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Slogan Chanters to Mantra Chanters
A Deviance Analysis of Youth Religious Conversion in the Early 1970s

A cherubic, ice cream loving adolescent guru landed on this continent in 1971, much to the excitement of his North American followers—all six of them. By the end of 1973, the now sixteen year old “perfect master,” Guru Maharaj Ji, had 40,000 American followers alone, with one of the most prominent American activists from the 1960s quite literally sitting at his “lotus” feet—sitting at them and even kissing them in homage. As cultural commentators shook their heads in disbelief, many former activists seemingly abandoned their politics and converted to any number of new religious groups, and new religious centers sprang up in every major city in North America. Observing this phenomenon in the San Francisco Bay area, Robert Bellah commented that “the burned-out activist was almost as common in the early 1970s as the burned-out drug user... Every one of the new religious groups, from the Zen Center to the Christian World Liberation Front, has had its share of former activists.”

The data on these groups from the early 1970s were a gold mine for sociologists. Some lasting contributions to sociological theory resulted from a spate of studies including theoretical work on secularization and
church-sect theory, analyses of conversion and ideology, and functionalist interpretations of the benefits that individuals who involved themselves in these new religious groups accrued. Analysis, however, of the transition from “the political” era to “the religious” one has not produced significant contributions to social movement theory, despite the intimate conceptual connections between social movement literature and sectarian studies.3

The most prominent of the politics-to-religion interpretations, offered by Steven Tipton, asserts that “youth of the sixties have joined alternative religious movements of the seventies and eighties basically . . . to make moral sense of their lives.” In an argument that resonated with the perspective of his mentor, Robert Bellah, Tipton claimed that American culture was in crisis by the early 1970s, and people gained a sense of moral purpose amidst this crisis by joining or participating in new religious movements.4

Most of these analyses see the conversions to ideologically religious groups in the early 1970s as providing resolutions to crises of meaning, and in doing so have continued the widely held but disputable assumption that religion is necessary to society because it provides a unique sense of meaning and order to social life.5 These studies, however, were not designed to analyze either the politics-to-religion transitions or the activists’ religious conversions as social movement phenomena. An examination of their bibliographies shows how little they were influenced by the literature on social movement dynamics. It is an observation and not a criticism to say that the sources for their scholarly inspiration came from elsewhere, and likewise their contributions lie in other areas.

In an attempt to provide a conceptual framework that establishes the activists’ conversions as a social movement process, I offer a complementary interpretation. Rather than claiming that purported crises of meaning caused activists to convert to religiously ideological groups in the early 1970s, I stress the cause as being a crisis of means within the political counterculture. Viewing the conversions in this manner, sociologists can analyze them as social movement phenomena, in which participants engaged in deviant behavior along lines first identified by Robert Merton several decades ago and subsequently clarified by other sociologists. The conversions to the new religious groups were innovative responses to activists’ appraisals of increasing costs and diminishing returns of political action, with activists-turned-converts believing that through these religious groups they were adopting new means to the same goal. In short, I view actors’ conversions from the political protest groups of the 1960s to the religious organizations of the 1970s as part of a shifting pattern of deviant social exchanges whose potential rewards altered in relation to events within the dominant culture, the prevailing subculture, and the social movement itself.

The first step in theorizing about the activist conversions in the early 1970s is to develop a language that enables us to speak about the period precisely and systematically. In order to do this, I will utilize concepts from resource mobilization theory, a perspective in social movement literature that first appeared in 1966 and has gained wide acceptance in recent years. A social movement is defined as “a set of opinions and beliefs in a population which represents preference for changing some elements of the social structure and/or reward distribution of a society.”6 Various late 1960s causes, such as university reform, the Vietnam War, student representation, and community power, fit within broadly defined boundaries of a “power redistribution” movement whose goal was “the revolution,” a term often used but rarely defined, and whose popular rallying phrase was “power to the people.”7 Broadly speaking, the movement wanted to achieve a fundamental restructuring of social and political power. Within the power redistribution movement were a number of organizations that identified their goals “with the preferences of a social movement or countermovement” and attempted “to implement these goals.” Among the more memorable social movement organizations from the late 1960s were Students for a Democratic Society, Student Mobilization Committees to End the War in Vietnam, and the Youth International Party. Viewed together, these organizations that “held as their goal the attainment of the broadest preferences of a social movement” are called “social movement industry.” People who believe in the goals of the movement are called “adherents,” and those who provide resources for the movement, but who need not be actual adherents, are known as “constituents.”8

With these concepts at our disposal, I want to focus specifically on the power redistribution movement in the early 1970s, during which period its overtly political nature was undergoing transition and, by most accounts, decline. The movement’s apparent decline occurred primarily
because it had both failed and partially succeeded. We can see an impressive legacy of social change that originated in the turmoil of the 1960s. Among the broad social effects attributable to the power redistribution movement are: the “humanization” and reform of education; increased public awareness of ecology and sex discrimination, of the affective rewards of interpersonal and sexual relationships, and of the creativity of religious heterodoxy; increased international dialogue between the superpowers; and even, in fundamental ways, some unsurpassed rock music. Beyond these achievements, the movement’s continuous antwar activities contributed to the United States government’s withdrawal of its ground troops from Vietnam in late March of 1973, two months after the end of the controversial military draft.

From the viewpoint of the participants, however, these achievements were overshadowed by a sense of profound political disappointment. The social movement theorist Anthony Oberschall commented that “the U.S. involvement in the war did not end as rapidly and as completely as the movement sought,” nor did the efforts of the era’s social organizations “result in a major redistribution of power in the U.S. as was hoped by some activists.” Indeed, movement literature from the late 1960s and early 1970s indicates how frustrated, if not despairing, many activists were with the efficacy of their political efforts. Writing in January of 1971, the Chicago 7 defendant David Dellinger already sensed the toll that seemingly ineffective protests were having on his fellow social-movement adherents. He astutely observed that the antwar movement had been plagued by ideological confusion and tactical mistakes. Even more serious, it has been struggling to overcome the feelings of frustration and despair that have gripped people after they discovered that neither a million people in the streets (November 1969) nor several hundred schools and colleges on strike (May 1970) altered Washington’s determination to escalate its war of aggression in Indochina.

Even Cyril Levitt spoke about the sobering effects in 1970s of the killings at Kent State and Jackson State, in the United States, and of the War Measures Act, in Canada. “The ante had been raised,” Levitt concluded, and activists realized that “it was going to cost them considerably more to stay in the game.” Within this frustration, fear, and despair lies the key to the rapid transformation of the slogan chanters of the late 1960s, into the mantra chanters of the early 1970s. Whether the power redistribution movement actually had failed was not the point; activists perceived that it had, and they acted accordingly. In order to “stay in the game,” frightened and frustrated activists simply changed the rules.

Social exchange theory suggests that “the game” involves an assessment of rewards, costs, and profits in social interactions. Individuals and groups seek a profit from their social exchanges, and they calculate profit as rewards minus costs. Using this basic insight to view the political climate of protest in the early 1970s, many activists assessed the cost of their own political protests as potentially so great, and the rewards and profits so sparse, that continued confrontations become inadvisable, even though they still believed in the power redistribution goal that lay behind their demands. If activists relinquished political protest, they protected their physical safety, but sacrificed the aim for which they had striven so arduously. If, on the other hand, they continued their legal or extra-legal protests, they risked their freedom and their safety for a goal that still remained elusive. Caught in this dilemma, a sizable portion of the New Left suffered what I call a “crisis of feasibility” regarding the means they had been using to reach their goal. In the early 1970s, the crisis of feasibility was not one of ends (“the revolution”) but of means (continued political action). The widespread involvement of former activists in new religious groups was an attempt to resolve this crisis.

From a theoretical perspective, resource mobilization insists, in classic exchange language, that a social movement organization “must have a payoff of its supporters. Aside from the joys of participation,” the theory adds, a social movement organization’s “major payoff is in the nature of its promise; its goals, or at least some of them, must have a reasonable chance of attainment.” In language easily applicable to an entire social movement, resource mobilization theory indicates that a “failing [social movement organization] loses members because they no longer believe their goals can be achieved with that instrument.” In sum, a social movement will lose support when its adherents lose confidence in the feasibility of achieving its goals through its established patterns of social exchanges.

The instrument, or means, of a social movement loses its attractiveness to adherents when societal or political events render those means
ineffective. Politicians, for example, may satisfy one social movement demand among many, and in so doing eliminate a major rallying point used against them by their opponents. Politically disarming events of this nature occurred in early 1973, when the United States signed a cease-fire with North Vietnam and ended the draft on January 27 and then withdrew its remaining troops from South Vietnam on March 29. With these actions, the United States government removed the most contentious issues that the power redistribution organizations had used to gain support from adherents. Already slowed by activist disillusionment and fear, the power redistribution movement suffered a further blow from the realization of much of what it had been clamoring to bring about. The movement's partial success, paradoxically, was also its most dramatic failure, as America's disentanglement from South Vietnam took place without a revolution in social or political power.

According to Zald and Ash, one consequence of the failure of a social movement organization is "the search for new instruments" among the disaffected adherents. "Either they search for more radical means to achieve their goals within the movement, decrease the importance of their goals, or change the focus of discontent." The two theorists conclude with a suggestion that "a Mertonian analysis of anomie might be relevant to this point." They are suggesting that disaffected adherents might try to establish new types of social exchanges involving the use of alternative means to reach the same goals, the same means to reach lesser goals, or alternative means to reach alternative goals.

In order to consider whether the effects of a social movement organization's failure can be seen as a form of anomie, one must slightly reframe the orientation of both Merton's analysis and many of the related studies that utilized deviance schemes that addressed deviance from, and conformity to, dominant cultural values. Zald and Ash's suggestion that we look at anomie of adherents who are involved in a failed social movement implies that we could use a Mertonian scheme to examine anomie in a social movement context, one that might be deviant, subcultural, or countercultural to begin with.

Among several qualifications to Merton's original scheme, Robert Dubin's may be the most promising. Where Merton had distinguished only between cultural goals and institutional means, Dubin distinguished between cultural goals, institutional norms, and institutional means. In order, however, to specify the importance of these categories to my study, I will define them in subcultural rather than dominant-cultural terms. Subcultural goals are purposes and interests held out as legitimate objectives for all or for diversely located members of the social movement. Institutional norms are "boundaries between prescribed behaviors and proscribed behaviors in a particular institutional setting," and institutional means are "the specific behaviors, prescribed and potential, that lie within the limits established by institutional norms. [They are] actual behaviors of people; the things they do in carrying out functions in the institutional setting in which they are acting." Institutional norms, therefore, specify the types of social exchanges that are permitted or expected, and the institutional means specify people's actual behaviors in social exchanges.

With Dubin's modified version of Merton's anomie scheme as our guide, two questions present themselves. First, what type of deviant adaptations to social exchanges did conversions to the religious groups offer to the power redistribution movement of the 1960s? and second, why did the adaptation of these exchanges take the form they did? Adherents' conversions to the religious movements of the 1970s were behaviorally innovative responses to the perceived failure of the power redistribution social movement of the counterculture, while still maintaining "revolution" as their goal. The innovations took the general forms that they did because the "defeated" adherents now were complying with the prevailing social exchange demands of the dominant culture, while at the same time they believed themselves to be utilizing these norms for the persistent goal of dramatic power restructuring.

The new religious movement was a way to comply with the dominant culture's demands for power over social exchanges, while at the same time denying the authority of that power. The new religious movement changed the focus of discontent from society to the individual, and this change indicated the adoption of new means to achieve the same goal. Moreover, converts felt that their new means were more radical than the ones previously used by sixties organizations. As the recently converted Rennie Davis told reporters about his new "mission" in 1973, "Getting the knowledge [from Maharaj Ji to the people] is the central objective. . . . Then we can do what the street people sought in the sixties—abolish capitalism and other systems that oppress."
Dubin's typology of deviant adaptations indicates that, as one form of behavioral innovation, persons or groups reject both the institutional norms and institutional means of goal achievement and substitute new ones while continuing to accept essentially the same (sub)cultural goal. This general scheme applies directly to the transition that occurred between the political action groups of the late 1960s and the religious action groups of the 1970s. Prior to the crisis of feasibility and perceived failure between about 1970 and 1973, the countercultural goal for the power redistribution movement was "revolution." The institutional norms through which movement adherents believed the revolution would occur included proscriptions against capitalism, authority and bureaucratic structures, the work ethic, future-time orientations, deferred gratification, and, toward the end of the 1960s, traditional gender roles. The behavioral norms by which the institutional norms were actualized involved cooperative, communal living and sharing; spontaneity in interactions and general lifestyle—including drug use; minimalism, non-hassled jobs; experimentation with gender roles; free love; Marxist and neo-Marxist ideological study; hedonism; a variety of political actions; and little practical future planning.

After the crisis of feasibility, the new religious movement rejected almost every one of the sixties institutional or exchange norms and behavioral or exchange means and replaced them with the norms and means that often resembled, even mimicked, those of the dominant culture. Although variations existed, the institutional and exchange norms of the new religious movement emphasized pro-capitalism, wealth, the work ethic, bureaucracy, present-future-time orientation (i.e., be here now and thereby bring about the revolution), subservience and obedience to authority, sex role traditionalism, Eastern mysticism or Western charisma, and postponed gratification.

Members of new religious movements lived cooperatively in ashrams or centers. Portions of either their shared wealth or their private incomes went to support the often wealthy gurus or their organizations' religious or business ventures instead of going to support their cohorts. They worked long hours in religiously affiliated businesses and often created bureaucratic structures that were unwieldy in size, male-dominated, rampant with titleism, and inefficient. Religious adherents were devotedly obedient to their charismatic leaders and chaste in their interactions with members of the opposite sex. They studied psychology and esoteric (usually Eastern) religious philosophy and espoused millenarian or apocalyptic doctrines. Perhaps the motivation of these converts was best summarized by a new Divine Light Mission premie who had recently resigned from Tom Hayden's Indochina Peace campaign. As he explained in the autumn of 1973: "For years I have worked for peace in Vietnam and now I must turn my attention to the deepest roots of . . . imperialism, the gross qualities of the human species, and work to effect an evolution of this being, beginning with myself." The failure of the power redistribution movement's attempt to reorganize and restructure society presented its adherents with the dilemma of having to comply with dominant cultural values and exchange principles that emphasized obedience to authority, bureaucracy, and the demands of capitalism, all of which they reviled. The adherents' subsequent involvement in the religious movement, therefore, was an attempt to lessen the demands of compliance by developing for themselves an alternative system of exchange rewards, which they did by adopting religious or psychotherapeutic ideologies and by affiliating with organizations that propagated the new tenets. As the social exchange theorist, Peter Blau, suggests, "[T]he more alternative sources of rewards people have, the less those providing valuable services can extract compliance." The religiously ideological movement complied with most of the exchange norms and means of the dominant society, thereby rejecting the unsuccessful exchange norms and means of the 1960s power distribution movement.

Having failed to bring about the revolution by radical action against political and economic structures, adherents to the power redistribution movement in the early 1970s adopted new means to their goal by taking personalized religious or psychotherapeutic action for themselves. The revolution still would come, but its arrival would be heralded by a personal transformation of purified individuals. Moreover, its appearance would be a divinely orchestrated event, as bitter experience had taught them that it could not be a socially orchestrated event. Transform the self of each adherent, the new logic went, and the heavenly sanctified revolution would immediately follow. Through religious ideology and
religious organizations, therefore, the new religious movement established an alternative system of rewards that stood in contrast to those offered by the dominant society.

One passage, written by an activist who had just heard Rennie Davis speak in Berkeley in April 1973, dramatically captures the points made here. Having shared with others an initial incredulity about Davis's religious commitment, Michael Rossman reflected that

If Rennie was a heretic, his heresy was not one of ends, but of means; and it struck us where our faith is weakest. We have all been struggling for personal fulfillment and the social good in the same brutal climate. Few now can escape the inadequacy of the political metaphor to inspire and guide even our political actions, let alone to fulfill them. It is not just a matter of the correct line; the problem is with process. All is accomplished by organizing. But was there an activist present who had not felt despair, simple and terrifying, at the frustrations and impossibilities of working in the organizations we form: their outer impotence, their inner conflicts, and ego games and wasted energy, the impoverishment of spirit which led us to drop out of them again and again? Here Rennie was, proclaiming the perfect means to our various ends, the ideal, impossible Organization working in perfect inner harmony and outer accomplishment. Lay down your arms, your suffering, and the Master will give you bliss. And yet to work in the Left, to be in the Left, has meant to bear these arms, the suffering; we have known no other way. 28

As the power redistribution movement searched desperately to find a successful method for achieving the ever-elusive revolution, the techniques and the promises of the new religious groups became, for many, beacons of hope.

From the perspective of social exchange theory, the flexibility with which people can interpret religious ideologies and texts makes religion a particularly useful device for adherents of a failed social movement who are attempting to renegotiate the perceived rewards and profits resulting from social interaction. Two sociologists of religion, Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, have recognized the exchange value of religion and have formulated it into a testable theoretical proposition. "In the absence of a desired reward," they propose, "[compensatory] explanations will often be accepted which posit attainment of the reward in the distant future or in some other nonverifiable context." 29 As applied to this study, adherents in the unsuccessful power redistribution movement of the late 1960s would receive the "reward" of the social revolution, but as "compensation" in the millennial future.

Religious ideology, therefore, provided the cognitive avenues by which many former activists reduced the dissonance caused by their commitment to an apparently failed social movement; in social exchange terms, a movement in which the costs of continued participation were far higher than the rewards or profits. From the perspective of the new religious movement, the profits for participation would be reaped in the imminent millennium. Religious organization, in complementary fashion, provided the social-structural means by which former activists established alternative resource rewards in contrast to those offered by the dominant society. If we view the new religions of the early 1970s as constituting another segment of a broad, social movement industry that was striving to achieve a humanistic society, then the religious conversions of former activists simply were shifts of allegiance from a failing movement to a rising one, both of which shared the same basic goal. 30 To borrow language from deviance theory, the power redistribution movement provided the learning structures which the new religious movement supplemented through its new opportunity structures. Many of the so-called new religious conversions by former activists, therefore, perhaps should more accurately be called alterations.

By identifying the transformations in institutional norms and institutional means between the late 1960s and the early 1970s, the model used in this study may explain several disparate, but well-established, characteristics of the early new religious movements and their adherents. From various studies, we know that participation in many religious groups in the 1970s facilitated people's (re)integration into mainstream society, and at the same time "interest in radical political change and in [counterculture and personal growth] movements tend[ed] to go together." 31 On the latter point, Tipton forcefully argued against a prevalent perspective that the new religious groups had drained political energies from the activist movement. He argued that "to depict alternative religions as simply siphoning off would-be political activists or 'cooling out' the politically disaffected oversimplifies the peculiar relationship
of political concern and disillusionment in these sixties youth, and, they would say, it oversimplifies the nature of social change itself. As the typology offered here shows, former activist "convers" believed that they were adhering to the same goal as the 1960s power redistribution movement, but their rejection of the norms and behaviors of the period in their attempts to reach this goal aligned them with the important institutional norms of the "straight" world, and thereby facilitated their (re)entry into it.

Of interest to sociologists of religion might be the way in which the theoretical scheme developed in this study relates to earlier work on the assimilative functions served by various 1970s religious groups for former participants in the drug culture. In their study on "getting straight with Meher Baba," Thomas Robbins and Dick Anthony show how youth movements "ease[d] the tension of the familial-occupational transition... by constructing value orientations and normative frameworks which combine[d] elements of both familial and bureaucratic role-systems (e.g., bureaucratic universalism and familial diffuseness)." As members of the drug culture encountered the disharmony between their goals and the institutional norms and institutional means or behaviors that they hoped would achieve those goals, many drug users experienced a crisis of feasibility analogous to what their politically active compatriots were about to undergo. By believing in Meher Baba as the universal, loving savior, former drug-users turned Baba-lover adherents were able to practice "selfless service" in institutionally impersonal normative settings, thereby facilitating their rapprochement with the "impersonal institutions of the larger society." The strength of the theoretical model presented here is that it may provide an explanation that is sufficiently general to explain the conversion of both activists and drug users to the same religious organizations in the early 1970s.

One profitable direction for future research would be an examination of the extent to which many of the new religious organizations themselves declined as they proved unable to maintain sufficient rewards to offset both the costs of continued involvement and the allure of rewards offered by the dominant society. A crucial factor was the fragmentation of the movement caused by exclusivistic religious ideologies. This exclusivism fostered competition among groups for constituents, participants, and resources. Debates among various religious groups on these issues were exceedingly bitter. Likewise, one should examine the depletion of personal resources that converts suffered as the result of irrational capitalist ventures by some organizations and almost insatiable charismatic demands by certain leaders. In short, extended applications of exchange perspectives, especially in relation to issues of deviance and conformity among 1970s social movement participants, would be especially fruitful, because we know that soon after the Age of Aquarius dawned, the sun sank over the horizon. The day was short, indeed.
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35. Normal Mailer, introduction to Hoffman, Major Motion Picture, xiii; Gitlin, The Sixties, 236.
41. Hoffman, Major Motion Picture, 83–84.
45. Hoffman, Major Motion Picture, 24–27, 84.
49. Hoffman, Major Motion Picture, 166, 281.
51. Avni, "Interview," Tikkan, 15.
52. Fred A. Bernstein, The Jewish Mothers' Hall of Fame (Corden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1989), 55, 62; Hoffman, Major Motion Picture, 9.
53. Hoffman, Major Motion Picture, 3–4; Florence Hoffman quoted in Bernstein, Jewish Mothers, 61.

52. Mailer, introduction to Hoffman, Major Motion Picture, xiii.
63. Avni, "Interview," Tikkan, 17.

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New Religious Consciousness, ed., Charles Y. Glock and Robert Bellah (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976). 57. As Bellah suggests, the list of former activists who converted to sectarian religions in the early 1970s is striking. In addition to Rennie Davis, the Chicago 7 defendant who became involved in religion and psychotherapy groups (i.e., tantric yoga, psychic therapy, Acola, and esctasy) was Jerry Rubin. The former Black Panther party leader, Eldridge Cleaver, became a born-again Christian, as did Bob Dylan. Bill Garaway, a former draft-resistance leader who became a member of the California Free Speech Movement and later joined the Socialist Workers party. The abbot of the prominent Zen monastery, Tassajara, was David Chadwick, who was involved in student activism. 


12. Levitt, Children of Privilege, 105. 


32. Steven M. Tipton, Getting Saved from the Sixties: Moral Meaning in Conversion and Cultural Change (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 244. 


34. Ibid., 205. 