

Unseen Suffering: Slow Violence and the Phenomenological Structure of Social Problems

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Abstract:

Social scientists have severed social problems from the study of framing work in social movements. This article proposes to rejoin problems and framing work via attention to the phenomenological structure of social problems. By describing basic 1) temporal, 2) spatial, and 3) experiential features of social problems, we facilitate comparisons of different kinds of movements across distinct historical periods and regions. The approach is demonstrated via the example of “slow violence” (Nixon 2011)—suffering that develops gradually across time and extends across space as well as disproportionately afflicts disempowered people. A comparison of two very different historical cases—environmental justice advocacy in the wake of the Union Carbide disaster in Bhopal, India and consumer activism in early twentieth-century America—illustrates how slow violence presents parallel issues with respect to representing the problem and identifying the culprits. On this basis, the argument demonstrates parallels among disparate social movements by including the analysis of the phenomenological structure of social problems into comparative studies of framing work in movements. As such, this article presents analytical possibilities for incorporating experiences of social problems into the study of framing work and social movements.

Keywords: Comparative historical sociology | Consumer activism | Environmental activism | Framing | Hidden experience | Social movements

Article:

In 2008, after walking 500 miles from Bhopal to New Delhi, a group of activists drew blood from those living with the aftermath of the 1984 Union Carbide chemical disaster. The activists wrote letters in blood to the Prime Minister to seek redress for the slowly developing effects of the disaster. Moreover, they took photographs of the blood drawing event, which were then distributed through local news outlets and the activists’ websites. After submitting the letter to the Prime Minister, the group visited workshops, slums, and youth associations with vials of blood, pictures, and stories of the harms wrought by the disaster (Banerjee 2013).

This is a striking instance of framing a social problem, the interpretive work that social movement scholars have long studied (Benford and Snow 2000; Johnston and Noakes 2005; Snow et al. 1986) Many studies of framing would investigate where these frames come from—perhaps social institutions (e.g., religion, nationality, language, organizations) or practices (e.g., interactions, situations, emotions). And they could investigate the contents of these frames (how activists characterize problems, e.g., culprits and victims, causes, ways to address the matter, etc.) Further, sociologists would investigate the consequences of framing the toxic event to the government and the people of India in this manner. Did it mobilize people? Why or why not? In general, the study of framing has taken a narrowly constructivist¹ approach to framing work, one focused on the contexts of and actions through which activists construct interpretations and meanings relevant to the movements. But this constructivist approach must be expanded to capture the ways that features of social problems can affect framing work.

To do this, we can investigate the phenomenological structure of social problems. By describing how people experience social problems, we will be able to compare framing work across seemingly disparate social movements—something that scholarly accounts with insufficient attention to problems fail to do. This article elaborates a concept coined by literary theorist Rob Nixon: *slow violence*. Slow violence refers to attritional suffering that develops unspectacularly. It is a) dispersed across time and space, b) disproportionately suffered by dispossessed or marginalized people, and c) difficult to apprehend and to represent visually.

The article begins with a survey of approaches to framing in social movements. Next, it proposes that attention to the phenomenological structure (temporal, spatial, and experiential features) of social problems can unearth their role in framing work. It follows with a comparison of environmental justice activism and consumer activism through the lens of slow violence: victims' campaigns for compensation in the years after the Union Carbide poisoning in Bhopal, India in the late twentieth century and the National Consumers' League's reform efforts in the early twentieth century. Located in different social and historical contexts, these activists struggled to illustrate slow-moving, hidden suffering, which required them to frame the problem and represent it visually. To conclude, I suggest future comparisons of social problems, particularly to sort out what has changed and what remains of mystification as a problem confronting activists. The search for recurring problems may renew an emphasis on the socio-historical development of framing and social movements that neither marginalizes the problems in question, nor confines framing issues to substantively similar movements (e.g. environmental, food, labor, civil rights movements, etc.).

Framing, environmental justice frames, and absent problems

Arising out of the cultural turn in social movement studies, framing refers to the “signifying work or meaning construction” undertaken by activists and participants in social movements

¹ I use “constructivist” to denote approaches that stress the work activists put into framing social problems. Thus, to talk of social problems does not imply something self-evidently objective, natural, and uninterpreted. There is always some basic interpretation at play. But the constructivist emphasis on framing work must incorporate problems as activists interpret and experience them rather than divorce them from framing work and stress the latter at the expense of the former.

(Snow 2004, p. 384). When activists appeal to others, identify perpetrators and victims, or in any way seek to focus attention on issues and conditions around which to mobilize, they are engaged in framing work. Studies of framing tend to prioritize the relationship between activists' interpretive work and its consequences for movements. At the same time, these studies allow no clear analytical role for social problems. Typically, to study framing is to study the processes through which activists construct the problems they seek to address (Benford and Snow 2000; McAdam et al. 1996; Johnston and Noakes 2005). Yet we can build on efforts to bridge studies of framing and opportunity structures (Ferree 2002; Koopmans and Statham 1999; Steinberg 1999) to tread a path toward a serious account of problems in framing work.

In their influential article, Snow et al. proposed that framing would draw attention to “grievance interpretation” and other “interactive and communicative processes” in mobilization (1986, pp. 464–465). They stressed the cultural work that goes into aligning these interpretations (frames) with those of potential participants. Moreover, they were careful to note that the existence of grievances and social problems did not determine framing work. They highlighted the “differential interpretation’ of grievances” across individuals, organizations, and societies (1986, p. 465). The authors gestured toward further investigation of associations between “types of movements” and “frame alignment processes” (1986, p. 476). But their focus remained on framing strategies (what they called bridging, amplification, extension, and transformation) without an analysis of social problems. From the start, then, the study of framing divorced grievances (and problems) from interpretation. This diminished the potential to assess how people’s experiences and understandings of social problems might contribute to constructivist accounts of framing work.

Subsequently, framing has been elaborated upon to highlight “diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational” dimensions of the framing process—identifying the problem and culprit, specifying solutions, and getting people involved (Benford and Snow 2000, pp. 615–618). This emphasis on the framing process has yielded insights about the efficacy of frames (Hewitt and McCammon 2005), the contests over framing issues within and across movements (Marx Ferree 2002), the cultural and social forces that shape framing strategies (Melo 2016), and lists of different types of frames (Benford 1997, pp. 414–415). The questions are often about how activists define a problem (broadly or narrowly), how movements arrive at a particular frame, and what features of frames prove most effective. For instance, Holly McCammon argues that frames become more persuasive as they specify reasons for their demands, have empirical credibility, and define problems as broad and serious (2009, pp. 56–59). When they seek the origins or development of frames, scholars identify discursive, strategic, and contested processes of frame construction (Benford and Snow 2000, pp. 623–627; Boykoff and Laschever 2011; Williams 2016). This focus on framing processes has remained rather narrow.

Some research has connected framing processes to broader socio-cultural conditions—a promising venue for expanding the study of framing. Koopmans and Statham (1999) proposed the notion of discursive opportunity structures to explore how political culture and history condition framing practices and resonance. Similarly, Marx Ferree (2002, 2003) and McCammon et al. (2007) insist that we must consider the role of social and discursive power in shaping framing practices. Thus, movements that tap into dominant ways of thinking about issues like women’s rights may resonate with larger publics and social movement targets. At the same time,

the reliance on powerful discourses can marginalize less popular, more “radical” or challenging frames. These accounts place framing work within a broader socio-historical context and begin to investigate questions of power, but the role of problems themselves remains unexplored.

When scholars do refer to problems, they do so mainly to dismiss their potential analytical relevance to framing work. They observe that movements to address similar problems will, obviously, draw on similar frames. Thus, when Benford and Snow surveyed the work on social movement frames, they noted, “the most obvious way in which collective action frames vary is in terms of the problems or issues addressed and the corresponding direction of attribution” (2000, p. 618). Because the connection between problems and frames appears “obvious,” the role of problems in framing processes is considered self-evident and therefore uninteresting. For example, environmental sociologists and others acknowledge that ecological and environmental activists must convince others that difficult-to-see issues require comparatively urgent redress (Adam 1998; Capek 1993; Meyer 2015; Natali and McClanahan 2017; Sandweiss 1998; Szasz 1994). As such, there are questions about how to frame environmental problems from the scale of the issues (Mansfield and Haas 2006) to the nature of the culprits and victims (Buckingham and Kulcur 2010; Faber 2008). Some focus explicitly on the origins and implications of these framing issues in scholarly understanding as well as mobilizing around environmental issues (Adam 1998, pp. 39–42; Natali and McClanahan 2017, pp. 200–202). For the most part, these studies detail the distinctive environmental imaginaries that inform framing work as well as the efficacy of framing practices for environmental problems specifically.² The focus on hard-to-see problems, in this case, is often limited to predefined environmental movements.

There are two major problems with the current state of frame analyses in social movements. First, it leads us to assume that we know more about the relationship between problems and framing processes than we do. Research that has pushed us to treat framing in terms of broader socio-historical processes tends to focus on matters of opportunity structures and power. However, these approaches still absorb problems into their socio-cultural contexts and thus assume that frames construct problems as a matter of course; in this way, they constrict the possibility of framing as an analytical concept. Building the analysis of social problems into the study of framing work in movements will enrich this approach by broadening our ability to identify the ways that social movements relate to their social and historical contexts. Without an interest in the structure of social problems, we lose a chance to identify longer term continuities. Problems, as I discuss in this article, are not merely objects of framing work; they are experiences with identifiable textures and characteristics.

Second, current approaches assume that substantive problems such as those associated with environmental justice are essentially incomparable to other, ostensibly non-environmental ones. Thus, Capek discussed “environmental justice frames” as necessarily bound up with essentially problems among “contaminated communities” (1993, p. 20). Environmental sociologists develop their accounts of environmental justice or ecological populism with primary reference to the history of environmental or environmental justice movements (e.g., Mascarenhas 2009, pp. 128–129; Szasz 1994, pp. 38–39). But this is not true only of environmental work. Comparisons of recurring problems over time often remain within the same substantive area, e.g., labor,

² Barbara Adam’s work on timescapes (1998) is a partial exception to which I return in the conclusion.

citizenship, food movements (Goldberg 2007; Haydu 1998; Haydu and Skotnicki 2016). Comparison will illustrate whether problems, as a matter of experience, have discernible phenomenal structures over time and across space.

Next, I propose a phenomenological approach that would preserve and expand upon the essential constructivist insight—that problems are always interpreted (Norton 2014). While they may not determine framing work, there is no reason to believe that grievances and problems are irrelevant to it. Rather than examine social problems as mere effects of framing, we can also look at how people’s experiences of social problems affect framing work. By exploring efforts to mobilize around social problems, we will find clues that reveal their phenomenological structure—that is, some elementary features of problems that manifest in people’s experiences. One note of caution: this approach to framing is not intended to answer the question of what gets defined as a problem in the first place. It proceeds from activists’ interpretation of some state of affairs as a problem and allows us to assess their framing work in relation to these states of affairs. Said differently, we can use activists’ framing work to ascertain analytically distinguishable—but not strictly independent—features of social problems.

The phenomenological structure of social problems

To specify the phenomenological structure of social problems, I focus on three basic features: temporal, spatial, and experiential. Temporally, problems manifest themselves along different timelines at different paces. Some problem—certain forms of violence or responses to intolerable social oppression, for instance—manifest themselves via public eruptions. By contrast, others may appear gradually, if at all, over long periods of time (Pierson 2004; Nixon 2011). The basic temporal question is: How do these problems develop and appear to us? This requires attention to the pace, duration, and rhythms through which social problems become evident.³

Spatially, problems manifest themselves across geographical and physical areas. The problems associated with exposure to toxins or increasing average temperatures have a particular geography, one where human borders (e.g., states) are not a serious obstacle. By contrast, the problems associated with displaced persons necessarily follow human and geographical borders, to some extent. The basic spatial question is: How are these problems distributed and manifest across space? This requires attention to the regions, patterns, and means through which social problems develop and surface in experiences.

Finally, it helps to identify the experiences of those involved in the problem. But identifying the culprits and victims is a feature of framing work, which makes the question of experiences difficult. Here we can focus on how activists characterize the suffering involved in the problem: ailments, afflictions, and the afflicted. To be clear, we can draw on activists’ framing of suffering

³ It is no easy task to demarcate spectacular problems from mundane ones. Consider some problems associated with racism in the United States. Some tend toward the self-evidently spectacular (e.g., police violence; urban uprisings). But these problems also have more mundane and historical roots (e.g., “micro-aggressions,” de jure and de facto segregation, slavery, institutional racism, etc.). Rather than adjudicate that issue here, I think researchers can take their cues about the character of these problems from the activists and movements under study. After all, the phrase “phenomenological structure of social problems” admits that these problems come to us already interpreted. Problems are not separate from framing work, but analytic emphasis on their relevance to framing work will yield new ways to connect framing to broader social tendencies and processes.

for clues about the character of the suffering involved: is it readily visible? at what pace does it appear? where does it come from? Thus, the basic question of experiences becomes: What is the character of the suffering involved? It forces us to consider suffering as a basic feature of social problems; while not all suffering indicates a social problem, many if not all social problems entail suffering. To preserve some analytical specificity, we can focus primarily on physical and physiological suffering, though the division of physical and psychological suffering can only be provisional (Galtung 1969; Nixon 2011).

In summary, we can begin with three basic phenomenological features of social problems: 1) temporal, 2) spatial, and 3) experiential, i.e., the suffering involved. While slow violence is my central example, one could bring a similar concern with phenomenological structure to other social problems and the framing work associated with them (e.g., legal marginalization and civil/human rights issues; austerity; war and spectacular violence—see the conclusion). This does not, however, secure a causal argument about the determination of framing work by the nature of the social problems addressed. If there are causal relationships that run from problems to frames, they would likely be limiting rather than selecting causes (Wright et al. 1992, pp. 147–151). That is, as activists seek to address slow violence-related social problems, they must find ways to represent them—often these ways will be visual. In other words, they are limited by the requirement to represent the problem in order to demonstrate that it is in fact real. But the work of representing slow violence—how they do so, whom they address, audience responses, etc.—may vary significantly across time and place, as existing studies of framing have ably demonstrated. Similarly, there may be substantial disagreement within movements about these matters of representing slow violence or other problems. Variation within movements can be useful to check and construct accounts of the phenomenological structure of social problems, as disagreement may reveal which features of social problems are up for conscious debate and which are not. In this article, however, the focus is not on such internal disagreement.

The phenomenological structure of slow violence: Union carbide in Bhopal

Slow violence describes suffering that “occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (2011, p. 2). Nixon provides several examples of slow violence: “climate change, the thawing cryosphere, toxic drift, biomagnifications, deforestation, the radioactive aftermath of wars, acidifying oceans, and a host of other slowly unfolding environmental catastrophes” (ibid.). In the interest of detailing the phenomenological structure of slow violence, two features in Nixon’s description are crucial: 1) its dispersion across time and space, and 2) disproportionate effects on dispossessed and marginalized populations. In addition, a third feature of slow violence corresponds to the framing work associated with it: 3) the difficulty of apprehending slow violence. We can observe these three features with an example used by Nixon himself: the fallout from the gas leak at a Union Carbide Factory in Bhopal, India.

In December 1984, a Union Carbide factory released thirty tons of toxic gasses into the shantytowns and residences surrounding the compound. Many people and animals were killed immediately while many survivors developed chronic conditions. Estimates of the total human dead ranged from 3000 to upwards of 16,000 (Nixon 2011, p. 51), while the Indian Government reported that well over 500,000 people were exposed to the toxic cloud (Lal 1996). Slow

violence describes the unseen suffering that developed long after the cloud disappeared. The Bhopal survivors suffered ocular, respiratory, and gastro-intestinal ailments as well as genetic, psychological, and neurological ones (Broughton 2005).⁴ The disaster was followed by years of legal wrangling over responsibility, epidemiological research, and high morbidity rates among those exposed to the gas. Union Carbide was reluctant to assume direct responsibility for the mass poisoning. Rather, they insisted on the failures of their subsidiary, Union Carbide India Limited. Throughout, the company had a contentious relationship with the Indian government and external researchers seeking to ascertain the causes and consequences of the gas leak (Fortun 2001). In 1989, Union Carbide accepted moral, but not legal responsibility and paid a settlement of 470 million US dollars to the Indian government, which was responsible for distributing money to the victims (Broughton 2005; Kumar 2004).⁵

But the toxic poisoning alone, whose symptoms often surfaced months and years after exposure, does not exhaust the health effects of the Union Carbide plant in Bhopal. The water surrounding the former factory site contained toxic chemicals and heavy metals, even after Union Carbide “cleaned” the factory ground (Chander 2001). As many of the residents surrounding the factory relied on these water sources, they were also exposed to potential harm. For these as well as technical reasons, the precise morbidity figures have been continuously contested—in 2004 the official death toll stood at 5800, while activists insisted that more than 20,000 people have died prematurely due to exposure (Kumar 2004). New, growing mortality figures surface yearly. In all, the aftermath of the Union Carbide disaster illustrates the insidious march of slow violence. The poison resulted in long-term, chronic physical ailments, high rates of miscarriage, and neuro-psychological issues including PTSD, impeded motor and sensory skills (Dhara et al. 2002).

Dispersion across time and space

Slow violence occurs along varied temporal and spatial registers. The temporal registers of slow violence are “unspectacular” or “attritional” (Nixon 2011, pp. 6–7)—that is, they work quietly and often cumulatively. Radiation, lead poisoning, and other forms of toxic exposure seep into the body and manifest themselves at varying rates. Analogously, the spatial registers of slow violence “may range from the cellular to the transnational” (Nixon 2011, pp. 47).

The disastrous gas leak was a deadly event: methylisocyanate gas smothered the residences around the Union Carbide factory.⁶ But the suffering that resulted from exposure to toxic gas unfolded over decades. Some developed chronic persistent eye-watering, burning, itching, and redness or difficulty breathing and lesions along the respiratory tract (Dhara and Dhara 2002, p.

⁴ Broughton suggests that the epidemiological data are likely to “under-represent the true extent of adverse health effects because many exposed individuals left Bhopal immediately following the disaster never to return and were therefore lost to follow-up.”

⁵ The claims of victims were in the range of 3 billion and also included criminal charges, which were dismissed by the Indian Supreme Court.

⁶ It may be worthwhile to investigate the differences between attritional suffering that is connected to some spectacular event (e.g., Union Carbide disaster) and attritional suffering without that same connection (e.g., living in a polluted shantytown). For present purposes, I focus on the connection between the attritional character of slow violence and the representation of ongoing suffering.

393).⁷ Moreover, in Bhopal as in many other toxic disasters, the violence traveled across generations whether through premature deaths or birth defects. When describing the fallout from the nuclear meltdown at Chernobyl, Nixon chronicles a “dizzying” array of timelines: intergenerational, bureaucratic, and somatic (2011, p. 49).⁸ To this he also adds geological timelines to account for radiation that can affect forms of life for generations. The pace at which the problem develops does not obey observable ways of marking time. In that way, the pace is uneventful.

These examples show that slow violence unfolds analogously in space. At the imperceptible cellular level, neurotoxins and carcinogens invade humans, other animals, and plants. Those exposed to methylisocyanate carried the toxins with them and many left Bhopal after the disaster, further distributing the suffering across space. On the other end of the scale, toxic events like the Chernobyl disaster spilled across geographical borders and the geopolitical struggle for oil has displaced populations across the world by reshaping environments to facilitate resource extraction—in addition, of course, to more explicit acts of violence (Nixon 2011, pp. 68–102).

The legal battles around corporate responsibility for the Bhopal disaster point to another crucial spatial aspect of slow violence: the relevant agents extend across regions and nations. To wit, the American-based Union Carbide Corporation (UCC) established the Union Carbide India Limited (UCIL) subsidiary. After the gas leak, the American-based company sought to establish that local malfeasance alone was to blame, while activists and Indian political figures insisted on the culpability of UCC.⁹ The third paragraph of a report produced by the former Union Carbide vice president of health and safety underscores the spatial and temporal gap between American UCC and the Indian UCIL:

The plant was operated by Union Carbide India Limited (UCIL), *just over* 50 percent of which was owned by Union Carbide Corporation. The first report of the disaster reached Union Carbide executives in the United States *more than 12 hours after* the incident. By 6:00 a.m. in the U.S., executives were gathering with technical, legal, and communications staff at the company's Danbury, Connecticut headquarters. *Information was sparse* but, as casualty estimates quickly climbed, the matter was *soon recognized* as a massive industrial disaster. (Browning 1993, p. 1 [italics added for emphasis])

The remainder of the report plays up the complex chain of causation as well as the political and legal struggles among UCC, local government, lawyers, and activists. In 2001, when the factory had long since been abandoned and the industrial site ostensibly cleaned (there were many lingering chemicals, incidental to the gas leak: on this, see Broughton 2005; Chander 2001; Fortun 2001), Union Carbide was acquired by Dow Chemical. Thus, Union Carbide—one of the crucial agents of the disaster—disappeared. This chain of ownership and responsibility reveals that the slow violence in the aftermath of the Bhopal disaster rests on an elaborate spatial

⁷ The extent to which one can still speak of the effects of methylisocyanate today is a matter of great uncertainty. Some doctors and researchers are dismissive, while others speak of insufficient evidence owing to the political climate around Bhopal research from the very beginning (Mukerjee 2010, pp. 131–157).

⁸ Nixon also includes international and intranational timelines. It is unclear why we should treat these as temporal and not spatial. Further, the argument does not depend on their inclusion.

⁹ For the Union Carbide version of events, see Kalekar 1988; Browning 1993.

network. It is obvious that slow violence need not obey conventional temporal, social, and spatial boundaries.

Effect on vulnerable populations

Second, slow violence disproportionately harms dispossessed people. Nixon notes that “people lacking resources ... are the principal casualties of slow violence” (2011, p. 4). From the residents adjacent to the Union Carbide factory or those in Argentine shantytowns (Auyero and Swistun 2009) to rural ethnic minorities in Nigeria (Nixon 2011, pp. 103–127) and rural Iraqis living with toxic war wreckage, dispossessed populations largely shoulder the burden of slow violence. They are typically the first to be exposed and, if people take their suffering seriously, they often become the target of corporate, legal, and political struggles to apportion responsibility. In addition to a lack of resources, the consequences are amplified by the marginality of populations. These communities live in the shadows of industrial factories, in slums by waste dumps, in far-flung rural areas, and many other places that wealthier, well-connected people can ignore. When hard-to-see populations suffer from hard-to-see violence, these populations struggle to get the attention and support they need. The visibility of the problems is affected by the marginality—whether cultural or physical—of the people afflicted most directly.

Apprehending slow violence

Third, these slow-moving catastrophes that disproportionately affect dispossessed populations are difficult to see; they create representational—particularly visual—challenges for those seeking to mobilize around these issues. Nixon observes, “a major challenge [for addressing slow violence] is representational: how to devise arresting stories, images, and symbols adequate to the pervasive but elusive violence of delayed effects” (2011, p. 3). In sociological terms, these are cultural and framing-related challenges faced by those concerned with slow-moving, attritional suffering.

The long-term poisoning in Bhopal illustrates some of these representational difficulties associated with questions of power, marginality, and social problems as experienced. States, corporations, researchers, and others involved in assessing and addressing the gas leak (as well as its fallout) produce conflicting accounts. Many outside of Union Carbide contended, with reason, that the company obstructed research into the causes and long-term consequences of the poisonous leak; in addition, many victims of exposure left the area without returning (Broughton 2005). The Union Carbide representatives countered that they were a convenient scapegoat for local activists and the Indian government, whom they cast as “[apparently indifferent] to the plight of the Bhopal victims”¹⁰ (Browning 1993, p. 13). Further, given the gradual unfolding of exposure as well as other problems relating to the factory such as poisoned water, it is difficult to represent the diurnal burdens of slow violence. Those burdens become a

¹⁰ The tense is adjusted for readability. The original passage reads: “I would be less than candid if I did not admit that many of us at Union Carbide were outraged by the Indian government’s apparent indifference to the plight of the Bhopal victims. From the first day, we had been moved by compassion and sympathy. We believed that the company’s position was responsible and fair. We could not understand why the government did not promptly distribute the relief funds to the victims” (Browning 1993).

part of the everyday struggle for survival, especially among dispossessed and often unseen populations. In contrast to the many spectacular violent events that bring attention to social injustices, the rot of slow violence does not lend itself to tidy visual representation. After the Bhopal Disaster, the focus on direct consequences of exposure to methylisocyanate gas papered over other environmental health issues related to the Union Carbide factory such as polluted ground water. These conflicting narratives, the stark power differences, and the everyday nature of the problem produce what Auyero & Swistun call “toxic uncertainty” (2009, pp. 3–6). Such uncertainty can undermine belief in the possibility of collective action to address the problem (2009, pp. 130–139), particularly because of the difficulties it presents for identifying a culprit.

To represent this slow-moving, gradual violence, one must grapple with imprecise boundaries and uncertain, or at the very least contested, causes. The problem is one of *sight* or more broadly *vision*. Nixon invokes Ulrich Beck’s notion of a “shadow kingdom”—a world of uncertainties hidden behind the visible world (Beck 1992, p. 72)—and asks, “How ... do we subject this shadow kingdom to a temporal optic that might allow us to see—and foresee—the lineaments of slow terror behind the façade of sudden spectacle?” (Nixon 2011, p. 62). It is important to recall that these problems of visibility are compounded by the invisibility of the people on the tragic vanguard of environmental suffering. Auyero and Swistun remind us that environmental suffering occurs in the context of countless other everyday struggles, from basic subsistence and bureaucratic obstacles to crime and drugs in their neighborhoods (2009, pp. 81–82). For those most afflicted, slow violence is one of many concerns. In a sense, slow violence is doubly invisible because of how it works and whom it tends to harm first. This compounds the diagnostic issues for activists—from within such communities as well as without. Consequently, it makes intuitive sense that Nixon stresses slow violence as a problem of vision and representation.

We can see this concern with visual representation in some of the activism after Bhopal. After the initial wave of militant protest in the wake of the disaster, activists sought to pin responsibility on Union Carbide and to expose the ongoing suffering and contamination of victims. They devised ways to portray slow suffering and to point out those responsible. Activists have dramatized the difficulty in representing and tracking chemical exposure repeatedly. Thus, one woman recalled a protest that occurred several months after the disaster: “It must have been in April, 1985 when more than 300 women marched to the DIG Bungalow hospital holding bottles with urine sample in their hands. They were shouting slogans: ‘Measure thiocyanate in our urine.’ ‘Tell us how much poison is in our bodies’” (Mukherjee 2010, p. 108). Faced with the problem of lingering contamination, they pursued actions that would reveal the hidden dimensions of their suffering. Mukherjee also points to the framing difficulties that resulted from the diffuse nature of the problem, especially as manifest in the experiences of those suffering:

Too many groups joined the fray, bringing in their own agendas and vested interests to an already conflict ridden arena. But it was only those with sustaining power that remained behind. The Bhopal disaster brought to the forefront risks that are inherent in hazardous industries. The gas leak was only the tip of the iceberg. Exposure to hazards and the victimization that follows are not merely confined to the workplace, but are directly linked to the communities at risk. The loss of life, the range and scale of morbidity, and

the degradation of the environment and its impact on lives were frighteningly widespread. How was activism to begin envisaging the rational possibility of remediation and proper compensation? (2010, p. 112).

Over 20 years later, the International Campaign for Justice in Bhopal staged their dramatic march mentioned at the beginning. The letters written in blood, the pictures of the afflicted, and the long march sought to represent hidden suffering, whether through bodily fluids, scientific testing, photography, or publicity. Again and again, environmental activists have struggled to make toxic suffering visible and to render the diffuse causes of the problem parsimoniously (Fortun 2001; Meyer 2015, pp. 47–73; Szasz 1994, pp. 38–68).

Comparison, history, sources

Slow violence focuses our attention on a recurrent framing problem for environmental justice activists: representing imperceptible harm and suffering disproportionately born by the dispossessed. In addition, the representational issues bleed into problems of diagnostic framing, or identifying the causes and culprits of suffering. Activists rely on strategies associated with vision to address this attritional suffering. But what happens when we use this analysis of slow violence to make sense of hidden suffering outside of late twentieth-century environmental activism? Can attention to the phenomenological structure of social problems reveal analytically meaningful connections between problems and framing work?

Comparative reasoning

Turn-of-the-twentieth-century consumer activists make for a wholly different comparative case. The National Consumers' League (US), the Consumer Co-operative Movement (UK), and other like-minded activists throughout Western Europe pioneered a wave of consumer-based activism on behalf of exploited laborers.¹¹ This would appear to be a situation where the movements simply confronted different problems in different contexts with different understandings. Environmental justice advocates in Bhopal pinned moral and causal responsibility on the absent Union Carbide Corporation and the Indian state. Consumer activists pinned moral and causal responsibility on consumers themselves. Consumer activists had access to less sophisticated scientific measures and tools than environmental justice advocates. Environmental justice advocates addressed questions of “neoliberal” globalization and globalized responsibility directly (Bauman 2008; Nixon 2011; Szasz 2007). By contrast, consumer activists worked during the emergence of “corporate capitalism” and anticipated the full-blown consumer capitalist society of the 1950s (Livingston 1997; Sklar 1988). Moreover, environmental justice advocates worked after revolutions in ecological thought in the second half of the twentieth century (Purdy 2015); the National Consumers' League (NCL) is not typically considered an environmental organization at all. Thus, we might expect their framing work to be incomparable.

This array of differences provides a valuable comparative opportunity to explore whether a problem recurs over time and across substantive kinds of activism. If early consumer activists encounter similar framing issues associated with problems having (1) diffuse spatio-temporal

¹¹ For analytical clarity, I confine my discussion to the US-based National Consumers' League but the other groups dealt with similar problems.

boundaries that (2) disproportionately afflict dispossessed populations and (3) involve extensive efforts to represent the problem visually, this will suggest that slow violence can help us incorporate analyses of problems into the study of framing work. To assess this, I employ a modified version of Mill's method of similarity—not—for causal analysis, but to explore unappreciated correlations across diverse types of activism. This modified method of similarity draws attention to similar problems in apparently dissimilar contexts (Gorski 2004; Ragin 1987; Skocpol 1984).

The history of the NCL and archival materials

The history of the NCL has been told, piecemeal, by historians and even some sociologists (Glickman 2009; Haydu 2014; Kish Sklar 1995, 1998; Storrs 2000; Wiedenhof 2008). Over the last decade of the nineteenth century, a group of predominantly upper-middle class women formed a National Consumers' League (NCL). The NCL investigated and publicized the conditions under which consumer goods were manufactured, distributed, and sold. NCL members researched and inspected workplaces around the country, from garment and food production to laundries and department stores. Led by the cantankerous and brilliant socialist Florence Kelley, they encouraged ethical consumption via their White Label campaigns as well as efforts to promote early shopping for Christmas. These latter campaigns were designed to support department store employees who were expected to work long hours during the Christmas season to meet growing customer demand. Just as important, they advocated legislation and enforcement of laws that protected vulnerable workers. In the first two decades of the twentieth century, they pressed for labor laws at local, state, and national levels. They also filed briefs in support of labor laws under discussion at the Supreme Court. NCL members frequently published in journals and newspapers, served on investigative committees, and circulated propaganda through religious groups, women's organizations, and exhibitions.

To survey the practical framing issues that confronted NCL activists, I draw on the League's organizational records. In their annual reports, meetings, campaign paraphernalia, published articles, and private correspondence, members wrestled with the best methods of educating consumers to purchase their goods ethically.¹²

Taking a longer view: Slow violence in turn-of-the-twentieth century consumer activism

NCL members described the problems associated with mass consumption as a) dispersed across time and space, b) acutely born by vulnerable populations and c) a matter of apprehension—all crucial features of slow violence. As with activists after Bhopal, the first two features (a and b) illustrate the phenomenological structure of slow violence, while the third feature (c) suggests the framing work associated with it.

Dispersion across time and space

At the turn of the twentieth century, the United States witnessed its share of spectacular, tragic labor unrest and workplace disasters, from the Pullman strike to the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory

¹² These documents come from the following archives: The Records of the National Consumers' League, National Archives, Washington, DC; and the Consumers' League of New York City, Cornell University, Cornell, NY.

fire. But the NCL emphasized workers' attritional suffering. From unseen workplace injuries to the long-term ill effects of physical stress, the NCL often sought to reconstruct effects on workers that, as NCL activists themselves acknowledged, were dispersed across space and especially time. Their descriptions of the problems thus accord with the multiple temporal and spatial dimensions of slow violence.

When the Consumers' Leagues in the states of Massachusetts, New York, Illinois, and Pennsylvania founded the National Consumers' League in 1899, general secretary Florence Kelley pointed to a major difference between the proposed white label and existing trade union labels: "the Union Label does not ensure sanitary conditions in manufacturers" (Second Meeting of the Conference on the Federation of Consumers' Leagues, May 17th, 1898). This emphasis on sanitary conditions signaled their early concern with the adverse, long-term, only gradually perceptible effects of workplace environments on worker health, which remained a feature of league agitation throughout the first two decades of the century. In a 1915 pamphlet titled "The Waste of Industry," a series of rhetorical questions underscored the health risks associated with cotton mills: "Did you know the noise in a cotton mill is nerve racking and deafening? ... the cotton mill workroom is always hot and humid? ... the workers toil from 48 to 66 hours per week and constantly stand while working? ... A HIGH DEATH RATE from TUBERCULOSIS is CHARACTERISTIC of the COTTON INDUSTRY?" ("The Waste of Industry," 1915) The pamphlet implies that debilitating health issues accrued over time owing to bad air, lack of sunshine, overwork, industrial noise, and other features of unregulated workplaces.

These efforts to identify slow-moving suffering were staples of league investigations and reports. Perhaps the most influential account of this slow suffering was the pioneering "Brandeis Brief." The Brief was commissioned by Florence Kelley and Josephine Goldmark of the NCL in *Muller v. Oregon* (1908). The Supreme Court case involved a laundry owner, Curt Muller, who violated an Oregon law restricting employment for women to no more than 10 h per day.¹³ Composed by Goldmark and attorney Louis Brandeis, the brief reported on working conditions in laundries. It included expert testimony and data on women's susceptibility to health ailments as a result of overwork. Brandeis filed the brief on behalf of Oregon to demonstrate that legal restrictions were constitutional because of public health risks from overwork. Goldmark and Brandeis stressed the corrosive long-term health effects of chronic fatigue: "Often ignored, since it does not result in immediate disease, this weakness and anaemia undermines the whole system; it destroys the nervous energy most necessary for steady work, and effectually predisposes to other illness. The long hours of standing, which are required in many industries, are universally denounced by physicians as the cause of pelvic disorders" (Brief for the Defendant in Error, State of Oregon, October 1907, p. 28). But these concerns with chronic fatigue were not limited to court cases. When local leagues investigated working conditions, they often documented health effects ("Occupations for Philadelphia Girls," Consumers' League of Eastern Pennsylvania, 1913; "Behind the Scenes in a Restaurant," Consumers' League of New York City, 1916).

¹³ These maximum hours laws and the Muller case offered the NCL and other reformers an opportunity to circumvent the *Lochner v. New York* decision (1905). In that case, the court had ruled that maximum hour laws violated the due process clause of the 14th Amendment. This "laissez faire" interpretation of due process entailed an unrestricted right to freedom of contract, which Oliver Wendell Holmes noted in one of the dissenting opinions.

In addition, workers' slow-moving suffering had the potential to affect consumers. Consumers risked infection if they used goods made in contaminated workplaces by sick workers or in unclean conditions. In their second annual report, Kelley noted, "much time and energy have been spent in the effort to obtain from the New York Department of Factory Inspection protection for the purchasing public from contagion and infection" (NCL Annual Reports 1900, p. 9). This self-interested appeal was especially common in the NCL pure food campaigns. In a report on the manufacture of food in tenements, league member Mary Sherman peppered her descriptions of candy, nuts, macaroni, and ice cream with lurid stories that implied contamination for consumers. In a typical narrative move, she illustrated the harms with vivid imagery from one tenement report: "A child lay sick of diphtheria in the back room where the physician visited her. The father manufactured macaroni in the front adjoining room, and would go directly from holding the child in his arms to the macaroni machine, pulling macaroni with his hands and hanging it over racks to dry" (NCL Annual Reports 1905, p. 38). Thus, the NCL drew attention to their role as protectors of public health for workers and purchasers. Regardless of their emphasis, the concern with sanitary conditions illuminated the dispersed accumulation of harms over time attendant to industrial production and consumption.

Due to increasingly elaborate commodity chains, league members worried about the unseeable threats travelling with consumer goods across space. In an early statement, Florence Kelley observed:

One of the most important considerations is the fact that legislation is by no means uniform throughout the states; and the righteous man in Massachusetts, living under the best labor code in this country, enforced by the most vigilant and experienced inspectors of factories, is in as great danger of buying garments made in infectious shops under the sweating system, which is in full blast, and is daily increasing in extent and in intensity in New York city, as was the Montana purchaser from the shops of Chicago. (1899, p. 296)

Inconsistent patterns of state regulation thus rendered the consumer susceptible to harms across long distances. But given the NCL's commitment to the responsibility of consumers for these working conditions, the harms did not just travel from filthy workplaces to consumers; they also traveled from the consumer back to the worker. Thus, the NCL's task was to identify and expose dispersed temporal and spatial suffering.

Effect on vulnerable populations

From the start, the NCL stressed the effects on poor and marginal workers. They emphasized women and children as the most vulnerable workers, largely because the male-dominated unions were unwilling to work with them. In an early statement of purpose, NCL President John Graham Brooks observed that the League worked on behalf of "the weak" and "enfeebled" ("The Consumers League," 1900, p. 24). Further, their consumer and legal strategies focused on the moral imperative of protecting poor women and children. These were the women and children who experienced chronic fatigue and other long-term ailments as a result of poor working conditions. At the same time, the NCL appealed to the self-interest of well-to-do consumers by pointing out the threats of contamination traveled from tenements and unhealthy factories (Kelley 1899, pp. 291–292). In their strategies and rhetoric, though, the NCL acknowledged that

poor consumers were especially susceptible to contaminated goods. Florence Kelley noted that many poor Italian immigrants relied on adulterated and contaminated staple products such as olive oil (*ibid.*, pp. 290–291). Similarly, even amid salacious tales of tenement production squalor, Mary Sherman reported: “Those who can afford to buy food in the cleaner and better stores feel safe when buying nuts in glass jars, peanut butter from a health food bureau, cakes on Fifth Avenue and candies wrapped in paper and apparently spotless” (NCL Annual Reports 1905, p. 35). The upshot was that those who could not afford to buy on Fifth Avenue were often exposed to contaminated goods. Overall, even as they worried about the contamination radiating from poorer to wealthier communities, the League members were aware that poorer and marginal communities stood in the greatest danger.

Apprehending suffering

Like the activism in the wake of Bhopal, NCL members wrestled with the task of apprehending and representing the suffering associated with exploitative tenement labor and factory work. As an article of faith, the NCL held that consumers were responsible for the suffering of unseen workers. Florence Kelley outlined the consumers’ responsibility for remedying their own “ignorance” and for engaging in preferential dealing (Kelley, “The Responsibility of the Consumer,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 1908, pp. 108–112). John Graham Brooks, the first president of the NCL, announced that “the shoddy buyer *is* a shoddy maker” (“The Consumers’ Leagues”, 1900, p. 3). It is worth noting, moreover, that this responsibility demanded constant vigilance in the context of obfuscation by advertisers, insufficient education, and consumer ignorance as staple goods were increasingly mass-produced. In an address to the NCL, Homer Folks lamented the anonymity of consumer goods,

What we all need, as Consumers, is a little more information and imagination. If we could only look behind the price and appearance of products to the processes and conditions by which they are produced, we would be better consumers and better citizens. If, in some manner, the personality of the workers could be impressed upon the product, not merely their skill, and their industry, but their fatigue, their strain, their suffering, how our work would be simplified” (“The Charity Side of the Labor Problem,” *NCL Annual Report*, 1904, pp. 17-18)

Thus, the NCL proffered a narrative of causal and moral responsibility that was difficult to sustain in an “eye-minded” world of ignorance and mute, mass-produced goods. (“Report of the Secretary,” *NCL Annual Report 1914–1917*, 1918, pp. 20–21).

But this ignorance obtained not only because of visible distractions but because suffering was obscured by the everyday commodity. A founding member of the Consumers’ League of New York City, Maud Nathan wrote of the “dark places” where “unseen and unheard” workers toiled in dismal conditions. She reported, “those who go down into the depths, never return with the same light hearts” (“Forward by the President,” *The Work of the Consumers’ League of the City of New York*, 1915, p. 6). The work of the NCL required them to rend the veil that ordinary perception cast over everyday commodities. To do so, the NCL employed a range of vision and perception-centered framing strategies from thick, sympathetic descriptions of workers and workplaces to exhibitions of sweated and non-sweated goods (Skotnicki 2017, pp. 627–637).

These exhibitions paired images of working conditions with sample goods. In effect, the NCL sought to brand the goods with the normally obscured conditions of their production, distribution, and sale.

These conditions of anonymous consumption and ignorance of causal and moral responsibility suggest the essential invisibility of workers' suffering. Moreover, from the beginning the NCL assumed that their task was to "[sustain] the workers in their effort to escape from the usage of sewing in their kitchens and bedrooms" ("Summary Statement ... of the First Year of the National Consumers' League," 1900, p. 7). These were marginal workers—immigrants in tenements, impoverished women and children in bakeries and laundries, young errand boys, and countless others. And the NCL assumed that the marginality further obscured their visibility. For that reason, the NCL investigated and published reports on countless workplaces and workers, from tenements and restaurants to mills and factories.

Structural traits of problems shared across time

Attention to the phenomenological structure of slow violence highlights a recurring framing issue that connect early twentieth-century consumer activism and late twentieth-century environmental justice activism. Most important, these activists dedicated themselves to representing the problem—making it visible. Moreover, these representational issues were compounded by the marginality of those suffering this delayed violence. In the context of these issues, activists struggled to identify the causes and culprits of these social problems. Although such diagnostic framing issues are common, the diffuse manifestations of "slow violence" present special difficulties in pinning down a single culprit. Of course, it is true that activists' framing work varied in detail—particularly in terms of their awareness of the scale of the problems they confronted. Regardless, these comparisons reveal framing work that reflects the experiences of analogous problems across wholly different historical periods and social contexts of activism.

The most important parallel revolves around the invisibility of the problem. The NCL labored to represent workers' attritional suffering. They spun arresting, sympathetic stories of harmed workers that also revealed consumers' causal as well as moral responsibility for this suffering. To render these stories more vivid, the NCL relied on visual and sensory depictions of workers and their harmful work environments. The NCL also relied on medical reports and the scientific community to demonstrate the ill effects of overwork. Similarly, activists in the wake of the Union Carbide disaster have repeatedly sought to illustrate the ongoing effects of toxic exposure and pollution. In addition to the stories of harm, Bhopal activists have called on doctors and scientists to make their poisoning visible. One group founded a People's Health Clinic that recorded the symptoms of those exposed to methylisocyanate (Mukerjee 2010, p. 113). While their tactics and styles differed, both NCL and Bhopal activists pursued strategies to reveal the nature of a hidden problem. Though it differed in detail, this framing work tracks the phenomenological structure of slow violence.

Furthermore, the marginal status of those suffering played into the activists' framing work. The NCL worked to address the suffering of women and children especially. As such, they worked to make the private suffering and labor of immigrant women and children a matter of public record.

They published photographs of tenement labor and workplaces; they engaged in independent investigations of factories and work sites. NCL members repeated that vulnerable and “enfeebled” populations were easy for people to ignore—especially in the context of extended supply chains. Similarly, the marginal status of Bhopal victims suffused their framing work. In 1989, a group of women in the Stationary Union—many of whom were exposed to methylisocyanate—undertook a march from Bhopal to Delhi. One participant recalled, “I told Champa didi [another march organizer] we need to do something that makes us more visible” (Mukerjee 2010, p. 115).

Finally, these activists wrestled in parallel to establish the causes of this suffering. While the NCL insisted that consumers were ultimately responsible for exploitative working conditions, they also acknowledged the role of businesses and the state in reproducing these conditions. States had better and worse labor laws; businesses were more and less just; consumers had more and less money; thus, at each step in this simplified picture, new culprits could slip in. While the NCL argued for the responsibility of consumers, my point is that they needed to make this argument repeatedly. Moreover, they needed to pin down the characteristics of these different agents of exploitative labor. Similarly, the Bhopal activists had to reckon with the dispersed network of Union Carbide Corporation, Union Carbide India Limited, the Indian government (including political figures, lawyers, bureaucrats, and even medical personnel) and the employees at the Bhopal as well as global environment in which these agents operated. In the years following the disaster, activists identified Union Carbide and the Indian government as culpable—an argument they have needed to make again and again. But by the early 2000s, Union Carbide had disappeared. Thus, one of the central culprits ceased to exist. As with the NCL, this complex chain of causation presented diagnostic framing issues that were bound up with the phenomenological structure of the problem.

Of course, it would be wrong to claim that these groups understood and responded to these problems the same way. A brief story about the NCL and international consumer advocacy suggests two important differences: degree of paternalism and global scale. NCL members commonly remarked on the distances goods traveled within the United States—from Montana to Illinois or Vermont to Virginia. Within the United States, the NCL developed a network of reliable investigators and sources upon which to base their activism. But they were aware that goods and raw materials traveled across the globe. In 1908, the NCL participated in an International Conference of Consumers’ Leagues in Geneva that included France, Spain, Belgium, Switzerland, and representatives from England and Germany—among others. In the years leading up to the conference, reports of “slave cocoa” in São Tomé and Príncipe troubled the participants and they discussed the prospects for a label of humane chocolate and cocoa. The NCL had the opportunity to throw their support behind an international labeling campaign to identify slave-made cocoa. But they refrained, not wanting to cede investigative authority to unknown parties (“Executive Committee Meeting,” October 1908). Thus, although they were aware of the global implications of the problem, the NCL was unprepared to pursue a global solution via consumer advocacy. Moreover, the victims were rarely involved in direct NCL campaigns. These were all conversations about the exploited workers in São Tomé and Príncipe or in tenements or elsewhere. By contrast, we have seen that victims and their experiences were central to activism in Bhopal.

The NCL's hesitance to address global commodity chains stands in obvious contrast to the activism surrounding the Bhopal disaster. They insisted that Union Carbide Corporation, not just its Indian subsidiary, was responsible. Even the Union Carbide executives acknowledged the global connection as they admitted moral rather than legal responsibility. They were expected to respond in the hours immediately following the gas leak. To mitigate further damage, Union Carbide executives assembled medical experts and resources to assist those on the ground in Bhopal. And from that moment Union Carbide executives were forced to defend themselves against the charges that they were culpable—by the Indian government, by local activists, by lawyers, and by others across the globe. Thus, those involved—as perpetrators, victims, and victim advocates defined the problem in transnational terms more or less immediately.

Ultimately, we know far more about these differences in framing and activism than about the similarities. Thus, this comparison reveals the potential gains of approaching framing in conjunction with an analysis of social problems. My purpose has been to demonstrate that we can—without distorting activists' understandings or the concept of slow violence—describe the phenomenological structure of the problems confronting consumer activists and environmentalists as analogous. Doing so opens up the study of framing as a means with which to identify recurrent problems across distinct kinds of social movements.

Conclusion

Consumer and environmental justice activists dealt with the similar issues of representing and diagnosing hard-to-see suffering (in this case, slow violence). Through a comparison of their efforts, I have proposed a template for incorporating the study of social problems into that of social movements and framing work. We can do so by 1) specifying the temporal, spatial, and experiential dimensions of social problems that activists seek to address and 2) showing the correlations between this phenomenological structure and the framing work that they do. Such work can serve as the basis for comparative historical research on social movements that examines the causal relationship between framing work and social problems (Johnston 2005; McAdam et al. 2001; McAdam et al. 1996). The first step should be to offer up more phenomenological descriptions of problems in conjunction with accounts of framing work. As we get better descriptions we can work towards a robust causal account.

To get a handle on the distinctive consequences of slow violence or any genre of social problem, we will need to identify distinguishable kinds of problems. This means we can use framing work and other records relevant to how movement participants understand the world to identify the phenomenological structure of social problems. For the purposes of analytical clarity, I stressed the dispersed physiological and physical manifestations of slow violence. Thus, one obvious comparison would be with dramatic or spectacular violence—wars, ecological and natural disasters, pogroms, direct racial violence, and other eventful irruptions.¹⁴ In these events, the source of the violence is clearer—even if the victims and culprits are always identified via framing work. We could also compare efforts to address different kinds of social problems such

¹⁴ This is an analytical distinction. In practice, one would expect many instances of slow and spectacular violence to occur in tandem, as the example of Bhopal demonstrates. If we want to identify the potential consequences of social problems for framing work, we must be prepared to work with such analytical moves, even if only provisionally.

as grievances around institutional arrangements (e.g., labor, austerity, civil rights) to shed light on the questions below.¹⁵

To the extent that the phenomenological structure of social problems matters to framing work, we would expect that different kinds of problems would inform framing work in different ways. Taking slow and spectacular violence as illustrations, there are several potential consequences. First, there is the matter of representing social problems and the content of framing strategies. While framing work always represents social problems, the quality, intensity, and contextualization of representational strategies may vary. If one were to compare activism in the immediate aftermath of Bhopal with activism over two decades later or even 2 years later, one might observe more framing work focused on illuminating the physical symptoms than on the instantaneous mass death. Further, given the difficulty of representing hard-to-see suffering, one might expect more explanations of the imagery around slow violence. Second, one might expect diagnostic framing issues, resonance, and discursive opportunity structures to vary with the phenomenological structure of social problems. It may be the case, for instance, that diagnostic framing work around spectacular violence entails specific ways of identifying culprits and victims, as well as targeting responsible parties. Environmentalists and consumer activists alike confront the problem of frame resonance—in dramatizing gradual, everyday afflictions and mobilizing people to work to address them (Meyer 2015; Stolle and Micheletti 2013). With more explicitly dramatic instances of violence, we might expect greater potential for frames to resonate with people. It follows, then, that discursive opportunity structures may also vary with the phenomenological structure of social problems. After all, the ability to get others to care about slow violence and other matters of dispersed harm may depend on the receptiveness of the public to claims about imperceptible phenomena as well as the admissible grounds for such claims. When we bring the study of social problems into framing work, we reveal new ways to ask questions about the structure and character of social movements.

The joint analysis of social problems and framing also stands to illuminate the relations between social movements and capitalist development. My discussion of slow violence, for instance, suggests a path for understanding consumer movements as environmental movements. Environmental sociologists and historians have documented the neoliberal market-facing “corruption” of environmental movements that become, in effect, consumer choices for green products or, at best, consumer movements (Kirk 2007; Smith 1998; Szasz 2007). The parallel problems of representing and diagnosing unseen suffering recommend another interpretation: that the convergence of consumer movements and environmental movements reflects a stable or recurring problem in a capitalist world. Over the past two and a half centuries, consumer activists have engaged in recurring efforts to penetrate the obscured conditions of production, often through appeals to people’s senses—imaginative or actual (Glickman 2009; Skotnicki 2017). Barbara Adam argues that this emphasis arises through a modern tendency to distinguish nature and culture and an insufficient ability to deal with the “invisible and immaterial” forces or

¹⁵ To my mind, the most crucial feature of this argument is the call for research that folds the study of social problems into the study of framing work. If this is to be effective, we will have to distinguish social problems in terms of how they appear or surface. Slow violence is a helpful notion with which to begin, but others may identify cross-cutting and more analytically promising notions. This will become clearer with more systematic investigation.

processes at work in the world (1998, pp. 43–44).¹⁶ Under these interpretations, to limn slow violence as an issue of the neoliberal era closes off investigation of longer haul historical developments and phenomena. There may be good analytical reasons to understand slow violence as bound up with the extension of commodification and domination entailed in the expansion of capitalist markets (Postone 1993; Sewell Jr 2008).

Thus, we can see how a range of problems in capitalist societies cluster around unveiling and representing hidden social suffering—environmental, humanitarian, consumer, labor, and emotional issues, to start (Boltanski 1999; Chouliaraki 2012; Erikson 1994; Hochschild 2011; Ilousz 2008; Krause 2014; Szasz 1994; Wilkinson and Kleinman 2016). This abstract domination does not hide exclusively behind goods directly bought and sold on the market but characterizes life more broadly in a world of networked interdependence, global supply chains, and markets. The problem of unseen suffering suggests comparisons across a range of groups from global humanitarian NGOs and consumer activists to environmental justice advocates and, perhaps even therapeutic, self-help advocates.

Moreover, as we become sensitive to the analogous problems of representing difficult-to-see suffering, we may become more aware of the environmental dimensions of consumer activism. For early consumer activists, workers’ suffering was an environmental issue, even as their understanding of “environment” differed from that of later activists. By using slow violence to recast the relationship between environmental and consumer movements, this approach offers a practical way to embed “non-environmental” movements within an environmental framework. Slow violence supplies a way to characterize the problems associated with the development of “Cheap Natures” in a capitalist world-ecology (Moore 2015). The intensive commodification of food, labor, energy, and raw materials has resulted in slow-moving, often hidden biological, psychological, and social forms of suffering; these are forms of suffering that activists have attempted to address jointly and that do not obey distinctions between environment and society. Moreover, given technical advances in resource extraction, greatly elaborated supply chains, and the expansion of the market, we can recognize our implication in the suffering that accompanies the development of commodification.¹⁷ The key issue is to locate the submerged environmental dimensions of suffering in the efforts of those ostensibly focused on other forms of suffering.

Rob Nixon anticipated that the problem of slow violence would only grow in size and stature in the future:

In an age that increasingly genuflects to the digital divinity of speed, how will environmental activists negotiate the representational challenges of slow violence—a

¹⁶ Like Nixon, Beck, and many others, Adam identifies this problem of invisibility as specially connected to environmental hazards. At the same time, she recognizes the affinities between the modern temporal perspective and the rise of capitalist market forces: industrialization, commodification, growth imperatives, and calculative practices, among others (1998, pp. 62–98). For a recent, historical perspective that reveals similar connections via the notion of cheapness in a capitalist world-system, see (Patel and Moore 2017).

¹⁷ Historian Thomas Haskell argues that the extension of the market could have supplied moral preconditions for the development of a humanitarian sensibility. This includes the recognition that one is causally implicated in the suffering of others. On moral conventions and the historical development of capitalism, see Haskell 1985a, 1985b. For a critique that embeds the humanitarian sensibility in the dynamics of imperial expansion and religious differentiation, see Stamatov 2013.

violence that is by definition image weak and demanding on attention spans? ... How will we distribute and maintain our attention over the *longue duree* as we seek to extend and sustain the pathways to environmental justice on a transnational scale?" (2011, pp. 275-276).

But these "image weak," attention deficit-inducing problems have a history that is worth addressing in conjunction with the slow violence now in process. Despite great transformations in social life and representational media, I have argued that we can learn from past efforts to reckon with the problem of slow violence. In fact, we can contribute to a more richly historical and systemic account of social movements by making comparisons of recurring problems across periods and regions (Haydu and Skotnicki 2016). By incorporating the phenomenological structure of social problems into the study of framing work, we can reimagine the relations between social movements and society.

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