in "the nature of nationalist manipulation and British government policy" (ibid.: 5). Yet, according to O'Callaghan, the nationalist leaders were not only politically manipulating the British government, they were culturally manipulating the Irish people: "The creation of a rhetoric of power that united individual economic self-interest with the fate of an independent Ireland . . . was the central political achievement of those who directed the so-called Land War" (ibid.).

The conceptualization of meaning construction that I present counters this perspective, which sees movement organizations and leaders as the primary meaning makers, able to mobilize people through strategically manipulated cultural resources around predetermined goals. In this case, I challenge O'Callaghan's claim that land movement leaders on their own channeled and transformed through manipulation of symbolic resources the Irish tenant farmers' visions and demands of land ownership into a specific and particular vision and demand of Irish nationalist independence. I argue that meaning construction—and thus, formulation of movement ideology, goals, and strategies—does not just happen "at the top" and then gets handed down, *fait accompli*, to masses who unquestioningly embrace

and internalize it. Rather, because of the metaphoric nature of symbols and the essential mechanism of interpretation, meaning construction is a multipath process between movement leaders and participants.

Unquestionably, leaders do attempt to use cultural resources for strategic purposes. And because leaders, elites, and notables—whether League executives, parliamentarians, local newspaper publishers, or clergy—delivered the majority of speeches at land meetings, it may seem that they were in fact constructing meaning. However, interpretation is a key component in the process of meaning construction; and it is unlikely that recipients of cultural messages interpret them exactly the way the issuer intended. As Barthes points out, “to hear is not only to perceive . . . it is also to construct” (1988:115). Everyone listening to a speech at a land meeting (or reading it in a newspaper) had to interpret it and construct their own sense of it. As “cultural entrepreneurs” movement leaders have no ultimate control over how people will interpret symbolic rhetoric and images, what symbolic models individuals bring to bear in their interpretations, or the specific meanings individuals will construct from those symbolic elements. To analyze social movements as if leaders and organizations have this control is to negate the contribution of culture to the agency of movement participants, the contingent nature of how movements unfold, and the multiple possibilities for movement outcomes.

The present study takes as its point of departure social theory that posits social and cultural structure as the basis of social action and order, and looks to the concert of symbolic processes and practical action in concrete events to ascertain how structural transformations occur.<sup>11</sup> A wide and varied body of sociological work has specified the role of different components in this process: meaning structure (Alexander and Smith 1993; Rambo and Chan 1990; Sewell 1996c), narrative (Hall 1995; Jacobs 1996; Smith 1994; Somers 1992; Somers and Gibson 1994), ritual (Berezin 1994; Kane 1996; Sewell 1996b), myth (Lincoln 1989; Mach 1993), discourse (Alexander and Smith 1993; Steinberg 1994), and event analysis (Abbott 1992; Sahlins 1981, 1991; Sewell 1996a, 1996b). My aim here is to present a framework which, while incorporating all these components, posits meaning structure as the primary basis of meaning construction, and interpretation of meaning structure as the primary mechanism for meaning construction and transformation. I turn first to the theoretical conceptualization.

## SYMBOLIC STRUCTURES, INTERPRETATION, AND MEANING CONSTRUCTION

Meaning is the sense people make of the world, or some aspect of it—particularly past and present experience and events, and their expectations and aspirations for the future. Meaning is embedded in and accessed through cultural systems, cognitive schema intersubjectively shared by a social group (D’Andrade 1987:112). The connection of cultural systems to individual and collective experience and memory (Shore 1995), the multiple meaning systems by which people understand their lives (Calhoun 1995; Dirks, Eley, and Ortner 1994), and the particular conditions of actors’ external worlds also figure into meaning. In any instance of meaning construction, each of these latter three components and their interrelations come into play in reference first to a cultural system; and it is through interpretation that all the components of meaning are linked.

Symbols are the building blocks of cultural systems. Whether word or image, a symbol represents a generalized conceptualization, or shared understanding, of empirical objects, conditions, and events. Symbols are first signs in that they represent something definite: for example, in capitalist society, “rent” denotes payment for use of someone else’s prop-

<sup>11</sup> See especially the work of Sewell (1992a, 1996b, 1996c).



erty. A sign becomes a symbol when its “direct, primary, literal meaning designates, in addition, another meaning which is indirect, secondary, and figurative and which can only be apprehended through the first” (Ricoeur 1974:12). An example from the Land War illustrates: in nineteenth-century Ireland, rent symbolized to most Irish tenant farmers their oppression and domination by landlords and Britain.

Two principles of symbolism are absolutely critical to understanding and explaining meaning construction. First, the basis of symbolic representation is not an intrinsic, natural, and fixed relationship between the symbol and the object it signifies (Saussure 1985). Instead, the relationship is metaphoric (Eco 1985; Leach 1976; Ricoeur 1974, 1976).<sup>12</sup> As such, symbolic representation implies a connection of similarity between two different things, and is constituted of a three-way relationship between an already established concept in the mind, the sense image, and the empirical object (Leach 1976:17–22; Saussure 1985:31). The institution of rent and the act of paying it (sense image) reminded the Irish of landlord power and control, and of their own oppression (empirical object). But this evocation was metaphoric: rent and oppression, strictly speaking, belong to different contexts—one is a legal contract, the other a political condition. It was the Irish collective experience of conquest, land confiscation, and repression (the established mental concepts) that connected rent with oppression.

Of course, this connecting process is not automatic—rent does not necessarily become a collectively shared symbol of oppression. The polysemous nature of symbols weighs against such automatic connection. On its own, a symbol can represent different meanings to different people because what a symbol does represent involves a complex and ambiguous series of associations between sense images and mental concepts. The second critical point then is that meaning is derived from symbols in relationship to each other. In other words, meaning is dependent on the internal structural arrangement of concepts in complex patterns of similarity, difference, and opposition (Lévi-Strauss 1966). For example, the profane meaning of “rent” and its connotations of injustice and insecurity to Irish tenant farmers derived from its relationship to the sacred conceptualization of “land,” and the vilification of “landlords” who had fraudulently acquired the land of Ireland. These symbolic patterns, or codes, are built up from historically transmitted meanings and transformed generationally. In later nineteenth-century Ireland, the meaning of rent in relationship to land and landlordism for the Irish tenant farmer was predicated on historical understandings of conquest and confiscation, famine and repression, and on current perceptions of landlords’ disregard for the tenants’ deteriorating situation. This structural relationship of symbols thus lends cultural models durability. On the other hand, the relational nature of symbolic meaning, together with the metaphoric quality of symbols, is why and how meaning changes. If symbolic meaning is created by the relationship of one symbol to another, and another, and so on, alteration of one symbolic element transforms the whole. To understand how culture can be both stable and changeable, and to answer our primary question of meaning construction, we must turn to the process of interpretation.

Interpretation is a volatile process that occurs on two analytic levels—the individual and the collective. On both levels, people engage in a double interpretation: they interpret experience using cultural models, but in so doing they also interpret the symbolic elements in the model itself.<sup>13</sup> Let us start with the latter process. According to Ricoeur, symbol and interpretation are correlative concepts and processes. To be symbols, the hidden meanings of signs must be uncovered, and interpretation is the work that does this deciphering,

<sup>12</sup> For an excellent synthetic exposition of the metaphoric nature of symbolism, as well symbolic construction in general, by a sociologist, see Mach (1993, chap. 2).

<sup>13</sup> For related but differently focussed discussions of this double interpretation, see Alexander (1988a:314), Kane (1996:166–68), and Sahlins (1981:68–70).

“unfolding the levels of meaning implied in the literal meaning” of a sign (Ricoeur 1974:12). Because symbols and what they signify belong to different contexts, when people are confronted with a symbol (such as “rent”), or when they use it to make sense of a specific situation, the interpretation involves metaphoric transition from one context to another. Rent does not naturally mean oppression, starvation, or injustice. But in the interpretive process, the symbol is processed through other historically established conceptualizations and meaningful connections to other symbols. Thus, extending the example, rent was collectively connected cognitively and emotionally with the historical experience of Irish tenant farmers (conquest by England, confiscation of lands, subjugation to landlordism) and associated with other symbols that represent this experience—for example, the British government and landlords.

In both everyday life and extraordinary times, this process of interpretation is complex, relying on metaphoric analogy and the extension of symbolic meaning. In everyday life people more handily accommodate new but relatively mundane experience to given cultural models, and through everyday practice tend to reproduce the culture structure (Bourdieu 1977; Giddens 1984; Sahlins 1981). But in extraordinary circumstances and events, such as social movements—when, on the one hand, people are confronted with new experiences that they cannot interpretively “normalize” with the conventional symbolic model, and, on the other, when the interpretive act becomes laden with emotion—interpretation tends to be creative. How?

Symbolic communication and interpretation consists not only in the translation of symbols according to cultural convention (i.e., the symbolic structure and its established meaning), but, as demonstrated by Ricoeur, also in the extension of translation into analogical creation. To reiterate, symbols are ambiguous and “opaque” since they are “given by means of analogy based on literal signification” (Ricoeur 1974:317). Symbolic creativity is possible because of this ambiguity and opacity: one meaning (the literal) analogically indicates a second meaning. This extension is both enabled and constrained by the number of analogies indicated by the first meaning and by the realm of a person’s or the collective experience (Ricoeur 1976:45–69). Everyday life usually does not stimulate such creative extension, though “every act of symbolic attribution puts the symbols at risk, makes it possible that the meanings of the symbols will be inflected or transformed by the uncertain consequences of practice” (Sewell 1996c:25). But in the often emotional effort to make sense of novel or difficult situations, this analogically creative process is set in motion within the individual, generating new ideas, thoughts, and emotional sentiments.

Individual ideas and sentiments, provoked by the symbolic analogical extension, become part of the empirical phenomenon to be interpreted collectively when they are made public. For example, it was not just the agricultural crisis, the reaction of landlords, and British intransigence but also the sentiments and thoughts that were provoked among the majority of the Irish in their effort to interpret the crisis that were addressed in public arenas during the Land War. But how are individual sentiments made socially comprehensible, especially if they are new or newly manifest?

Just as individual interpretation of experience is structured by conventional symbolic systems, so must individual thoughts and ideas be publicly articulated and put into dialogue with others. Discourse is this articulation, through the intertwining of particular symbolic associations and codes with social relationships and environments. To paraphrase Ricoeur, discourse screens and reduces the possible meanings of the symbols people use to communicate (1976:17). Thus, discourse is predicative (*ibid.*: 1–23); a discourse makes an assertion or argument about specific issues or problems.

Discourse is both structured and made concrete and socially available through various modes, primarily narrative. Narratives, including myths, are stories through which an indi-

vidual and/or community comes to understand itself. Narratives put into play—employ—characters, space, and time; and by giving history a specific orientation, narratives allocate moral responsibility, causality, and agency and provide exemplary models for action (Ricoeur 1974:293; Smith 1994; see also Hall 1995; Lincoln 1989; Somers 1992). In other words, narratives provide a particular symbolic understanding of events and thus a vehicle by which people can (but not always will) make metaphoric associations in the same particular direction.

Thus, discourse provides the basis for social interaction, whether harmonious or conflictual (Alexander 1992:297–98), and for collective meaning construction and transformation. Discursive interaction becomes contentious when symbolic understandings and expression collide. For example, though all Irish tenant farmers tended to sacralize “land,” as a symbolic concept it held a specific meaning to subsistence farmers—security and stasis, which was different from that held by large grazier tenants—opportunity and mobility. Though often contentious, and therefore usually conceptualized as “competitive,” this interaction does not necessarily end in one meaning prevailing over another, as frame analysis might indicate (e.g., Ellingson 1995). Instead, discursive contention usually resolves through symbolic fusion and combination and produces an emergent “new” meaning (e.g., Alexander and Smith 1993; Battani, Hall, and Powers 1997).<sup>14</sup>

During the Land War, an evolving discourse of retribution organized various symbolic codes—such as those containing rent, land, and landlords on the one hand and political domination, nation, and Britain on the other—into a new cultural model of militant claims for social and national independence. Yet, as we shall see, during the course of the Land War the radical discourse of retribution collided with a moderate discourse of conciliation that existed both within and outside the movement. This contention provoked the construction of new meaning within the movement that combined and transcended the two discourses.

Depending on historical context, a range of symbolic practices, including habit and routine at one end of the spectrum and ritual at the other, activates and solidifies collective sentiments through narrative discourse; and leads to either cultural and social continuity or transformation.<sup>15</sup> Sahlins (1981) shows that this reconstruction happens as people try to fit new experience into established cultural models, in both “everyday” life and rituals, and in times of social upheaval. As Sahlins (1981, 1995) and Kertzer (1988) demonstrate, disjunction between perception/experience and established cultural models opens the door for meaning reconstruction. And disjunction can occur in arenas of collective interaction and ritualistic events (e.g., Sewell 1996b). In any case, meaning construction and reconstruction is based on collective interpretation; what results from this process is highly contingent. It is the collision of new experience with conventional meaning systems, and the individual and collective interpretation of both, that provides both the opportunity and the open-ended path for meaning construction.

Having laid out the elements and processes that give culture not only its autonomous nature but also its ability to change, let me sum up my theory of meaning construction. Meaning is predicated on the metaphoric nature of symbols and the patterned relationships of symbols in cultural models. Furthermore, symbols are transformable because their meanings are ambiguous and polysemous. Individually and then collectively, people interpret

<sup>14</sup> These authors do not explicitly make this point, but the process of “discursive combination” can be seen in their respective empirical analyses.

<sup>15</sup> It is important however to keep in mind Marshall Sahlins’ point that the dichotomy of continuity/change is somewhat false: “continuity is not the same thing as immobility; indeed *the strongest continuity may consist in the logic of cultural change*” (1995:415; italics in the original). See also Sewell (1992) for similar, extended discussion. On ritual and ritualistic action, see Durkheim (1965), Turner (1969), Moore and Myerhoff (1977), Sahlins (1981), Alexander (1988b), Hunt (1984, 1988), Roth (1995), Sewell (1996b), and Kane (1996). For practical action, see Bourdieu (1977, 1984), Giddens (1984), and Powell and DiMaggio (1991).

and rearrange symbols and meanings in the process of acting on those meanings in a world of structural conditions and contingent events. But this reconstruction of meaning happens in reference to a symbolic structure as well as in reference to its use. Analytically, it is the meaning embedded in a symbolic structure that is *in the first instance* the basis of cultural change; the interpretation of symbolic systems the primary mechanism.

### THE PROCESS OF MEANING CONSTRUCTION DURING THE LAND WAR

The best way to substantiate my thesis is to demonstrate empirically the specific transformation and construction of symbols and meaning during a social movement. This I do using two Land War processes as the windows for analysis. After briefly discussing the conditions upon which the Irish land movement emerged and grew, I first examine the main discursive struggle within the movement. This analysis provides a deeper account of early movement symbolic contention and demonstrates that transformed meanings of critical symbolic concepts such as “confiscation” emerged from this conflict. Second, I reconstruct specific instances of symbolic contention and creativity at land meetings to reveal again how meanings were transformed in the symbolic collision and rearrangement, through interpretation, of the “old” symbols of rent and constitutionalism.

#### *Emergence and Development of the Land Movement*

Despite the overall prosperity that tenant farmers enjoyed in post-Famine Ireland, an economic downturn in the late 1870s forcefully exposed the problems inherent in the landlord system (Vaughan 1994). The land movement began in the western province of Connaught, in County Mayo, which contained the bulk of the smallest and poorest tenancies in the country and those hardest hit by the depression and failed harvests of 1878 and 1879.<sup>16</sup> The idea for organizing tenant farmer grievances and protest into a social movement came primarily from nationalist leaders (such as the former Fenian<sup>17</sup> and radical nationalist, Michael Davitt), who understood the urgency of the land question and how it could be used to mobilize the majority of the Irish against Britain. Local leaders of both the nationalist and agrarian causes organized the first mass meetings in County Mayo, which immediately mobilized tenant farmers (Bew 1978; Jordan 1994; Moody 1981). Soon, large “monster” meetings were taking place weekly in the west. The strength of the western movement indicated to constitutional nationalist Charles Stewart Parnell, M.P., then head of the Irish Home Rule movement and soon to be President of the Irish Parliamentary Party, that the agrarian movement could be the vehicle to further the nationalist cause. When the Irish National Land League (INLL) was established in Dublin in October 1879, Parnell accepted the position of the president.<sup>18</sup>

Despite Parnell heading the movement and tempering its more radical and violent tendencies and activists with constitutionalist principles, the larger and more prosperous farmers, especially those in the south, east, and north, avoided the movement in significant numbers until the second half of 1880. Though sympathetic, these farmers, who were in

<sup>16</sup> Consecutive years of poor weather was largely responsible for the disastrous harvests. Solow comments that it “is almost impossible for the imagination to devise a worse combination of weather conditions than befell the Irish in 1879 (1971:122). The situation was bad throughout Ireland, especially for tillage farmers but also graziers (Clark 1979:225; Donnelly 1975:250–65). For example, the potato yield in 1879 represented a sixty-one per cent decline from the yield in 1876. For conditions in the west, see Jordan 1994.

<sup>17</sup> “Fenian” was the commonly used term for members of the radical secret society, the Irish Republican Brotherhood established in the late 1840s. The goal of the IRB was complete separation from Britain, and it advocated physical force and other “non-constitutional” methods to attain Irish independence (Comerford 1985).

<sup>18</sup> Michael Davitt was a co-founder of the Irish National Land League and, along with Charles Parnell, the co-leader of the Land War.

general more politically moderate, feared the militancy of the western movement. It took a number of contingent and conjunctual events to convince them to join.

First, the economic crisis deepened, and the intransigence of both the landlords and the government to provide relief in the form of lower or deferred rents angered the larger farmers. Then, the government's arrest of some of the movement's leaders on charges of sedition in November 1879 incensed larger farmers, who up to that point held faith in British constitutional law. Last, in May of 1880 Archbishop Croke of Cashel, an ardent nationalist and defender of tenant rights (one of the few in the Church hierarchy) forcefully endorsed the movement in a sermon. By articulating and thus sanctifying the movement principles, Croke eradicated the fear of religious transgression for Irish Catholic tenant farmers should they participate in the movement, and enabled the clergy, who supported the movement in very large numbers, to actively participate in it (Moody 1981:115; Larkin 1975:53). Thus, the third major participant—the Catholic Church—matriculated into the movement.

By the end of 1880, most tenant farmers and nationalists in Ireland, as well as the majority of the Church (most of the clergy, about half of the hierarchy) supported the land movement (Clark 1979; Moody 1981). Local branches of the Land League sprang up throughout the country, even in the north.<sup>19</sup> Crucial movement activity involved eviction resistance—demonstrations at sites of eviction and legal action in the courts; parliamentary action, including reform proposals and obstructionist tactics; and intimidation of those who might take the farm of an evicted farmer. But the most prominent and symbolic manifestation of movement activity were the massive land meetings that took place every week, sometimes up to ten meetings on any given weekend (Moody 1981; Townsend 1983).

These meetings were ritualistic in their ceremonial form (Alter 1987); more important, they were ritualistic in their content: it was in land meetings that symbolic and meaning construction occurred (Kane 1996). Substantial numbers of people attended most meetings, usually between 2,000 and 20,000; and audiences consisted of a wide range of people—poor, middling, and substantial farmers, laborers, merchants, and professionals. On the speakers' platform sat local leaders—including tenant farmers and clergy, and often a couple of national leaders, central Land League organizers, and/or "advanced" Irish M.P.s—who delivered emotionally charged speeches in which they articulated movement demands and goals. For the most part, speeches were narratives that recounted essential Irish history and myths—the conquest, the confiscations, the repression, the famine—and expressed on a higher level the aspirations and visions held by the Irish people. Of course, "the Irish" and their interests and world views were not homogeneous. Visions for change varied greatly from group to group and were often in conflict. Thus, the land meetings, as well as the local branch meetings, were sites of meaning contention and collision. And as local and national newspapers gave almost verbatim accounts of both "monster" and branch meetings as well as eviction processes, demonstrations, and court proceedings, virtually everyone in the country became involved in the discursive contention and meaning construction of the land movement.

### *Contours of Symbolic Struggle in the Land Movement*

Cultural theorists widely agree that social movement meaning construction occurs through struggle between the dominant power holder and the contending movement (e.g.,

<sup>19</sup> Despite the movement's stated nonsectarian nature, Protestant farmers in the north were put off by the Catholic Church's involvement, in the same way that its nationalist component alienated tenant farmers loyal to Britain (see Thompson 1985 and Wright 1996).

O'Callaghan 1994; Steinberg; Tilly 1995), and among members of the movement (e.g., Calhoun 1991; Polletta 1996; Voss 1994). The British government's reaction certainly motivated specific action on the part of the land movement and also contributed to the construction of the new understandings and meanings within it (O'Callaghan 1994). Yet even when stimulated by external forces, such as British or landlord action, intramovement contention remained the refractor of movement meaning construction. Though there was a general consensus concerning the movement's broad goals—land reform and some form of national independence—how these ends should actually look and work and how they ought to be reached was deeply contested. Should land reform follow a program of co-possession with landlords, should peasant proprietary be the eventual end, or should landlords be dispossessed of their land immediately? Should national independence take the form of federalism and Ireland remain bound to Britain, or was complete separation from Britain the only way? Should the movement follow a strategy of moderate agitation and parliamentary pressure, or should radical methods, including violence, be followed? These issues reflected not merely problems of strategy but, more important, differences in cultural understandings of the land struggle. A brief exploration of the meaning systems in which the different groups of tenant farmers, nationalists, and Church clergy operated illustrates the contention that existed within the movement.

At the outset of the land agitation, key symbolic concepts were both shared and struggled over by most people in Ireland, save the landlords and others loyal to Britain. Most generally, land represented life and a vision of the nation; England and landlords symbolized oppression; the myth of confiscation included both land and the nation; and independence would be from both landlordism and British domination. Finally, the Irish believed they had rights to their land and country. However, these symbols held more specific meanings to different social groups and provided conflicting understandings of Irish problems and visions for change.

To the smallest Irish farmers, land provided and represented stasis of tradition and a communally based form of agrarian organization. Under the land system, which upheld the legal rights of landlords to raise rents, evict, and sell the land at will, the small tenant farmers felt under constant threat of dispossession. Hoping to hold onto their plots of land, small tenant farmers acted deferentially to landlords. Small farmer action also tended to be reactionary, communal, and fatalistic, due largely to the traditional and conservative influence of the Catholic Church (Miller 1985). At the outset of the land movement, small farmers sought "justice" in the form of rent reductions and no evictions, and they were prepared to employ traditional methods of attaining this justice: if solicitation did not work, they could resort to intimidation and violence (Beames 1987; Townsend 1983).

To the commercialized middle-size and larger tenant farmers, security through the land meant economic opportunity and social and political mobility. Though these tenants had actually benefitted from the land system after the famine, it still represented stasis and an obstacle to mobility in the long run. Furthermore, the larger farmers considered the land system to be economically backward, supporting an aristocracy on the one hand and ineffective small farmers on the other. But because they had fared well under the landlord system, were the beneficiaries of land consolidation, and respected the Liberal version of property rights, middle and larger farmers sought justice through constitutional reform (Donnelly 1975; Hoppen 1984; Jones 1995). The land reform program known as the "3Fs" (fair rent, fixity of tenure, and the free sale of the tenant's interest in his holding), essentially a form of co-possession, was the goal of these tenant farmers.

The most sacred symbol to the Irish was Ireland itself; to those who desired independence, England was profane. Radical nationalists (not only activists, but people from diverse social groups—tenants, merchants, professionals, and clergy) envisioned Ireland as a nation:

sovereign, independent, redeemed, and free of Britain. Radicals believed that separation by constitutional means was impossible as the British constitution and Parliament were instruments as well as symbols of oppression (O'Farrell 1971). Militant, armed struggle would be necessary to end English domination.

For the more moderate nationalists, the "Home Rulers," independent Ireland meant democracy and self-determination in Irish affairs by the Irish instead of oligarchic control by Britain. For these constitutionalists and federalists, England was a symbol of restriction and misrule, but not evil. There were benefits in remaining attached to Britain. Independence would bring an end to conflict with Britain and between different Irish groups (such as Protestants and Catholics, landlords and tenants). National autonomy was to be achieved through constitutional change; political action should be moderate, compromising, conciliatory, and patient (Larkin 1990).

The Irish Catholic Church was also divided over issues of land and nationalism. This division stemmed from Church doctrine, politics (the priority of Church issues and fidelity to Rome versus devotion to Ireland), and contention within the Church hierarchy. Catholic Church doctrine strictly upheld private property rights, as well as obedience to legitimate authority. Land movement ideology, which negated the rights of landlords and advocated illegal action, created great consternation among the Irish bishops. A number of Irish bishops felt strong affinity with the movement in terms of English control: they wanted to be free from it. On the other hand, more conservative bishops felt that conciliation was the means toward more autonomy and feared reprisal from the British crown and parliament (Larkin 1975, 1987, 1990). The Catholic clergy were initially apprehensive about the movement, anxious about possible violence and loss of the political control they enjoyed in their parishes. However, the majority of priests, including many sons of tenant farmers (O'Shea 1983), sympathized with the plight of their parishioners and rapidly threw their support to the movement. Hence, the Catholic clergy provided important organizational and ideological support and brought to the movement meaning systems constituted of symbolic concepts such as community, providence, God-given rights, moderation, peace, and respect for property.

#### *Discursive Competition: Retribution versus Conciliation*

These differences were articulated, and the struggle over them conducted, through discursive competition at massive land meetings, League branch meetings, eviction demonstrations, and in the pages of the newspapers. Manifest in what I call the discourse of retribution versus the discourse of conciliation, it represented the contest between two approaches, radical and moderate, over which set of principles would guide the demands, goals, and strategies of the land and national struggle. Much of the meaning construction during the Land War emerged from this discursive struggle.

In the west, where the movement erupted, a discourse of retribution developed and remained dominant. Retribution embodies two meanings: on the one hand it signifies payment and reward, compensation, redress and justice; on the other, it suggests retaliation and punishment. Both these connotations were evoked and metaphorically extended during the land struggle. The western small farmers and the radical nationalists wanted the land and nation back for the Irish alone. Retribution implied a one-way street—the British were to do all the compensating, the Irish to concede nothing. In terms of punishment, a fair amount of rhetoric expressed the desire to "pay back" landlords, both for their own wrongdoings, and for those of the British empire they represented. In its extreme form, retributive concepts authorized violence. The list of those to receive retributive justice (mostly in the form of intimidation and ostracism) included not only landlords and their

agents and bailiffs, but also “land grabbers”—tenant farmers who took the land of their evicted fellows (Townsend 1983).

To radicals, conciliation represented compromise, accommodation, and patience. A major ambiguity lay in the sense of conciliation as atonement, that is, making reparation and compensation. On this ambiguous signification, the radicals and the constitutionalists could agree. But while moderates believed in compromise and patience leading to gradual and steady change, radicals were not about to contenance any further compromise or accommodation with Britain. Historically, compromise and accommodation with the English had only been disastrous for Ireland.

Early movement speeches demonstrate how different symbolic elements of the land movement were related through the contention between retribution and conciliation. For example, many self-perceived Irish characteristics developed since the conquest became associated with a conciliatory stance vis-à-vis the British and the landlords: self-abasement, cowardice, deference to landlords, and the inability to take a determined stand against the injustice they suffered. Thus, conciliation had come to symbolize weakness and demoralization and was seen as anathema to justice and equity. John O'Connor Power, former Fenian and M.P. for County Mayo, articulated this understanding at a meeting of the Ballinasloe Tenant Defense Association in November 1878:

If ever Ireland should be reduced to a condition of final subjugation [it would be because] “self-abasement paved the way for felon bonds and despots sway.” History [will] condemn [us] if recognising the oppression to which [we are] subjected [we are] too cowardly and mean to stand up boldly in assertion of [our] country’s liberties. (*Connaught Telegraph* [hereafter, *CT*] 11-9-1878)

However, the main responsibility for Ireland’s condition lay with England; and the basic premise justifying retribution was the fact, and the mythology build up over three hundred years, of Irish land confiscation by the English.

#### *Reconstructing the Concept of Confiscation*

Throughout the Land War, some version of the following narrative, delivered here by Michael Davitt at Westport, County Mayo, was recounted at almost every land meeting:

To confiscate the land of a subjugated but unconquered people and bestow it upon adventurers is the first act of unrighteous conquest, the preliminary step to the extermination or servitude of an opponent race. And the landlord garrison established by England in this country, centuries ago, is as true to the object of its foundation, and as alien to the moral instincts of our people, as when it was first expected to drive the Celtic race “to hell or Connaught.” It is the bastard offspring of force and wrong, the Ishmael of the social commonwealth, and every man’s hand should be against what has proved itself to be the scourge of our race since it first made Ireland a land of misery and poverty. (*CT* 6-14-1879)

Tenant farmers in the west came to the land movement armed with an intense belief in the injustice of confiscation, as it had occurred centuries before. Though this traditional connotation was regularly invoked, especially in emotional dramatizations of the past, the concept of confiscation was related innovatively to other concepts that together metaphor-



ically suggested alternative understandings of justice for tenant farmers. For example, early in the movement speakers at numerous meetings responded to charges that the land movement advocated illegal land confiscation. At a demonstration at Tuam, County Galway, P.J. Costello claimed that not only had landlords obtained land by confiscation, but continued to confiscate tenant farmers property, and indeed the latter's motivation to be productive, through excessive rents and evictions "[We] come not as the advocates of violence and crime . . . [but] as the true conservators of order . . . to protest against, and . . . prevent the landlords from confiscating the outlay and industry of the tenant farmers (*Freeman's Journal* [hereafter *FJ*] 9-22-1879). At Drumsna, County Leitrim, Michael Davitt tied the concept of confiscation to the core symbol of rights: proprietary belongs to those who are productive and use the land well, not only for themselves but the nation. "Has the land been conferred upon the landlords of Ireland for services rendered to Ireland or to humanity? I say no . . . they own the land of Ireland by virtue of conquest and confiscation" (*FJ* 12-15-1879). And in County Mayo, at Gurteen, barrister James Killen proclaimed that confiscation of landlord property would be fitting restitution for the historical wrongs suffered by the Irish: "[T]he land of Ireland has been three times confiscated, but always in favor of the aristocracy. [We] want a fourth confiscation, or rather a restitution now in favor of the people" (*Limerick Reporter* [hereafter *LR*] 11-21-1879).

In this way, the meaning of confiscation was metaphorically transformed. A concept that had represented historical wrongs and present injustice and suffering now represented fair compensation, a just component of righteous retribution. This "transfer of sense" (Ricoeur 1974:60) happened as people interpreted the different, and usually familiar, narratives presented at meetings. I would argue that the experience of the agrarian crisis and the land movement, along with the emotional fervor both generated, furthered the analogical extension of the concept among movement participants as they interpreted the narratives of confiscation.

In contrast, and possibly in opposition, to the militancy of the west, the tenant farmers in the southern and eastern counties maintained a moderate approach to land reform and nationalism. At the Louth (in the eastern province of Leinster) Tenant Defense Association meeting in January 1879, a discussion of an eviction exhibits tenant farmer indignation over perceived landlord injustice. Yet the farmers and their supporters recognized the rights of both the crown and landlords. Rev. George Taaffee, P.P. Collon, proclaimed:

The farmers of Ireland . . . should cry out against the terrible injustice to which they are exposed, and demand from the government protection for themselves and properties. The farmers are as peaceable and law-abiding subjects as those who have more power to oppress and rob them. (*Dundalk Democrat* [hereafter *DD*] 1-11-1879)

At the same meeting, a tenant farmer, O.J. Caraher of Cardistown, spoke about organizing for self-protection and change in the land laws, but also identified himself as a subject of crown: "In the face of persecution . . . they should band themselves together and never cease in their efforts to have such a change made in the law as will secure for every honest and law abiding subject a right to live on the soil" (*ibid.*).

As both passages reveal, these tenant farmers understood themselves to be peaceable and law abiding, not degraded and desperate as their counterparts in the west. The deferential, noncontentious, conciliatory understanding of structural relations is unmistakable, evidenced by this comment uttered by tenant farmer Michael McCarthy at the Waterford Farmers Club meeting in October 1879: "[We are not here] to wage war against the landlords, but to ask them to help the farmers in their present depressed condition" (*FJ* 10-14-

1879). The understandings portrayed in these narratives also indicate that many farmers in the south and east considered themselves British subjects, citizens who had the same rights and protections as all other British subjects. Those who shared the discourse of conciliation in any sense seemed to have identified themselves as such.

Though the debate over the type of land reform the movement would push for represented a struggle over concrete material goals, the contestation was a process of symbolic meaning construction transcending those material issues. For example, in the face of economic hardship, landlord intransigence, and possible eviction, how might a tenant farmer participating in the movement discourse interpret the concept of confiscation to understand and make a decision about the best course of land reform and how to achieve it? Did confiscation represent the injustice done to the Irish? Did past British confiscation of Irish land justify the confiscation of landlord property? Or was confiscation of any type unjust? As a symbol, confiscation was powerful; yet its meaning could only be determined by how it was interpreted within a particular symbolic structure. As the above passages illustrate, the moderate movement participants challenged the militant view that confiscation of estate lands was justified, while the radicals challenged the moderates "constitutional" and deferential stand on property. This contention occurred through narrative and dramatization, which constantly opened up symbolic patterns for interpretive rearrangement and meaning transformation.

So far, we have a picture of substantial differences and collision of understandings between various segments of the movement participants. I turn now to examining specific instances of meaning construction and transformation for another perspective on the reconstruction of particular symbolic elements and meanings within each discursive code. By investigating mass and branch meetings occurring at various times during the Land War we can see how symbolic collision led to meaning transformation, convergence, and ideological consensus as people interpreted their lives and the events of the land campaign.

### *Reconstructing the Meaning of Rent at Irishtown*

At the mass demonstrations of the Land War, it was not the official resolutions that moved audiences, but rather the impassioned, often spontaneous speeches containing narratives of the life and the future of the Irish. During the first mass land meeting, at Irishtown, County Mayo, on April 20, 1879, the speech that resonated most deeply and elicited the greatest response from the audience was delivered by Michael M. O'Sullivan, a teacher and radical nationalist. It dramatized the experience of tenant farmers in the west—agricultural crisis, exorbitant rents, avaricious landlords, and an unresponsive government—and demanded immediate rent reductions.

O'Sullivan: . . . the past two seasons have been very bad, and disease in sheep has crept in to accumulate the distresses of the farmer. Under such circumstances does any man for a moment consider that the tenant farmers of Ireland can afford to pay the present exorbitant rents for their lands, or that the lands are worth those rents?

(Cheers, and cries of "They are not.")

O'Sullivan: It follows, then, that the present rents being too high, justice demands their reduction (cheers). But, judging from the past, we know that, unfortunately,

there are landlords in Ireland who do not look to what is just, but to what the law will permit (hear, hear). If, then, the landlords who are now demanding exorbitant rents do not lower them to meet the requirements of the times and the altered circumstances of the tenant farmers, let the tenant farmers themselves meet together, and consult together, and settle among themselves what would be fair, equitable rent, and if that is not accepted by the landlord—why, let them pay none at all.

(Great cheering, and loud cries of “None at all.”)

A Voice: Let them do that (great cheering).

O’Sullivan: They cannot pay unreasonable rents, they wish to pay what is fair and just and it must be accepted. If not let the landlords who refuse take the consequences of refusal on their own heads (cheers). It is . . . fearful to contemplate those consequences in their fullness . . . extermination of the people on the one hand, and—we cannot shut our eyes to the lessons of the past—extermination of the exterminators on the other (applause). (*CT* 4-26-1879)

This long passage demonstrates important aspects about meaning and ideological construction and political mobilization during the Land War. First, in the face of impending agricultural and economic disaster, immediate rent reduction demands were voiced at every land meeting, at least through 1880 (Clark 1979:298). Despite the negative connotation associated with demanding relief, the speeches at the demonstrations had to speak to the immediate concerns of the agrarian audience in order to mobilize tenant farmer interest. On the other hand, easily understood demands, such as rent reductions and the end to evictions, allowed ready access to participation by tenant farmers in the ritual of land meetings. Most important, as it constituted the concrete core of tenant farmer life, the concept of rent became a powerful metaphoric vehicle for meaning construction. Because of its literal meaning, paying for the use of someone else’s land, rent was the repository of many other possible meanings that could be constructed through interpretation, as a deconstruction of the above passage demonstrates.

O’Sullivan asks the audience “Is the land worth exorbitant rent?” Given the great hardship that tenant farmers yearly endured in order to make the rent and keep their land, the meeting participants might have answered “Yes” (Vaughan 1994). Yet, O’Sullivan’s narrative included the current agrarian crisis and the misanthropic response of landlords to the tenants’ predicament. Thus, rent could be interpreted, and its sense metaphorically transferred, to mean oppression, domination, and injustice. The response of the audience—“They are not”—suggests that they did indeed make this metaphoric transition. Having established consensus on exorbitant rents and the inherent tyranny of landlords, O’Sullivan proposed that the tenant farmers unite and settle on a fair rent among themselves. If this rent was not accepted by the landlords, “Let them pay none at all.” Given the social context, this was an outrageous proposition. Yet it was met with great affirmative cheering and shouts by the audience of farmers. Through the narratives, the audience could imagine themselves organizing and, if necessary, refusing to pay rents. This form of retributive action was not one distressed tenant farmers would have considered before the Irishtown meeting. But through narrative and ritual, the western tenant farmers began to construct a new meaning of rent and formulate an alternative form of action based on their under-

standing of rent. And in fact, throughout the Land War, hundreds of tenant farmers refused to pay rents and resisted evictions.<sup>20</sup>

Early in the land movement, as exemplified at the Irishtown meeting, the meaning of rent became thoroughly vilified. This may seem a predictable symbolic outcome. But what rent came to mean precisely to movement participants, and the outcome that meaning contributed to, was far from inevitable. Though tenant farmers certainly resented the burden of high rents, especially during times of bad harvests, it was not until the Land War that rent came to symbolize both tenant and Irish degradation and the evil of landlordism and British domination. Through narrative exposition and metaphoric transfer of meaning, rents became conceptualized as having evolved from conquest and confiscation, not from legal property rights, and contributing to so many evil consequences—eviction, starvation, emigration, and further oppression. As an example of the relational nature of symbolism, this reconceptualization of rent intertwined with a reconceptualization of security: Irish tenant farmers came to understand that security through dependence on landlords and the rental system did not constitute real security. Fortified and mobilized by these new understandings, Irish tenant farmers came to feel morally justified in not paying rents. The transformed meaning of rent also implied that reform that retained any form of rent system would be unacceptable. Thus, the long advocated ‘3 Fs’ system withered away as a permanent solution to the “land question.” The demand for peasant proprietary grew, eventually becoming the goal of the land movement and the symbol of everything the Irish struggled for—autonomy, security, self-determination, and prosperity.

The meaning of rent was transformed partially through the transformation of the meaning of two other concepts (and practices) that it was connected to in Irish meaning structures: deference and conciliation. Irish tenant farmers had long viewed deference to landlords as essential to holding on to their land; and among all but the Fenians, conciliation during the nineteenth-century had been the preferred route to achieving concessions from Britain. But beginning with the early land meetings, as rent and landlordism became understood as the pivotal mechanisms of tenant and national oppression, movement participants (including land movement leaders) began to conceptualize deference and conciliation not as providing security or an avenue for change, but as furthering degradation and oppression.

### *Transforming the Meaning of Constitutional in the South*

In contrast to the radical ideology that emerged in the west from a convergence of radical nationalism and small farmer culture, the more bourgeois and politically moderate farmers in the southern and eastern provinces of Leinster and Munster underwent intense internal struggle as they prepared to join the movement. Partly because of the western militancy, many had reservations about joining. Yet ideological struggle in the south and east transformed the symbolic structures by which these participants understood the movement and soon transformed the militant ideology of the Land League. Debate over one issue was particularly transformational: testifying before the Bessborough commission.

On July 29, 1880, the Bessborough commission was appointed by Parliament to look into the workings of the 1870 Land Act and to supplement the proposed Compensation for

<sup>20</sup> The political acts of resistance to rent payment and eviction often resulted in mass demonstrations (and sometimes violence) and the further construction of symbolic meaning. Three of the most important were the Dempsey Eviction (*The Nation* 11-29-1879; *FJ* 11-24-1879; O’Brien 1905:232; Jordan 1994:250–51), the Carrore Resistance (see Davitt 1904:213–18; Hawkins 1974; *Sligo Champion* 1-10-1880), and the infamous Boycott Affair (see Bew 1978:133; Jordan 1994:285–93.) From the last case, one of the most important modern forms of collective political action acquired its name, not least of all due to the tenant farmers’ success.

Disturbance Bill of 1880 in redressing tenant farmer grievances.<sup>21</sup> When the Compensation Bill was rejected by the House of Lords shortly thereafter, enraged tenant farmers were faced with the dilemma of whether they should cooperate with a commission appointed by a government unable to produce even minor reform measures. The Land League executive officially declared its opposition to the Commission and instructed all members and movement adherents not to give evidence. However, many local branches debated the issue, and a number of them decided to send representatives before the commission, evidence that the central leadership did not completely control the movement. More important to the present analysis, the debates clearly demonstrate changing symbolic understandings among bourgeois Irish farmers regarding the land question and British rule.

On August 15, a monster meeting of tenant farmers convened in Kildare, a rich grazing county in the province of Leinster. Many prominent and radical League leaders attended. James Leahy, a tenant farmer and local leader who had recently been elected to the House of Commons as a Parnellite Home Ruler, took the podium first. After identifying himself as “one of them,” i.e., a tenant farmer, Leahy pronounced that “the landlord system of [this] country should cease. They should remember the maxim of the great Liberator, Daniel O’Connell ‘The man who commits a crime gives strength to the enemy.’ One means for the redress of [our] grievances [is] the Land League. Another [is] the commission which had been appointed by the Government, even though some enemies of the tenantry might be on it” (*FJ* 8-16-1880).

The political contradiction of Leahy’s suggestion—on the one hand, to join the Land League, and on the other, to participate in the Bessborough commission even though the League had condemned it and “enemies” constituted it—is evidence of the struggle over meaning among larger tenant farmers. Like many tenant farmers he represented, Leahy was clearly caught between a conciliatory and retributive stance. As Paul Bew points out, the prosperous farmers of southern and eastern Ireland had been prepared to go the Liberal route to land reform, including testifying before the commission, until the defeat of the Compensation Bill (1978:120). The defeat of the bill blatantly challenged the tenant farmers’ faith in the system and the policy of conciliation; and as they considered the more radical politics of the Land League, their previous cultural understandings began to change.

The Land League organizers in attendance reacted fiercely to Leahy’s speech. Michael Boyton ridiculed the M.P.’s advice: “Mr. Leahy wants tenant farmers to go to law with the devil in a court held in hell” (*FJ* 8-16-1880). Regarding the use of violence, which farmers outside the west greatly feared both because they had been the victims of it and because they believed violence to be counterproductive in a constitutional struggle, Boyton reassured the meeting participants that “[t]here was no intention of committing any crime against the law.” He finished by chiding Leahy for insinuating that the tenants would engage in violence: “There [is] no necessity for flinging the phrases of forty years ago into the faces of men who were intelligent and could read and write” (*ibid.*).

The contradictory conjuring up of the O’Connell mythology illustrates both the role of collective memory in meaning construction and the symbolic volatility of the period. O’Connell was generally held by the Irish, especially middle and upper-class Catholics, in high, if not sacred, esteem. Boyton’s suggestion that O’Connell, and his dictums, no longer held relevance to an educated, modern Irish people risked alienating many. On the other hand, the idea was “liberating,” as O’Connell also represented deference, elitism, and conciliation.

<sup>21</sup> The bill proposed to repeal a clause in the 1870 Land Act which debarred any claim to compensation for disturbance from a tenant ejected for nonpayment of rent, and to suspend evictions for two years (until December 1882) among tenants paying £10 or less a month who could not make their rent due to the agrarian crisis.

Another row over the Bessborough commission demonstrates the increasing ideological conversion of the southern and eastern tenant farmers to retributive discourse through interpretation and meaning construction. One of the oldest and best organized farmer organizations was the Cork Farmers' Club, which had recently converted itself to a Land League branch. At two consecutive branch meetings of the Cork Land League in August 1880, the members heatedly argued the issue of testifying before the Bessborough commission. On August 21, Thomas Linehan read a proposed resolution: "that having no confidence in the composition of the Land Commission, we decline to give any evidence before the commission" (*Cork Daily Herald* [hereafter *CDH*] 8-23-1880). The branch secretary, Denis Cronin countered with the amendment that "while [we] most emphatically protest against the one-sided constitution of the Land Commission, we recommend to the Land League . . . [to reconsider] their resolution of withholding evidence . . .", arguing:

If [we] draw in [our] horns from everything of a constitutional character [we will] leave the whole arena to [our] enemies the landlords who would send in everything in their favor and who would blacken the character of the Irish tenant farmer. Nothing could be more suicidal to the people of Ireland than to neglect laying hold of every opportunity constitutionally and otherwise to have [our] rights asserted. (Ibid.)

To different degrees, both men express the farmers' belief that the government, the landlords, and the commission would not deal justly with the tenant farmers, indicating that the British government no longer symbolized justice in the minds of the southern and eastern tenant farmers. Refusing to deal with the government commission illustrates a radical development for substantial tenant farmers like Linehan, as it is an expression of independence from and contempt for a system to which they had previously subscribed. Cronin's remarks represent those of other tenant farmers who, while believing the British government incapable of acting justly on behalf of the Irish tenant farmers, felt that in order to fight a worse enemy, the landlords, working with the commission was necessary.

The following week, the Cork branch censured an "extensive" farmer, John Lane, for testifying before the Bessborough commission. Mr. J. O'Brien, the club's president, pointed out that "if there was to be any strength attaching to their meetings, the minority whenever a resolution was passed, should be ruled by the majority" (*CDH* 8-30-1880). Lane was defiant in defense of his conciliatory reasoning and action, both at this meeting and at another branch meeting two weeks later: "[I am] sure the Government [is] disposed to settle the question, that there [will] be no more trouble or bloodshed in the country, but that the poor farmer would have security for his industry and his labour, and that he would be paid for every shilling expended on the land" (*FJ* 9-13-1880). In response, another farmer, John O'Connor, replied:

Mr. Lane [has] delivered . . . one of the most ridiculous speeches [I] have ever listened to. To think that a parliament of landlords or a committee of landlords was to settle the all-vexed question of the land at one single blow was something . . . [it is] unwilling [and] incapable of doing. Mr. Lane might persist in going before the Land Commission, but it would for this League, affiliated or not [with the central League in Dublin] to deal with him according to the rules laid down for their guidelines. (Ibid.)

These interchanges illustrate the ideological movement of bourgeois farmers from a conciliatory discourse to one of retribution. This transformation was in part prompted by a

contingent event, the defeat of the Compensation Bill; interpreting what that event meant challenged their symbolic understandings of the world. The larger farmers, as exemplified by those in Cork, scrutinized their symbolic understandings, pitted them against more radical codes, and gradually a “new” structure of meaning emerged. The symbols remained the same—constitution, parliament, O’Connell, unity, land, and nation—but the meanings became transformed. Though agitation should be within the constitution, what large farmers now considered constitutional was greatly extended, especially past Parliament which they now realized was not to be relied upon. The beliefs and practices of O’Connell were desacralized, as farmers symbolically connected O’Connell’s deference to the British Parliament. Though the bourgeois farmers had long struggled with the communal/individual opposition (Miller 1985), the reaction of the Cork Land League to Mr. Lane’s individual action of disregarding the majority in testifying before the Bessborough Commission demonstrates the ideological embracing of the concept of unity that had been developing within and throughout the movement. Finally, unity over individualism was posited within a symbolic code containing a refurbished concept of constitutionalism.

As illustrated by meetings in Leinster and Munster, the early radical meaning and symbolic construction contributed to and then was transformed by the cultural processes by which larger and more moderate southern tenants matriculated into the movement: the metaphoric transformation of meaning via narrative dramatization in ritualistic events. To conclude, let me tie the empirical analysis to the theoretical framework, by reviewing the concept of “constitutional” and how successive changes in its meaning reconfigured the code of the land movement ideology.

Prior to the land movement, “constitutional” meant British law, and this law was widely accepted, if also highly resented. The western phase of symbolic construction profaned the meaning of constitutional: if it was British, “constitutional” meant “unjust.” Contingent events during the land struggle—such as the arrests, trials, and acquittals of leaders for seditious language at land meetings; the defeat of the Compensation Bill; the Coercion Acts; and the collective interpretation of those events as articulated in ritual narratives—presented a “disjuncture” between experience and established meaning, resulting in re-interpretation and inversion of the movement’s understanding and relationship to constitutionalism. Interpretation of these events, using both old and newly developing symbolic systems, forced land movement participants to reconceptualize the meaning of both. For example, the arrests of leaders outraged people, furthering their alienation from the British system of justice. Then, when the leaders were acquitted, that self-same “justice” system appeared weak and ineffective in the face of righteous Irish defiance. Land movement adherents, and those contemplating joining the movement, saw themselves as acting lawfully and constitutionally. It was the British government and landlords who violated the “constitution” by not upholding Irish rights—either “constitutional” or “natural.” Thus, “constitutional” became the badge of the land movement, not the government. The concept of “constitutionalism” regained a sacred status and became the accepted route to justice because it had been symbolically disconnected from the British government.

By the time the land movement reached the southern farmers, militant constitutionalism was a major component of its ideological code. The tenant farmers of Munster and Leinster accepted that constitutionalism included the demands and rights of the Irish and much of the movement’s activities, and that the British government had breached its constitutional authority. Yet ironically, and as evidence of the metaphoric nature of meaning construction, the wide acceptance by most land movement participants of militant constitutionalism resulted in an unforeseen ideological consequence—the rehabilitation of the meaning of “conciliation.” And it would be by conciliation that the Land War was temporarily settled with the Land Act of 1881, a reform act based largely on the model of the “3 Fs.”

The first Land War ended in 1882—after the passing of the 1881 Land Act during the previous summer, the arrests of more than five hundred League leaders and activists by the end of 1881 (including M.P.s), the banning of the Land League by the British government, continued agrarian demonstrations and violence despite the League being outlawed, and the signing of the “Kilmainham Treaty” in which Parliament agreed to amend the Land Act to include thousands of tenants in arrears in return for the League suspending its activities against the landlords and the crown. However, though the ideology at the end of the Land War allowed for compromise with the British, it was hardly an ideology of conciliation typical of pre-Land War Irish politics. From beginning to end, the land movement had articulated a discourse of retribution, exemplified by its primary goals and symbols—peasant proprietary and national separation. Yet, concepts of conciliation constantly countered and tempered retributive meanings. By the end of 1881, the particular arrangement of symbols in the land movement ideology indicated that the course to both peasant proprietary and national independence had to be constitutional and, thus, conciliatory. However, just as political alliance is not achieved merely through negotiation of interests, the seeming combination of retribution and conciliation in one ideological discourse was not a matter of negotiation between different movement constituents. Through the intense interaction of diverse groups in public arenas such as land meetings, and the subsequent debates that raged through the press, from the pulpit, in the pubs, and on the floor of parliament, diverse meaning codes collided in this discursive conflict. From this collision emerged a unifying ideology that transcended these diverse meaning systems. This transcendence was possible not because the conflicting meaning systems were abandoned, but because they were transformed, through symbolic interpretation, extension, and rearrangement.

## CONCLUSION

This essay started from the assumption that meaning is a crucial component in culture and social structuring, and has built on the argument that meaning is located in, and its construction and transformation understood through, the internal logic of symbolic systems (e.g., Alexander 1990; Alexander and Smith 1993; Kane 1991; Sewell 1985, 1992a, 1996c; Somers 1995a, 1995b). As a contribution to this theoretical effort, I have attempted here to flesh out a fundamental key to analyzing meaning construction—the metaphoric nature of symbols. Because symbols are metaphorical, ambiguous, and polysemous, and because it is through relational patterns of symbols that meaning emerges, meaning construction depends on the mechanism of individual and collective interpretation of experience using established cultural models. Finally, the construction of meaning is an indeterminate process: if symbolic meaning comes from metaphoric association and extension in the interpretation process, then the collision through social interaction of different symbolic systems results in the construction of meaning which is unpredictable, emergent, and relatively autonomous from extant cultural and social structures.

What does this imply for the analysis of social movements? Prevalent notions that meaning construction is basically a process of instrumental and strategic manipulation of symbolic frames, i.e., “aligning” movement frames so that they “resonate” with conventional cultural understandings; that meaning can be produced by discrete groups of leaders and organizers and imposed on the larger movement; and that movement outcomes are the result of power intentions (both dominant and challenging) mediated by symbolic resources are inadequate. Meaning construction is at least as emotional as it is cognitive and strategic (Lincoln 1989:8–26); meaning construction is a widely collective endeavor and not the preserve of the few; and, finally, movement outcomes, because they are partially struc-



tured by cultural transformation, are contingent and unpredictable because the process of symbolic transformation is so indeterminate.

Cultural analysis that examines the metaphoric logic of symbolic systems and the interpretive process by which people construct meaning yields fuller analysis of the role of culture in social movements, the agency of movement participants, and the contingency of the course and outcomes of social movement than that which concentrates solely on practices and implicitly assumes symbolic stasis. Because of their metaphoric nature, symbolic systems are fluid structures. Although coherent and strong enough to structure understanding and thus action, they are transformable. But they are transformable within the bounds of collective interpretation. The interpretive process, upon which meaning construction and action is predicated, is the fundamental step of agency. All movement participants engage in interpretation to construct meaning and to plan action. How they interpret, i.e., the metaphoric associations and extensions they make, is highly contingent, based on the store of concepts from experience and the specific events being interpreted. And in collective interpretation, meaning construction is highly contested, as participants enter the process armed with diverse systems of meaning upon which they base their interpretation. The outcome of such a process is conditional: it is not a case of "anything could happen," but numerous scenarios are possible, because copious possible meanings can result from symbolic collision. We can almost consider the process in mathematical terms: the number of different social groups (even individuals) multiplied by the number of symbolic systems each uses in interpretation, multiplied by the number of symbolic concepts in each system that are open to reinterpretation. Of course, this exaggerates the extent of potential symbolic change. But it underlines the point that culture is causal in social movements not because static symbolic structures, which can be instrumentally manipulated, influence participant action and effect predetermined ends but, rather, because symbolic systems are transformable, and transformed meaning can lead to new forms of action and contingent, unforeseen outcomes.

The contingency of cultural transformation in social movements mediates the outcomes of the movement. Why did the Land War end in 1882 with a Land Act offering co-possession and not peasant proprietary, the stated goal of the Land League? Why did tenant farmers accept the Land Act, yet continue to hold mass demonstrations and even engage in "outrages" at escalated levels (Moody 1981; Townsend 1983:153–57)? Why did a land tenure structure based on co-possession immediately prompt the decline of landlordism? And why did Britain soon "lose" Ireland, after seemingly winning the battle of the Land War in 1882? These questions can be answered fully only if we look to the content—the patterns and logic of symbolic meaning—of the cultural system constructed during the Land War.

Obviously, most successful social movements resolve in a political "compromise"—such as the 1881 Land Act—between the dominant power and the contending group. Yet, below the surface of the compromise between Irish landlords and tenants over the distribution of property rights lay a "mass repudiation of the concept of society upon which the continued role of landlordism depended" (Bull 1996:90). This repudiation emerged in part from the discourse of retribution, which in 1882 included the refurbished concept of conciliation. Conciliation as a symbolic concept indicated that most Irish desired change through constitutional reform; but constitutional meant that the Irish had rights, including those of protest, combination, speech, and continued agitation for further reform of unjust laws and structures. Thus, land movement adherents continued to press for land tenure change. This agitation led to successive land reform bills, which made it increasingly difficult and unprofitable for landlords to hold onto land (Jones 1995). This perspective on land reform, which posits the notion of conciliation within the pattern of symbolic logic upon which the Irish acted, and which helps explain the consequential change in Irish social structure, can

only be attained by including an analysis of “culture-as-system-of-meanings” (Sewell 1996c) into the configuration of causal variables. The route by which the Irish land movement participants constructed the meaning of “constitutional,” and all its related concepts, was charted by the metaphoric condition of symbolic logic and the mechanism of personal and interpersonal interpretation.

Social movement analysts must integrate an analysis of the logic of autonomous symbolic systems into studies of social movements in order to truly understand the objects of their studies. For example, Swidler suggests that social movement analysts focus on codes, contexts, and institutions to analyze culture’s power to affect action (1995:32). According to Swidler: “Certain contexts, particularly those that are important in many social movements, give culture a coherent organization and consistent influence that it normally lacks in the minds of most individuals” (1995:35). However, from my discussion it should be clear that it is not concrete situations that organize and create cultural meaning, but the interpretation of concrete contexts by individuals using coherent cultural models. Thus, examining the metaphoric condition of symbols and the interpretive mechanism of people using those symbolic systems in concrete situations should precede and then continue concomitantly with the examination of public symbols, practices, and power in social movements. Indeed, incorporating the metaphoric basis of meaning and the interpretive mechanism of meaning construction as I have specified will enable social movement analysts (and others interested in cultural construction and causality) to fully attend to the cultural preconditions of activism, how political consciousness and ideology derives from interaction between individuals, how movement participants navigate sociocultural processes and contested meanings, and what really happens in sites of social interaction where meaning is constructed (as per Gamson 1992). Furthermore, how movement leaders and organizers, as well as changing events, influence meaning construction can more accurately be evaluated when the autonomy of symbolic structures and the interpretive activity of movement participants is considered (e.g., Ellingson 1995). Finally, as I have illustrated in the case of the Irish Land War, the specific unfolding and outcomes of social movements are more fully explained when the intricate process of meaning construction based on symbolic metaphor and collective interpretation is analyzed.

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