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Frame Brokerage in the Pure Food Movement, 1879–1906

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ABSTRACT The US campaign for ‘pure food’ from the 1880s through 1906 featured a diverse coalition of groups with quite different ways of defining the problem, identifying the relevant actors, and balancing political and consumerist tactics. This paper examines how these differences in framing, rather than undermining cooperation or impeding success, helped to broaden the coalition for pure food and to win passage of the 1906 Food and Drug Act. It pays particular attention to the ways in which women’s groups acted as frame brokers, translating pure food issues into a maternalist language and, in so doing, contributing both new support and new tactics to the campaign. The case study is used to address more general issues in the relationship between framing and (1) coalition-building and (2) tactical repertoires.

KEY WORDS: Framing, coalitions, tactics, success, food

Addressing delegates to the National Pure Food and Drug Congress in 1898, government chemist and pure food crusader Harvey Wiley identified the threat and called for action. The problem, he explained, was not dangerous products to be banned from the marketplace.

I would be opposed to any prohibitory measure against the manufacture of goods of any description [...]. What we want is that the farmer may get an honest market and the innocent consumer may get what he thinks he is buying [...]. The object of this bill is to secure honesty. (National Pure Food & Drug Congress, 1898, p. 16)

Pure food activists in the General Federation of Women’s Clubs (GFWC) took a different view. They warned against adulterated food on the grounds of its safety, declaring such food ‘an enemy which attacks the home’ (Pickavance, 2003, p. 101). Where Wiley called for legislation to restore honesty to the marketplace, the GFWC also urged members to make use of their power as consumers. Women should, for example, ‘refuse to buy any canned product that is not distinctly labeled with the name of the manufacturer and [...] for which your local grocer will not give a guarantee of purity’ (GFWC, 1906, 8th Biennial Meeting, p. 343). In all the essential components of ‘collective action frames’—what is the problem, who is affected, and what are we to do—Wiley and the GFWC framed pure food
in distinct ways. As we will see, so did western farmers, temperance reformers, and consumer advocates. Yet, these diverse groups formed an effective coalition that ultimately won passage of the 1906 Pure Food and Drug Act.

This paper uses the case of pure food advocacy to explore two theoretical questions from the larger literature on framing in social movements. First, how can broad coalitions engaged in common campaigns accommodate diverse framing of campaign goals and tactics by coalition members? Second, what does that diversity contribute, for good or ill, to movement outcomes? In answering both questions for the pure food case, I will argue for the importance of frame brokerage by the leaders of organizations within larger coalitions. I use this term as shorthand for the mediating role that organization leaders play in the framing work of a joint campaign. This mediating role works in both directions. In one, frame brokers translate ostensibly common campaign issues into the local cultures of their organizations, reframing coalition goals to fit the identities and concerns of their constituents. In the other direction, this reframing work not only channels the support of organization members into a common campaign, but it may also contribute tactical innovations rooted in the distinct identities and experiences of coalition partners, thus making success more likely. The next two sections review how these two relationships—between framing and coalitions and between framing and success—have been discussed in the literature. I then zero in on the pure food case and how frame brokerage expanded the coalition and diversified its tactics.

Framing and Coalitions

Snow et al.’s (1986) classic article on ‘frame alignment’ highlighted the role of framing in social movement mobilization and distinguished several ways in which activists brought their own framing of injustices, goals, and strategies into alignment with target audiences. Among Snow’s mechanisms of frame alignment, the most relevant for pure food advocacy is frame ‘extension,’ in which a movement attempts ‘to enlarge its adherent pool by portraying its objectives or activities as [...] being congruent with the values or interests of potential adherents’ (Snow et al., 1986, p. 472; see also Snow, 2004). Target audiences may differ in their concerns and agenda from those of movement organizers. The challenge is to augment the movement’s framing work to engage those concerns and agenda—making a pitch for racial justice in an effort to pull minorities into an antiwar campaign, for example, or highlighting issues affecting undocumented workers in order to mobilize them in labor struggles. Although this formulation unduly assigns all the agency to movement organizers, it captures an important process in relations between those organizers and potential adherents. But how might this dynamic change when the gap is not between movement leaders and unorganized individuals, but among potential coalition partners, already mobilized for other purposes (for a recent survey of social movement coalitions, see Van Dyke & McCammon, 2010)?

A common answer makes more inclusive frames and more inclusive coalitions go hand in hand. Case studies analyze the corresponding successes and failures. In the first category, we see the emergence of more generalized frames as diverse groups rally together. Dean and Reynolds (2009; see also Rose, 2000) show how a larger vision of social justice helped local stakeholders—unions, civil rights organizations, environmentalists—form ‘deep coalitions’ on behalf of progressive regional development strategies. In their account of networking among Vancouver progressive organizations, Carroll and Ratner
trace the development of a master frame—a ‘political economy account of injustice’—that provided ‘a common language in which activists from different movements can communicate and perhaps find common ground’ (1996, p. 616). But much as master frames can pull coalition partners together, frame conflicts can disrupt them. In Benford’s (1993) study of the Austin anti-nuclear movement, differences among radicals, moderates, and liberals in their framing of problems, goals, and strategies fostered squabbling and impeded common action. Rohlinger and Quadagno (2009, p. 341), similarly, found that the more conservative Christian organizations framed political issues ‘in their own faith traditions,’ the more difficult it became for them to cooperate with their erstwhile partners in the Christian political movement. In other case studies, coalitions endure only because some partners yield to the framing work of others (Croteau & Hicks, 2003; Bob, 2005).

These are real possibilities, but the underlying assumption that coalitions need unifying frames need not hold. One reason that divergent frames may coexist within a coalition is organizational: where partners have considerable autonomy and where tightly coordinated action is rarely expected, different definitions of coalition goals and strategies may do no harm. Another reason, and the one highlighted in this paper, has more to do with the nature of the ‘meaning work’ at the heart of framing: actors can interpret ostensibly common goals and practices in very different ways. Hart (2008) and Gillan (2008) make a similar point for individuals within a movement, but it applies as well to organizations within a coalition. For example, in their study of successful mobilization against pesticide use, Pulido and Pena (1998) demonstrate how Latino and UFW activists interpreted the issue in terms of protecting workers from exposure, while their middle-class environmentalist allies thought, instead, about protecting consumers and the wilderness. In the case of pure food, crusading chemists saw the issue as a quest for honest representation of food ingredients; progressive women saw it as a matter of exercising their responsibility to protect the health of their families. These contrasting understandings of pure food rarely impeded practical cooperation in pursuit of legislation. Nor is it primarily the work of adept coalition leaders to fit varied groups together into broader campaigns (Nepstad & Bob, 2006). With pure food, this work was done on a more decentralized basis as activists in groups already mobilized for other purposes interpreted emerging issues in ways consistent with prior ideologies and organizational agenda. Within each coalition partner—the Association of Official Agricultural Chemists (AOAC), the GFWC—there could be a coherent and congenial understanding of what the campaign was all about. Between each group and campaign leaders, GFWC and AOAC officers could be doing the work of translating common objectives into distinctive organizational scripts. Gerhards and Rucht’s (1992) account of ‘mesomobilization,’ although it emphasizes the need for effective master frames to mobilize broad coalitions, notes a similar dynamic as coalition partners customize the message of a common campaign to better fit their own constituents.

Framing and Tactics

How might this frame brokerage contribute to movement success? Scholars connect framing with outcomes in two main ways. One focuses on ‘frame resonance’ and thus the ability to mobilize more supporters. The other looks more directly at framing and the achievement of movement goals. Both have some applicability to the pure food case. A third, less common approach is more relevant still: it moves in two steps, from framing to tactical versatility and from there to movement success.
It stands to reason that, all else being equal, frames that engage the attention and sympathy of wider audiences will help build a bigger movement. The research task is to figure out what makes for a more resonant frame. One factor may be a frame’s fit with prevailing political languages and cultural assumptions. In explaining the persistent appeal of greenbackism in the nineteenth-century US labor movement, Babb (1996) shows how this doctrine made sense within the broader culture of worker republicanism. In the longer run, however, Babb finds that frames must have some empirical credibility to maintain allegiance—a conclusion confirmed by Snow and Benford (1988). In most of this work, the emphasis is on strategic framing by movement leaders, and resonance is a matter of audience members accepting or rejecting the leaders’ pitch. Other scholars wish to give those audience members a larger role, allowing for their own interpretation and adaptation of movement frames. Doing so helps Polletta (2006) identify a different characteristic of movement narratives that enhances their appeal: ambiguity. Stories of injustice and resistance which leave room for listeners to fill in the blanks from their own experiences and values are likely to be more effective. Swart (1995), too, emphasizes that movement activists rhetorically adapt master frames to fit their own circumstances and needs. For Polletta and Swart, it is audiences rather than movement strategists who are the key agents in making frames resonant. My analysis of the pure food campaign advances a similar point, but it aims for the middle ground between Polletta’s individuals and Swart’s movements—organized groups within a broader coalition.

The other link commonly drawn between frames and success highlights the fit between frames and opportunities. Much as others have found with audience resonance, McCammon et al., (2007) conclude that frames which are consistent with policy-makers’ political assumptions (such as the value of equal individual opportunity) are more likely to win concessions. And much as with audience resonance, frames that are backed with clear rationale and concrete supporting evidence are more often successful in gaining political advantages (Cress & Snow, 2000; McCammon, 2009). Other accounts put more emphasis on the alignment of frames with political opportunities. Diani (1996), for example, offers a general typology of the kinds of frames most likely to succeed in political environments of greater or lesser elite cleavages and opportunities for autonomous action.

The studies of framing and success most relevant to the case of pure food are those that make the connection through movement tactics. It is sometimes pointed out that tactics are themselves framing strategies, declarations of who we are, what we stand for, and who our enemies are. Singing religious hymns during peaceful marches while bystanders shout racial epithets and police fire water cannons is a powerful way of framing the quest for civil rights (McAdam, 1996; see also Smithey, 2009). But the reverse is also true: frames and identities carry tactics. To the extent that frame brokers carry into a coalition different ways of understanding issues and constructing boundaries between us and them they may bring along alternative strategies corresponding to their particular identities. The best example comes from Ganz’s (2009) study of the United Farm Workers. As participants redefined the struggle as (in part) a civil rights fight by Mexican immigrants, they not only activated identities different from that of class-based labor, but also introduced tactical ideas borrowed from the civil rights movement and from Mexican traditions, such as the long march and peasant theater. Tactical innovation and versatility, in turn, improve a movement’s chance of success, as individuals with diverse backgrounds and skills enhance the ability to respond in creative ways to new challenges and to apply varied forms of pressure on authorities (Andrews, 2004; Ganz, 2009). The pure food campaign
reinforces this conclusion. Until the late 1890s, the campaign focused mainly on legislative measures. Women became more involved in the struggle as organizations like the Women’s Christian Temperance Union and the GFWC reframed the issue in a maternalist language, with adulterated food a threat to their protective family roles and pure food a special responsibility of the nation’s women. With that frame brokering, the campaign gained some influential coalition partners. But it also gained new tactics, involving the then-novel strategy of using consumer leverage in the marketplace to complement conventional political lobbying. That tactical innovation was rooted in women’s stereotyped roles as consumers and as responsible, through their consumption choices, for the safety of the home. We next look more closely at this case.

The Campaign for Pure Food

Concerns over the safety and integrity of commercial foods date back at least to the 1830s in the USA, but these concerns intensified in the last four decades of the nineteenth century and became the focus of a national campaign for federal regulation from the early 1880s. There was ample cause for alarm. A pound of flour or a pint of beer, for example, might be diluted with chalk or water to fatten the seller’s profit margin. The pleasing color of a pickle might owe less to curing than to copper. And the milk available to many urban households was ‘swill milk,’ the product of cows fed on the cheap residue of distilleries. There were many more unpleasant examples (United States Senate, 1900).

Problems such as these could be framed in different ways. Some critics defined the offense as that of fraud. The damage done by watered beer, in this view, was not to the body but to public morality. Such adulteration harmed the honest producer, undersold by unscrupulous rivals. It also appeared symptomatic of how industrial concentration and urban growth eroded personal ties of trust between producer and consumer. Adulteration, Congressman Brosius charged in 1898, was a ‘moral poison’: it violated every person’s ‘right to know what he is eating and drinking’ and it forced businessmen to sink to the level of their most disreputable competitors (National Pure Food & Drug Congress, 1898, pp. 8–9). Pure food, for these critics, was honest food, uncorrupted by venal market practices. Others put their emphasis on the health risks of adulterated food. Additives like copper in pickles (or morphine in patent medicines) could cause injury. And although unscrupulous urban bakers, dairy operators, and distillers had been putting harmful additives in their cheapest products for a long time, modern food production prompted new anxieties over safety. How could consumers judge the hazards of novel products like margarine, unfamiliar techniques like factory canning, or untested preservatives like benzoate of soda (United States House of Representatives, 1906)? Here too, modern science seemed to bring not only risks but alienation from a safer, more wholesome past. The customer constantly ‘hears the praises of the French patent,’ a Congressman said of margarine in 1882, ‘but he longs for the fruits of God’s patent, the pure spring water, the sweet grasses, and the lowing herd’ (Young, 1989, p. 75). Other critics, finally, depicted the problem as one of class inequality. Adulteration, according to one memorial presented to the United States Senate in 1898, ‘menaced the health and purses of the poorer classes especially’ (United States Senate, 1898, p. 1). Affluent city dwellers could assure themselves of wholesome milk. It was the poor who had no choice but to buy the cheapest milk and who were the least likely to understand its risks (Egan, 2005).
However the problems were interpreted, the first responses were local ones. As early as the 1830s, reformers demanded municipal ordinances to ensure the purity of milk supplies (Egan, 2005). State-wide campaigns got underway on a broader front by the 1860s. These sought laws requiring accurate labeling of food, banning harmful additives, and establishing facilities to inspect foods and test ingredients for safety. Even where such laws passed, however, they could do nothing against out-of-state products. New York laws setting standards for wholesome beef could not bar meat from Chicago slaughterhouses. The first attempt to win a national pure food law came in 1879. Nearly 190 more such attempts came, and failed, before passage of the 1906 Food and Drug Act (Okun, 1986).

A remarkably diverse assortment of interests and organizations backed state and federal regulation. The main champions of pure food consisted of certain small businesses, health-related professionals, and female reform groups. The businessmen included those ‘honest’ retailers losing domestic markets to unscrupulous competitors and exporters losing foreign markets on account of the bad reputation of some American products. They promoted legislative remedies in the pages of the American Grocer and through the lobbying efforts of the National Board of Trade, which yielded one of the first pure food bills to be introduced (and defeated) in Congress (Young, 1989). Other reliable business allies in the quest for pure food were small farmers and dairymen, particularly in the west, who saw their products being discredited and undersold by adulterated versions and by such modern alternatives as margarine. The Farmers’ Alliance was one of the early risers in the campaign, calling for a pure food law in 1881 (Kane, 1964).

Health-related professionals formed another pillar of the pure food campaign, particularly chemists and doctors. State-level food laws commonly assigned monitoring and testing duties to chemists in agricultural bureaus or inspection departments. Their professional ties and common tasks led to the 1886 formation of the AOAC. According to its charter, the organization dedicated itself to crafting analytical methods for evaluating foods and to devising standards of purity on which consumers could rely. The AOAC also became an important vehicle for providing expert testimony at hearings, conducting research, and publishing reports supporting stricter regulation (Wolfe, 1975; Marcus, 1987; Berneking, 1997). Doctors often joined the fray, particularly where campaigns targeted adulterated and fraudulent drugs as well as food. At the national level, the American Medical Association went on record in support of a pure food law in 1904. Through both its professional legitimacy and its ability to coordinate the lobbying of state medical societies, it became an effective partner in the coalition (Wirtschafter, 1958; Okun, 1986).

Women’s reform organizations were the final major element in the pure food coalition. The first to call for government action, in the mid-1880s, was the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). Initially, their concern was with food and drugs that carried an unlabeled alcoholic punch. A decade later, however, the WCTU’s national leadership had come to see alcohol abuse as more a symptom of poor social conditions—including impure foods eaten by urban laborers—than a sign of poor morals (Bordin, 1981; Lebsock, 1990; Goodwin, 1999). Joining the WCTU was the GFWC. Members of the GFWC were genteel, secular reformers, not Christian temperance crusaders. For them, purifying the food supply was part of a larger project of civic reform in which good government, clean streets, and wholesome food went hand in hand. Local GFWC affiliates began promoting pure food in the late 1890s, and by 1905 the national organization had a dedicated committee at work sending letters to newspaper editors and elected officials, collecting
information for members, and dispatching representatives to give talks around the country (GFWC, Proceedings of the Biennial Meetings; Young, 1989). A final reform group committed to the cause of pure food was the National Consumers League (NCL), open to all but dominated by women. Launched in 1899, the NCL sought to improve working conditions for female and child laborers by educating and organizing consumers to buy only from responsible firms. They soon expanded their mission to defend the interests of consumers themselves (Sklar, 1998; Goodwin, 1999; Wiedenhoft, 2008).

No umbrella organization tied these forces together. Instead, their activities were loosely coordinated through joint conferences, overlapping affiliations, and personal networking. The 1898–1900 meetings of the National Pure Food and Drug Congress illustrate both the diversity of the coalition and one mechanism for holding it together. These conferences were organized by pure food advocates from the U.S. Bureau of Chemistry and from the Virginia Grange (a farmers’ organization) to work out a common set of recommendations for legislation. The gatherings featured delegates from trade associations (including confectioners, retail grocers, and bee keepers), professional bodies (such as the American Chemical Society and the Medical and Surgical Association), farmer organizations (the National Grange and the National Farmers’ Congress), and the WCTU. The rosters encompass nearly 100 organizations (National Pure Food & Drug Congress, 1898, 1899). Major expositions, like the one held in St. Louis in 1904, provided occasions for chemists, consumer advocates, public health officials, and civic-minded women to work together on educational exhibits, warning of food dangers and demonstrating new methods for identifying and manufacturing pure food (Kane, 1964; Okun, 1986; Goodwin, 1999). The NCL acted as a joint forum for female reformers, doctors, temperance advocates, and labor union officials to mingle and discuss strategy (Goodwin, 1999). Even in the absence of formal ties, finally, personal networking helped coordinate the movement. Chemists, health department officers, and philanthropists exchanged reports on new studies of particular foods and, as needed, rallied to fend off business attacks on their activities (Wolfe, 1970; Okun, 1986). The networker-in-chief was Harvey Wiley. From his post as chief chemist at the Department of Agriculture, he maintained a busy schedule of speeches at women’s clubs, testimony before Congress, correspondence with professional organizations, and circulation of Bureau of Chemistry bulletins to well-placed individuals.

Although Wiley sought first and foremost to apply direct political pressure on Congress, many of his female allies added a different approach, what we would now call political consumerism (Micheletti et al., 2004). The idea was to bring the market leverage of consumers to bear on merchants, and the first step, accordingly, was to educate consumers. In the 1890s, the WCTU’s Marian McBride used local food fairs to promote ‘higher standards for food products,’ and with the help of contacts made through the National Pure Food Congress, she ‘compile[d] a running list of ‘clean’ foods […] for the use of women’s groups’ (Goodwin, 1999, p. 115). After 1900, women’s magazines adopted a similar approach on a broader scale. Good Housekeeping tested food products and published both a ‘Roll of Honor’ for those that met standards of purity and an annual guide to safe shopping. Women’s Home Companion and Ladies’ Home Journal soon followed suit (Endres, 1997). The GFWC explicitly connected consumer and political strategies. Reporting on efforts by its Ohio branch to give women better ‘knowledge of food values,’ The Club Woman argued that ‘the only way to get pure food laws and protection from base imitations of all kinds, is to provide an education which will enable the purchaser to know when “things are not what they seem”’ (November 1904, p. 13).
Women’s groups also organized more concerted consumer action. The WCTU established ‘vigilante groups’ to monitor what merchants were selling and, if direct negotiations failed, to report violations of state law. The GFWC adopted a similar approach but under the characteristically more genteel name of ‘visiting committees,’ charged with persuading merchants to stock only properly labeled goods (The Club Woman, November 1902, p. 88). Impure foods and uncooperative merchants, in turn, might face boycotts. A mass meeting called by the New York Council of Jewish Women voiced the hope that ‘if the women of this country boycott the vendors of deleterious foods they can put them out of business’ (New York Times, 3 December, 1905). And much as with contemporary political consumerism, women activists did their best to make available alternatives to those deleterious foods. Local branches of the WCTU, for example, established ‘hygienic’ lunch stands and restaurants where consumers could be assured of safe eating (Goodwin, 1999).

The women who led the WCTU, the GFWC, and the NCL championed a variety of consumer tactics to win pure food, but they also did what they could to promote legislative remedies by signing petitions, writing letters of newspapers, and meeting with legislators. In this they joined men like Wiley in more conventional political tactics. The laws put forward on a regular basis from 1879 to 1906 varied rather little in their basic provisions. They required that makers of foods and drugs accurately label the ingredients used. They gave the federal government new responsibilities and new resources to evaluate foods and drugs for safety and for compliance with the law. They banned harmful ingredients. And they covered only interstate trade, leaving it to individual states to police foods and drugs within their borders. Year after year, these bills also failed, brought down by businessmen’s defense of free markets and southerners’ defense of states’ rights. Success finally came in 1906, when the popular campaign received a timely assist from Upton Sinclair’s exposé of conditions in meatpacking plants and from President Roosevelt’s personal pressure on recalcitrant Republican senators. Harvey Wiley is generally given credit for keeping the troops in line. On one side, he energetically and skillfully coordinated the efforts of coalition partners, both in hearings before Congress and behind the scenes. On the other, he negotiated key compromises between consumers and business groups to blunt the latter’s opposition (Young, 1989). Wiley himself—not one to minimize his personal contributions to history—nevertheless declared the final Congressional vote to be ‘the victory of the women of this country, whose influence was felt as irresistible’ (Anderson, 1958, p. 181).

Frame Brokerage and Coalition-Building in Pure Food

Campaign leaders like Wiley were able to enlist multiple sources of support for pure food legislation. There were reasons for this that had little to do with framing. As social movement scholars have found in other cases, a number of ‘moral shocks’ (Jasper, 1997) heightened and generalized concerns over food safety and integrity. Periodic scandals over swill milk in major cities go back into the 1840s and prompted mobilization on a local basis. Impure food became an affront to national pride in the Spanish-American War, when journalists charged that the health and morale of US soldiers were jeopardized by ‘embalmed beef’—the canned beef that was part of military rations and which kept poorly in Cuba’s heat. Finally, 1905 brought the serial publication of Sinclair’s The Jungle. Its stomach-turning scenes of meat processing are widely credited with giving the final push to food and drug legislation (Marcus, 1987; Young, 1989).
The pure food campaign also benefited from its timing within a wider ‘cycle of protest’ (Tarrow, 1998) in which Progressives called on the government to take action for conservation, corporate regulation, working conditions, and much more. Moral outrage and widespread collective action, however, go only so far in explaining the breadth of the pure food coalition. The Progressive impulse could have (and did) drive many different movements; why food? And while moral shocks often galvanize mobilization, in the case of pure food the key actors were existing organizations, already mobilized for other purposes, turning their attention to food adulteration. It is here that frame brokerage becomes an important part of the story, both for understanding how these organizations signed on and how diverse framing of food issues could be a resource for, rather than an obstacle to, the development of a more inclusive coalition.

The alliance between pure food advocates and organized civic groups involved the translation of food issues into different ideological frameworks. For western farmers, concerns over adulterated food were assimilated to the more general populist resentment of eastern business. When the Farmers’ Alliance called for a federal pure food law in 1881, it did so in the name of escaping economic servitude to eastern food companies, not in the name of protecting consumers’ health (Kane, 1964). The WCTU, for its part, embraced pure food for reasons that went beyond eliminating alcohol-laced drinks and drugs. In the early 1880s, when the WCTU still couched its opposition to spirits in religious terms, impure food was seen as fostering ‘diseased appetites’ (Bordin, 1981, p. 108). Purifying the food supply and limiting alcohol consumption were two parts of a single campaign to improve morals. By the 1890s, the WCTU leadership had come to view alcohol abuse as more disease than sin, and a disease brought on more by social conditions than by personal failings. Within this framework, pure food became one ingredient (along with kindergartens, job training, and better sanitation) in a larger campaign to eliminate inducements to drink (Bordin, 1981; Lebsock, 1990). The National Consumers’ League had yet another ideological template, but one as easily applied to pure food. Its leaders saw themselves as organizing middle-class women as allies of poor women and children. These were the most likely victims of adulterated food, and the victimizers—businesses lacking all sense of social responsibility—were the same as those that exploited vulnerable workers on the job. Lobbying for pure food benefited the poor as consumers in much the same way that lobbying for protective labor legislation benefited them as producers (Sklar, 1998; Storrs, 2000).

Frame brokerage between campaign leaders and the GFWC was more subtle but also more important, because it operated with all the female-led groups in the movement, including the WCTU and NCL. Historians have shown that this was an era of maternalist politics, in which educated women became increasingly active in reform politics and justified that public engagement as an extension of their traditional roles as moral guardians of home and family (Skocpol, 1992; Tarr & Tebeau, 1996; Clemens, 1997; Endres, 1997). The key ideological move was to reframe home and family in wider terms. In part, this move was pragmatic: to discharge their proper functions at home, female reformers argued, women had to become politically active. Because of their ‘time-honored, world-conceded sphere,’ argued a speaker at the 1896 GFWC convention, ‘any cause of ill-health [. . .] is of legitimate, vital and immediate interest to women. Whether that danger lies in [. . .] an unsanitary schoolroom, impure water supply [or] foul alleys, [. . .] if the menace to the people’s health exists, the interest and the duty are hers to know about it and have it corrected’ (GFWC, 1896, 3rd Biennial Meeting, p. 295). Reformers
also redefined women’s responsibilities by making the larger community an extension of the household. Efforts to clean city streets and purge corruption from city government became matters of ‘municipal housekeeping.’ Women’s reformist ambitions went well beyond the city. ‘The world has ever looked to women as the home-maker and home-keeper. Can she not become the regenerator and keeper of the nation?’ (GFWC, 1904, 7th Biennial Meeting, p. 94).

This was a cultural script easily applied to the pure food campaign. Leaders of the WCTU, NCL, and GFWC assimilated the cause to their own agenda, and they did so by translating food purity issues into maternal priorities. Pure food, the WCTU’s Marion McBride argued in 1898, was ‘a home question,’ adding that ‘the welfare of the family is the welfare of the state’ (National Pure Food & Drug Congress, 1898, p. 32). Alice Lakey of the GFWC took up the same theme. Because ‘women are housekeepers of the land,’ they had a special responsibility to exercise vigilance over the nation’s food supply (New York Times, 24 January 1905, letter to the editor). Women’s magazines made the same point, telling readers they were ‘entrusted with National Housekeeping and National Housecleaning’ (Endres, 1997, p. 263). The NCL’s Harriet Van Der Vaart reminded GFWC members that the choice and preparation of foods had long been women’s responsibility. This work, however, ‘has gradually been taken [...] from the home, until to-day, the housewife may [...] provide her family with all kinds of canned fruits, meats and preserves.’ It falls to women, accordingly, to ensure that these commercial products are ‘pure and wholesome. Law and labels are [...] needed for effective work in this direction’ (GFWC, 1906, 8th Biennial Meeting, pp. 170–171).

Multiple and varied interpretations of food adulteration, then, were not obstacles to building a wide coalition, differences to be transcended with some more inclusive master frame. They instead helped make a broader coalition possible. And in contrast to the leader-centered view of ‘frame bridging’ (Snow et al., 1986), brokerage between general goal and constituent framing was the work of each group’s own culture and leadership, not the resourceful framing tactics of campaign organizers. One can see GFWC spokeswomen, for example, taking on the cause of pure food, and giving it a distinctive spin, much as they had done with other issues, like child labor or elementary education.

Frame Brokerage and Tactical Repertoires in Pure Food

The campaign for pure food legislation succeeded in part owing to political opportunities of a kind familiar to social movement scholars: favorable openings and divided elites. Teddy Roosevelt adopted the cause as his own and exerted his leverage as president and as party leader to win the support of conservative Republican senators in 1906. Roosevelt’s election in 1904, moreover, marked the rise of a substantial Progressive wing within his party. The pure food campaign benefited, as well, from the over-representation of western farm states among Congressional leaders, men who shared some of the populist resentment of the industrial east (Anderson, 1958; Young, 1989). These political circumstances were clearly favorable to the pure food campaign’s legislative goals, and they help explain the timing of success in 1906, as compared to the failure of similar bills in earlier sessions.

The other classic form of political opportunity, divided elites, also benefited pure food activism. Pure food advocates got important support from business factions who stood to lose from both the competing products of large food manufacturers and the loss of
consumer confidence in food products. Most important was the decision of the National Retail Grocers’ Association to support the Food and Drug Act in 1906, after having opposed similar statutes in 1901 and 1902. Divisions among experts also gave pure food advocates favorable opportunities of a more cultural kind. Chemists employed by food companies dismissed warnings about preservatives and artificial ingredients, but state and federal chemists offered laboratory results to back up those warnings. On the pharmaceutical side, the American Medical Association weighed in against defenders of the patent medicine industry and in favor of scientific standards for evaluating drug safety and efficacy (Wirtschafter, 1958). Such well-credentialed allies were especially important in the Progressive Era, when the application of dispassionate science to solve social problems enjoyed great legitimacy.

Innovation and diversity in movement tactics, however, complemented political opportunities. Indeed, one political opportunity—a divided business community—may itself have been reinforced by campaign strategies. We saw that the campaign featured a range of new tactics based on concerted consumer action rather than conventional political pressure. These tactics were the work of women’s organizations. Why women? Partly, of course, because women lacked the vote: consumer action offered an alternative source of leverage. More important was the way in which frame brokerage aligned traditional gender ideology with consumer activism for pure food. Women’s organizations, we saw, framed the issue of pure food not primarily as one of honesty in the market, but as one of safety in the home. And GFWC, NCL, and WCTU leaders all presented the quest for pure food as an exercise of women’s traditional responsibility to be responsible consumers, protecting their families from unsafe products. That responsibility called for and justified political action by women on behalf of pure food legislation. But it also demanded vigilance in buying food, and many of the schemes women’s group deployed—labeling, white and black lists, consumer bulletins—were meant to enable women to perform that duty more effectively. In some ways, these practices were not really innovations; instead, they extended old-fashioned feminine roles. However, frame brokerage linked those roles and practices to a political cause and put them more systematically to use for public ends. In this they offer another example of the pattern identified by scholars like Ganz (2009) and Polletta (2002), in which new members of movement coalitions bring with them both distinctive scripts for understanding collective goals and distinctive resources and skills for reaching those goals. In the pure food case, that transposition of consumer tactics to a political movement was fostered by the period’s strong cultural association between women and consumption (Cronin, 2000). It also drew on precedents in which women had used their clout as consumers for political ends of other kinds, as the NCL had done on behalf of child labor and the WCTU had done in pursuit of temperance. But the connection between women and consumption was also made explicitly and deliberately by frame brokers—organization leaders using maternalist language both to reframe pure food issues and to legitimate women’s activism in the marketplace as well as the legislature.

The literature review noted the general argument that innovation and diversity in movement strategy make success more likely. Without closely controlled comparisons, it is hard to say for sure if this conclusion applies to the pure food campaign, but there are at least three reasons to think it does. Students of more recent US mobilization around food safety, notably efforts to regulate and restrict genetically modified (GM) foods, often point to the relative weakness of consumer activism. By contrast, Western Europeans have more effectively applied pressure to retailers through boycotts of GM food and boycotts of
GM-free alternatives. And one reason for Americans’ tactical weakness is said to be the lack of a ‘food culture’ in the USA, which might have viewed GM products as a threat to highly valued and widely shared culinary traditions (Schweiger, 2001; Schurman, 2004). The comparison to pure food is instructive not only because the latter did feature such consumer tactics and did succeed. It is also instructive because maternalist ideology served as a sort of functional equivalent to a food culture in fueling consumer mobilization. It did so by translating often-invisible risks into threats to women’s customary responsibility for food quality.

A second reason to think that consumerist tactics made a difference involves the business groups that eventually came to support legislation. Pure food bills failed in 1901 and 1902 in part owing to the opposition of the National Retail Grocers’ Association. But it was especially from 1903 that the GFWC and NCL expanded their educational outreach, white lists, and boycotts. These were also the years that women’s magazines joined the campaign. And in 1905, the Retail Grocers, who would have been the direct targets of consumer campaigns and who were vocally anxious about consumer trust, switched sides to support pure food legislation. Organized manufacturers, by contrast, remained in opposition (Young, 1989; Goodwin, 1999).

Third, we know from other policy areas that maternalist framing of public issues in this period won political gains. A leading example is labor law. Demands for legislative action to limit the length of the working day or set minimum wages consistently failed in state legislatures or, if they passed that hurdle, in federal courts. Once reframed and rewritten to focus on vulnerable women and children—exceptions to the American liberal ethos that individuals should rely on themselves, not the state—such measures often made it into law. The same pattern can be found in early twentieth-century welfare policy (Skocpol, 1992). Frame brokerage in the pure food campaign thus did double duty. It aligned movement goals with the discourse of organized women, and it aligned their consumer tactics with prevailing political opportunities.

Conclusion

The Food and Drug Act was approved after a quarter century of agitation and over the resistance of food manufacturers and political conservatives. This achievement reflected, in part, the breadth of the coalition working for pure food and the range of its tactical repertoire. My focus has been on the frame brokerage that enabled both coalition breadth and tactical range. The campaign picked up support from existing groups like the Farmers’ Alliance, the WCTU, and the GFWC as their leaders reframed pure food issues to fit the culture and concerns of their own organizations and constituents. These distinctive organizational framings, in turn, introduced back into the campaign new tactical approaches and resources. Frame brokerage by women reformers was most important in broadening both the size and repertoire of the coalition. By translating pure food issues into a maternalist idiom, they brought their organizations—hitherto engaged on other fronts—into the campaign. And they carried with them their culturally sanctioned roles as consumers and their experience with the use of consumerist tactics for other causes.

For social movement scholars, the case study offers some correctives. A familiar view is that as different groups opt to work together in common campaigns, they develop (or negotiate) some more inclusive, generalized framing of issues and goals (Gerhards & Rucht, 1992; Carroll & Ratner, 1996; Rohlinger & Quadagno, 2009)—with possible...
tensions between internal ideological commitments and support for common principles (Croteau & Hicks, 2003; Beamish & Luebbers, 2009). The pure food case illustrates, first, how movement goals get translated into different organizational scripts: cooperation is possible without common principles because the movement goals mean different things to different constituents. Through frame brokerage, moreover, those differences can become assets rather than obstacles to expanding movement coalitions. And we should look for the source of these accomplishments less among skillful national organizers mobilizing new adherents and more among the leaders of existing constituent organizations. As for framing and success, the case study does not question the potential contributions of frame resonance, frame credibility, or a salutary fit between frames and opportunities. But it more strongly reinforces the alternative argument that framing may contribute to success by enhancing tactical versatility. Frame brokerage, by translating movement goals into the languages of different audiences, may thereby activate different tactical approaches rooted in the traditions and resources of those audiences.

The historical findings for the pure food case are clearly not generalizeable to all coalitions. Whether diverse framings among potential coalition partners broaden an alliance or divide it will depend on other factors that are worth further investigation. Some movement goals may lend themselves more readily than others to multiple, non-conflicting interpretations, and we know from comparative food studies that food is a particularly plastic cultural object. Some coalitions are more loosely coupled than others, permitting greater autonomy to constituent groups, including in their framing work. Indeed, some scholars argue that such loose, ad-hoc networks of activist groups are becoming the norm (Tilly, 2004). As for tactical diversity, much as Ganz (2009) found for individual unions, so for coalitions: they may vary in whether organizational practices encourage or inhibit tactical innovation and pluralism. And even if encouraged, the contribution of tactical innovations to movement success will turn on other considerations, such as the fit between them and prevailing political and cultural opportunities.

In all these respects, the specifics of the pure food movement may not be typical. But even if the answers it offers are not generally applicable, the questions are. Scholars would benefit from looking more closely at the decentralized work of frame brokerage, for its role both in linking existing social movement organizations to broader coalitions and in conveying to those coalitions new tactical styles and skills.

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