Social movements ultimately fail, at least in minds of many committed participants. As radicals and revolutionaries have discovered throughout history, even the most successful movements generate aspirations that cannot be fulfilled. Activists, particularly those in social movements that are driven by democratic ideals, often do not regard the achievement of political reform as conclusive evidence of success. Their activism drives them toward values that cannot be fully implemented except within the activist community. Thus, although American social movements provided a major impetus for the extension of civil rights to previously excluded groups, many abolitionists struggled for more radical transformation than was achieved through the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, and many feminists wanted more than the Nineteenth Amendment or the Equal Rights Amendment. Similarly, many black activists of the 1960s came to see themselves as seeking more than the civil rights acts of 1964 and 1965.

Because the emergent goals of American social movements have usually not been fulfilled, scholars have found it difficult to determine their political significance. Institutionalized political behavior rather than mass movements are the central focus of studies on American politics. Historians have portrayed social movements as important forces on behalf of reform but not as the decisive shapers of the reforms themselves. They typically devote
little attention to the internal processes of social movements and view activists only as harbingers of change—colorful, politically impotent, socially isolated idealists and malcontents who play only fleeting roles in the drama of American political history.

Center stage is reserved for the realistic professional reformers who remain at the edges of movements and for politicians who respond to mass activism by channeling otherwise diffuse popular energies into effective reform strategies. Abolitionist activists, historians have suggested, did not free blacks from bondage through moral suasion or through other distinctive forms of anti-slavery militancy; instead, the Republican Party transformed abolitionist sentiments into a viable political program. Similarly, historians have noted that the initial Populist platform, itself a tepid manifestation of late-nineteenth century agrarian radicalism, was enacted by later generations of unradical reformers. Historians, in short, typically view social reform movements from a distance and see mass activism as significant only to the extent that it contributes to successful reform efforts using institutionalized strategies and tactics.

This view of mass activism reflects sociological approaches to the study of social movements that downplay their political functions. American sociologists of the 1950s and 1960s explained that social movements served to relieve widely shared discontents that resulted from strains in the social system. Implicit or explicit in most sociological studies of American social movements was the notion that they were more likely to serve psychological rather than instrumental functions, that they manifested inchoate, individual discontent rather than serious, even if unsuccessful, political strategies involving organized groups. Historians influenced by sociological studies of social movements have argued, for example, that the abolitionists were psychologically abnormal or that populists were reacting against the passing of a familiar agrarian society.

Until recent years, the classical sociological view of social movements prevailed in the study of what is generally called the
civil rights movement. Use of the term “civil rights” itself is based on the assumption that the southern black movements of the 1960s remained within the ideological boundaries of previous civil rights activism. Many social scientists studying black protest participation insisted that activism resulted from a distinctive psychological state that was shared by activists. According to an extensive literature, based largely on survey data rather than field observation of ongoing struggles, protest participation was most likely among blacks who had become increasingly aware of the discrepancies, or dissonance, between their conditions of life and the alternatives made possible by the rapidly changing surrounding society. As one sociologist put it, black protesters were distinguished from other blacks by a “higher awareness of the wider society” which made them “more prone to develop the particular set of attitudes and perceptions that lead to protest.”¹

Social scientists found it much easier to offer such analyses of the black struggle during the first half of the 1960s, when there were few signs of dissension within the movement over integrationist goals. During the last half of the decade, however, it became increasingly difficult to explain black power militancy as the outgrowth of the frustrated integrationist desires of blacks. Nevertheless, the classical sociological perspective continued to dominate scholarly writings regarding black militancy. If mass black activism could not be understood as a somewhat unwieldy tactic for achieving longstanding civil rights objectives, it was still possible to portray it as a politically unproductive or even counterproductive expression of mass frustration. Few scholars have been willing to study the internal dynamics of black social movements or to examine their varied and constantly changing strategies, tactics, and styles of leadership. As the nonviolent struggles of the early 1960s gave way to the violent racial conflicts of the late 1960s, the understandable reluctance of scholars, most of whom were white, to study black movements close up rather than from afar became more and more evident.

Thus, until recently, the civil rights literature was comprised
mainly of studies of the major national civil rights leaders and their organizations. Following the lead of sociologists, most historians assumed that the black insurgences of the decade after the Montgomery bus boycott could best be understood within the context of a national campaign for civil rights reform. They saw mass activism among blacks as an extension of previous institutionalized civil rights reform efforts. To be sure, historians recognized that the new activism went beyond the once dominant NAACP tactics of litigation, lobbying, and propagandizing, but they saw increased black activism as a new tactic within a familiar strategy based on appeals to power. Protest was a product of widespread black dissatisfaction with the pace of racial change rather than with underlying strategies to achieve change. Instead of viewing mass activism as an independent social force, with its own emergent values and ideology, scholars were more likely to see it as an amorphous source of social energy that could be directed by the leaders of national civil rights organizations.

Indeed, some historical accounts have stressed the decisive role of white politicians rather than civil rights leaders in guiding the effort to achieve civil rights reforms. Thus, Arthur M. Schlesinger's account of the Kennedy presidency illustrated a common theme in surveys of the 1960s when it described Kennedy as a leader seeking to “keep control over the demand for civil rights” through timely concessions which would “hold the confidence of the Negro community.” In broader terms, Schlesinger portrays Kennedy as moving “to incorporate the Negro revolution into the democratic coalition and thereby [helping] it serve the future of American freedom.” More recently, Carl M. Brauer gave more attention to the black protest movement as an independent force for change, but he too concluded that Kennedy usually maintained the initiative, driven by his need “to feel that he was leading rather than being swept along by events.” When black militancy threatened to get out of hand in the spring of 1963, Brauer recounts, the President “boldly reached out to grasp [the reins of leadership] once again.”
Studies of civil rights organizations and their leaders understandably give more emphasis to the role of these organizations and their leaders than do studies of presidential leadership, but nonetheless these writings are ambiguous regarding the extent to which organizations and leaders were able to mobilize and direct the course of black militancy. They have focused on the strategies developed by national civil rights groups, while portraying mass activism as a new instrument in the arsenal of national civil rights leaders. The result has been that we have many studies of national civil rights leaders, particularly Martin Luther King, Jr., but few that attempt to determine the extent to which civil rights leaders reflected the aspirations of participants in black struggles.

This failure to clarify the shifting relationship between leadership and mass struggle is a glaring deficiency of studies that imply that national civil rights organizations and leaders played decisive roles in mobilizing southern blacks as a force for change during the 1950s and 1960s. Although the scholarship of the last five years has begun to rectify this deficiency, the perspective of the previous civil rights literature continues to reflect as well as shape the prevailing popular conception of the black struggle.

Embedded in this literature is the assumption that the black struggle can best be understood as a protest movement, orchestrated by national leaders in order to achieve national civil rights legislation. As already noted, use of the term civil rights movement, rather than such alternatives as black freedom struggle, reflects the misleading assumption that the black insurgencies of the 1950s and 1960s were part of a coordinated national campaign. Viewing the black struggle as a national civil rights reform effort rather than a locally-based social movement has caused scholars to see Birmingham in the spring of 1963 and Selma in the winter and spring of 1965 as the prototypical black protest movements of the decade. In reality, however, hundreds of southern communities were disrupted by sustained protest movements that lasted, in some cases, for years.

These local protest movements involved thousands of pro-
testers, including large numbers of working class blacks, and local organizers who were more concerned with local issues, including employment opportunities and political power, than with achieving national legislation. Rather than remaining within the ideological confines of the integrationism or King's Christian-Gandhianism, the local movements displayed a wide range of ideologies and proto-ideologies, involving militant racial or class consciousness. Self-reliant indigenous leaders who headed autonomous local protest organizations have been incorrectly portrayed as King's lieutenants or followers even when they adopted nonviolence as a political weapon rather than a philosophy of life and were clearly acting independently of King or of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which he headed.

At present, few detailed studies of these sustained local movements have appeared, but William Chafe's study of Greensboro and Robert J. Norrell's study of the Tuskegee black movement, to cite two examples, reveal that local black movements were unique and developed independently of the national civil rights organizations. Blacks in these communities developed their own goals and strategies which bore little relation to national campaigns for civil rights legislation. King was the pre-eminent national black leader, the exemplar of Gandhian ideals, but in Greensboro, Tuskegee, and many other communities, local leaders and organizers played dominant roles in mobilizing blacks and articulating the emergent values of the local struggles.

Careful examinations of local movements, therefore, challenge the assumption that national leaders, notably Martin Luther King, orchestrated local protest movements in their efforts to alter national public opinion and national policy. There is much to suggest that national civil rights organizations and their leaders played only minor roles in bringing about most local insurgences. It was more often the case that local black movements produced their own distinctive ideas and indigenous leadership rather than that these movements resulted from initiative of national leaders.

The Montgomery bus boycott, for example, began in 1955 as
the result of an unplanned act of defiance by Rosa Parks. Martin Luther King, Jr., emerged as a spokesman and as a nationally-known proponent of nonviolent resistance only after Montgomery blacks had launched their movement and formed their own local organization—the Montgomery Improvement Association. King's organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, was formed only after the boycott ended. To be sure, the Montgomery struggle was an extension of previous civil rights reform efforts, but it began as an outgrowth of local institutional networks rather than as a project of any national civil rights organization.6

Similarly, no national organization or leader initiated the next major stage of the black struggle, the lunch counter sit-ins of 1960. SCLC, CORE, and the NAACP attempted to provide ideological and tactical guidance for student protesters after the initial sit-in in Greensboro, but student activists insisted on forming their own local groups under student leadership. Even the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, which was founded by student protest leaders, was unable to guide the sit-in movement—a fact that contributed to SNCC’s subsequent support for the principle of local autonomy.7

CORE initiated the Freedom Rides of 1961, but this desegregation effort did not become a major social movement until CORE abandoned the rides after protesters were attacked by whites in Alabama. Student militants formed their own organizations. Hundreds of student freedom riders then brought the movement into Mississippi and later to other parts of the South.8

The Freedom Rides provided a stimulus for the massive Albany protests of December 1961, which became a model for mass mobilizations of black communities elsewhere in the South. Each of the national civil rights organizations tried to offer guidance for the mass marches and demonstrations which culminated in the Birmingham protests of spring 1963, but by the summer of that year it had become clear to national black leaders that the black struggle had acquired a momentum over which they had little
control. A. Philip Randolph, the black leader who proposed a march on Washington, told President Kennedy, "The Negroes are already in the streets. It is very likely impossible to get them off. If they are bound to be in the streets in any case, is it not better that they be led by organizations dedicated to civil rights and disciplined by struggle rather than to leave them to other leaders who care neither about civil rights nor about nonviolence?"9 Malcolm X recognized and identified with the local black leadership that mobilized the black insurrections of 1963: "In Cambridge, Maryland, Gloria Richardson; in Danville, Virginia, and other parts of the country, local leaders began to stir up our people at the grass-roots level. This was never done by these Negroes of national stature."10

Even this brief discussion of the early history of the southern black struggle should reveal a major weakness of studies that assumed that King played a dominant initiating role in southern protests. These studies have not determined the extent to which King was actually able to implement his nonviolent strategy in specific places. Studies focused on civil rights leaders and organizations, rather than on local movements, often give the impression that King was not only the major national spokesman for the black struggle but also its prime instigator.

During the period from 1956 to 1961, however, King played only a minor role as a protest mobilizer as opposed to his role as a national symbol of the black struggle. Acknowledgement that King had limited control over the southern struggle should not detract from his historical importance as a heroic and intellectually seminal leader; recognition of King's actual role instead reminds us that his greatness was rooted in a momentous social movement. Numerous black communities organized bus boycotts and, later, sit-in movements with little direct involvement by King, who was seen by many black activists as a source of inspiration rather than of tactical direction. Even in Albany, where he played a major role in the 1961 and 1962 protests, he joined a movement that was already in progress and worked alongside
indigenous leaders who often accepted but sometimes rejected his advice. In St. Augustine, Birmingham, and Selma, he also assisted movements that had existed before his arrival. In numerous other communities, movements arose and were sustained over long periods with little or no involvement by King or his organization.

Moreover, these local movements should not be viewed as protest activity designed to persuade and coerce the federal government to act on behalf of black civil rights. There was a constant tension between the national black leaders, who saw mass protest as an instrument for reform, and local leaders and organizers who were often more interested in building enduring local institutions rather than staging marches and rallies for a national audience. Local black leadership sought goals that were quite distinct from the national civil rights agenda. Even in communities where King played a major role, as in Albany, Birmingham, and Selma, he was compelled to work with local leaders who were reluctant, to say the least, to implement strategies developed by outsiders.

Black communities mobilized not merely to prod the federal government into action on behalf of blacks but to create new social identities for participants and for all Afro-Americans. The prevailing scholarly conception of the civil rights movement suggests a movement that ended in 1965, when one of the last major campaigns led by a civil rights organization prompted the passage of the Voting Rights Act. The notion of a black freedom struggle seeking a broad range of goals suggests, in contrast, that there was much continuity between the period before 1965 and the period after. Contrary to the oft-expressed view that the civil rights movement died during the mid-1960's, we find that many local activists stressed the continuity between the struggles to gain political rights for southern blacks and the struggles to exercise them in productive ways. Rather than claiming that a black power movement displaced the civil rights movement, they would argue that a black freedom movement seeking generalized
racial advancement evolved into a black power movement toward the unachieved goals of the earlier movement.

In summary, scholars have portrayed the black struggle as an augmentation of traditional civil rights reform strategies directed by national civil rights organizations. They have stressed the extent to which national civil rights leaders were able to transform otherwise undirected mass discontent into an effective instrument to speed the pace of reform.

This conception of the black struggle has encountered a strong challenge from a new generation of scholars who have closely examined the internal dynamics of the black struggle in order to determine its sources and emergent norms. As suggested above, previous scholarly studies become increasingly deficient in explanatory power as scholars move nearer to the black struggle itself. If the black struggle were to be seen as a series of concentric circles, with liberal supporters on the outside and full-time activists at the center, the older scholarly literature would appear adequate in its description of dramatic, highly-publicized confrontations in Albany, Birmingham, and Selma and its treatment of the impact of these confrontations on public opinion and the national government. But the literature fails, for the most part, to explain what occurred at the core of the black struggle where deeply committed activists sustained local movements and acquired distinctive tactics, strategies, leadership styles, and ideologies. It was among activists at the core of the struggle that new radical conceptions of American society and black identity emerged. The scholarly literature helps in explaining why a black person gained new rights, but this literature has been less successful in explaining why a black person is now likely to bring quite different attitudes to whatever he or she does than would have been the case before the black struggle began.

Among the recently published works that offer appealing new perspectives for viewing the black struggle as a social movement are the historical studies of specific local movements, such as
those of Chafe, Norrell, and those currently being written by J. Mills Thornton on Montgomery and John Dittmer on Mississippi. These and other studies should provide a fuller understanding of the local context of the black struggle.

Several young sociologists have also charted some promising new directions in the civil rights literature. Doug McAdam\textsuperscript{11} delivered the most sweeping assault yet on the theoretical underpinnings of the previous civil rights literature. He recognized that this literature was rooted in inappropriate classical sociological theories of social movements that focus attention on discontented individuals seeking to manage the psychological strains associated with temporary disruptions of the social equilibrium. His alternative perspective points to the political character of the black struggle, which, he argues, arises not simply from increasing discontent, but from a growing recognition among discontented people that they have the power to alter their conditions of life.

Yet, although McAdam's political process model can serve as a useful way to examine the black struggle, his use of historical evidence remains open to question. Rather than beginning with a broad definition of indigenous organization among blacks, he attempts to demonstrate the importance of indigenous organizations by pointing to the role played by the major civil rights organizations in the black insurgencies of the 1960's. After examining the New York Times index, he comes to the unsurprising conclusion that most of the Times' reports mentioned the involvement of the major civil rights groups in protest activity. McAdam should be troubled by the fact that the civil rights groups may have influenced the news reporting by directing reporters' attention to activities in which the group was involved and that the reporters themselves may have had difficulty assessing the nature of organizational involvement in protest activity. The utility of McAdam's model would have been even more convincingly demonstrated if he had recognized that political processes take
unique forms in each local context and that extensive research is needed to determine what roles particular types of national and local institutions play in a specific social movement.

Aldon Morris\textsuperscript{12} offers a perspective similar in many respects to McAdam's, although he is more concerned with studying the social context of the black struggle than with carrying on a dialogue with previous civil rights scholarship. Morris makes an admirable attempt to do something that the previous generation of scholars neglected to do—that is, to determine how as well as why movements arise and to do this by actually undertaking serious historical research. His original interviews with many of the leaders of the black struggle are themselves wonderful contributions to historical scholarship. Just as McAdam's historical sources do not always serve his analytical purposes, however, so Morris's interviews provide an insufficient base on which to rest his argument.

On the one hand, Morris seeks to demonstrate that indigenous black institutional and leadership networks played major roles in sustaining the black struggle, this is a notion I have no difficulty accepting. On the other hand, he also wants to show that pre-existing black institutions invariably initiated and sustained those struggles. His evidence demonstrates that these organizations provided vital resources for those individuals who initiated the local movements, but far more careful research into documentary evidence from the period would be needed to assess the role played by civil rights organizations as opposed to individuals acting independently of those organizations. In some instances, my own interviews with the same individuals placed greater emphasis on the restraining influence on black activism of pre-existing organizations. In numerous instances, isolated individuals engaged in protest-initiating actions that were unauthorized by any organization, and these voluntary actions served as catalysts for mobilizing existing institutions into action. To conclude, for example, that spontaneity played little role in the sit-ins of 1960s because many individuals involved in initiating the sit-ins were
affiliated with organizations is to downplay the disruptive impact of the sit-ins on those organizations.

Both McAdam, because of his reliance upon newspaper sources, and Morris, because of his insufficient use of primary sources from the period under examination, do not give sufficient attention to the importance of institutional transformation as basic themes in local black struggles. While it is true that the national civil rights organizations played major roles in the southern struggle, it is also the case that these organizations operated in a constantly changing context to which they were forced to respond. Morris relies upon the useful concept of “local movement center” to describe the “dynamic form of social organization” that sustained the struggle, but, surprisingly, his use of the concept conveys little of the dynamism that actually made such centers sources of tactical and ideological innovation.

It should be possible to direct attention to the fact that pre-existing institutions, leaders, and organizations were critically involved in all phases of the struggle without losing sight of the numerous ways in which activism served to challenge existing arrangements in black communities. To maintain, for example, that existing black church networks were vital to the struggle should not lead us to ignore the fact that many black churches did little to aid the struggle, did not join the umbrella organizations that came into being to sustain protest activity, and often were unwilling even to allow civil rights meetings to take place inside their buildings. To maintain that pre-existing civil rights groups played crucial roles in the struggle should not lead us to conclude that they always did so without prodding from activists or without considerable internal policy conflicts. To maintain that many black protest leaders were already part of the leadership structure of black communities is to ignore the extent to which the sudden rise to prominence of a leader such as King disrupted existing patterns of leadership.

Despite these criticisms, McAdam, Morris, and the historians who have done careful study of local movements have offered us
important insights which correct the still-dominant view that movements are typically peripheral to institutionalized structures and to the process of political change. But this insight needs to be combined with an understanding of the capacities of social movements to transform the structures that created them, to generate new ideas and values, and to transform the people who become involved in them. Careful study of the internal dynamics of the black struggle will make us more aware of the ways in which institutions of various types can sustain movements or can kill them. Studies of the historical black struggles of 1960s currently being conducted by the many talented scholars entering this exciting field might also suggest how the vastly greater resources of contemporary black communities might be mobilized to renew the struggle.