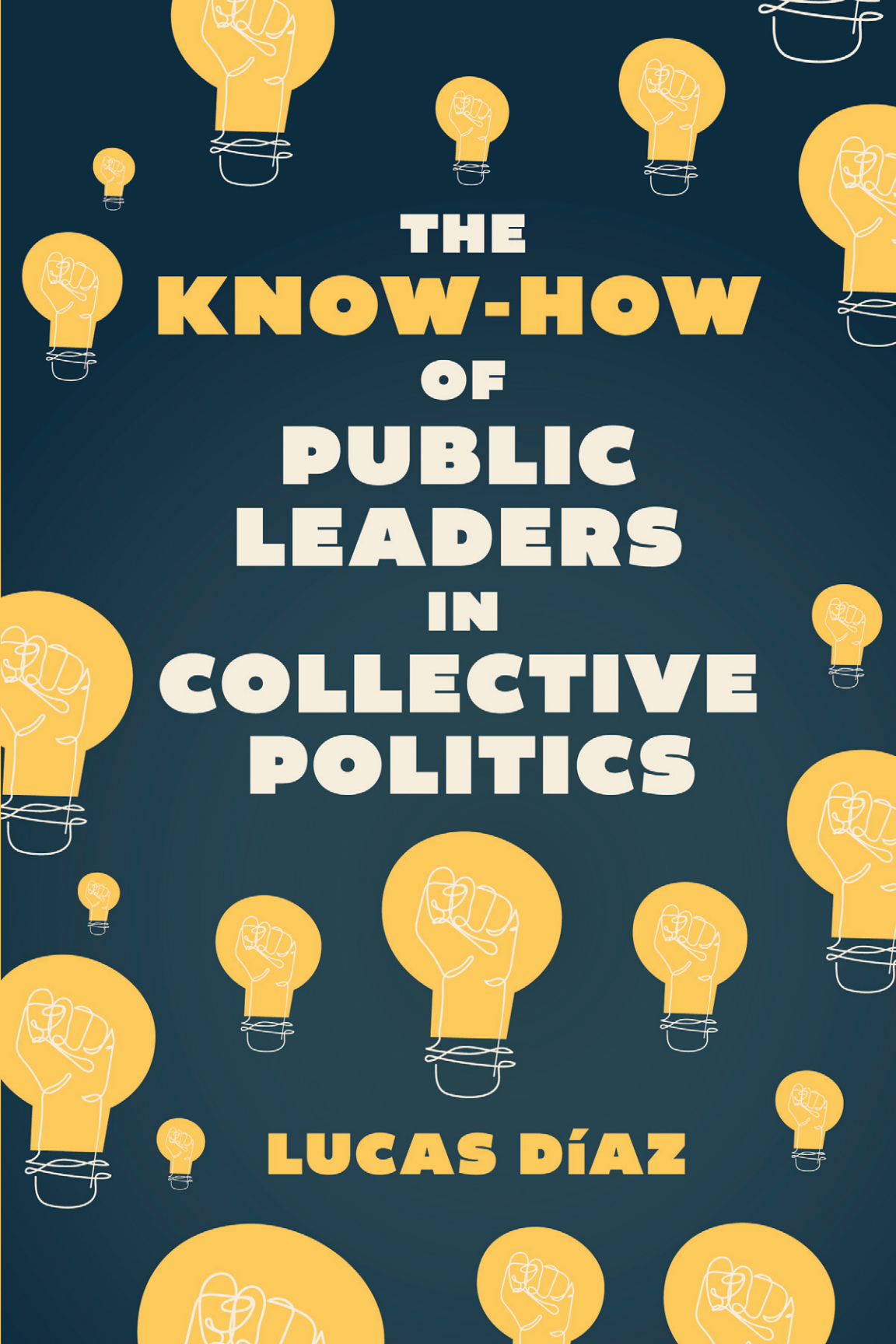
THE
KNOW-HOW
OF
PUBLIC
LEADERS
IN
COLLECTIVE
POLITICS
LUCAS DÍAZ

The Know-How of Public Leaders in Collective Politics

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The Know-How of Public Leaders in Collective Politics

BY

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List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

ALAAP	Alliance for Language Access for All People
AWI	All Are Welcome Institute
BYHH	Bring You Home Housing Organization
CRT	Citizen Rights Collective
FANO	Finance Authority of New Orleans
HANO	Housing Authority of New Orleans
HJC	Housing Justice Coalition
HTAG	Help Them Achieve Greatness Organization
HUD	Housing and Urban Development
HUNO	Homes for Us New Orleans
IAF	Industrial Areas Foundation
LDPSC	Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections
LHC	Louisiana Housing Corporation
LHFA	Louisiana Housing Finance Agency
NBHI	Neighborhood-Based Housing Institute
NNG	Nearby Neighborhood Group
OCD	Office of Community Development
QAP	Qualified Allocation Plan
RSD	Recovery School District
SAF	Strategic Action Fields Theory
SIP	Strategic Interaction Perspective

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About the Author

Lucas Díaz is a Dominican-born immigrant to the United States who has lived in the New Orleans area since the 1970s. He completed his PhD in Sociology from Tulane University's City, Culture, and Community program in 2022 after working 20 years in the local nonprofit and government sector.

Since 2000, Lucas has worked on nonprofit management, community engagement and organizing, government-based public participation programs and policies, leadership development, and nonprofit fundraising. He co-founded and led a New Orleans–based community nonprofit organization serving the Latinx community in 2007, then served as the first director of the Mayor's Neighborhood Engagement Office for the City of New Orleans from 2011 to 2013. During his time in City Hall, Lucas wrote public participation policies and designed community engagement programs that are still in use today.

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Chapter 1

Know-How Matters

A Bit of Background First

Let's begin with how my personal story informs this book. Not the most academic beginnings, to be sure, but it merits consideration since a good deal of the data I use come from my own experiences as a complete member of the fields in New Orleans that I analyze (Anderson, 2006b; Pensoneau-Conway & Toyosaki, 2011; Toyosaki, 2011).[1]

In the months leading up to hurricane Katrina, I made a living as a professional fundraiser in the New Orleans area for a music organization that focused on providing live performances. My work kept me relatively focused on corporate and private donors who cared about the recovery of New Orleans and the role music could play in that recovery. Professionally, I was not inclined to engage in the type of activities that challenged government to change, no matter how dire social justice issues appeared to me in the city. My personal experiences, shaped as they were by working-class Dominican immigrants who were singularly focused on achieving economic stability in the New Orleans area, contributed to the belief that my responsibility as a human being was to focus on "making it" in the United States. I viewed my position as an immigrant as being better served by avoiding confrontation with authority and focusing on getting ahead as an individual.

There was no mention in my upbringing of ever being or ever becoming activists, or any mention of unjust systems during my childhood, contributing to my early-life beliefs that the street demonstrations on TV, or the vented anger folks showed in city council chambers (made available on public access television), couldn't possibly lead to any change. According to my family, people in power don't offer the average person the opportunity to steer the ship. It's not our place, so the average person should just focus on doing what can be done to improve economically. Such was the way I saw the possibility of change before hurricane Katrina.

Two years after the hurricane, I co-created a Latinx-serving nonprofit that did in fact engage in activities that directly challenged local and state government. I experienced the same civic "activation" that many others after the storm

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experienced in New Orleans (Weil, 2011).[2] I felt compelled to help the newcomer immigrant Latinx community (Fussell & Diaz, 2015) interact with the pre-Katrina general population with which I was familiar.[3] This compulsion fueled a strong desire to build something that could play a meaningful role within the shifting landscape in post-Katrina New Orleans. However, my knowledge and skillset certainly did not fully position me well to take on such a challenge.

Aside from the combined experience-based knowledge of immigrant life in New Orleans and my practice-based knowledge of fundraising strategies for nonprofit organizations, I had no additional knowledge or skills relevant to initiating any form of social service or social justice organization. I reached out to others who could help me form a new organization and embarked on learning what I believed I needed to know to achieve any form of impact. In embarking on this work in 2007, I engaged with three different community organizers in the New Orleans area, all of whom were trained to conduct their work as professionals by the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF).[4]

The IAF has trained thousands of professional organizers who have worked throughout the United States as part of a tradition that dates to labor organizing in the early 20th century in Chicago. Organizers in this tradition train future prospective community organizers who will take up this work as professionals, as well as organizational leaders who become lay organizers. These professional and lay organizers are trained in concepts and strategies gleaned from years of field practice and internal critical reflections about the nature of the work and how to best pursue it. Through my relationships with the organizers I met in New Orleans, I was afforded the opportunity to participate in two different community organizing trainings, one conducted by IAF in Los Angeles in 2007 and one conducted by IAF trained organizers in Chicago in 2008. It was in these trainings that I learned how regular people such as myself have fought for and secured the desired change they want to see in their communities.

I entered the first training with complete skepticism about what people who are not in power can do to affect the public decision-making of those in power.[5] I learned how organizers go about helping people build power and take calculated, public action steps as part of contentious collective politics that move them toward achieving the social justice changes they seek.[6] After completing my second training, I had no doubt that I could put to practice what I learned from IAF to push for change in New Orleans.

Not long after this training, I engaged in a series of activities that my pre-Katrina self would have thought pointless and doomed to fail. Six years after Katrina, I had either led, co-led, or participated in post-Katrina efforts that resulted in: limited improvements to the New Orleans Police Department's efforts to work with the new immigrant Latinx community in a nonthreatening manner, adoption of professional interpreter standards by the State of Louisiana Supreme Court, and defeat of anti-immigrant bills in the State of Louisiana 2008, and 2010 legislative sessions.

From these experiences in the field, I began to wonder if other groups deployed similar lessons to that offered by IAF and if use of this knowledge helped them achieve the outcomes they desired. Of course, it's not that straightforward. I also

experienced various failed actions, which helped illustrate in my mind that possessing the skills and knowledge espoused by IAF as critical to building power didn't always equate to a group achieving their desired outcome. And yet, the marked differences I experienced between those collective actions in which the leadership knew something about what they were doing when compared to leadership that maybe could have benefitted from a little more knowledge and practice is undeniable. It's a qualitative difference that can be understood best via comparison. Alone, without any reference to anything different, a particular approach may seem, on its own merit, to be good enough. It isn't until a previously deemed adequate approach is compared to a more effective one that we begin to perceive such qualitative differences.

Over many different experiences as a practitioner in New Orleans between 2007 and 2018, I observed how these qualitative differences interacted within collective actions. I began to consider how differences in execution between groups pushing for change in New Orleans appeared to align with the level of capacity a group possessed.[7] In activities in which I participated between 2007 and 2018 in the New Orleans area, I observed that groups with high levels of capacity were able to build power and participate in opportunities to affect public decision-making scenarios, whereas groups with low levels of capacity were less successful in their efforts to affect change. At the same time, there were also instances when groups appeared to possess the type of capacity (at whatever level) that IAF championed as critical for success and yet repeatedly failed to achieve any desired change.

These practice-based observations serve as the foundation for the focus and research data this book explores. Based on my own practical experiences in the New Orleans area, the work to bring about social justice change at local levels, particularly when it is collective and aimed at public decision-makers, differs in the hands of leaders who have some degree of knowledge, skills, and/or experiences in and with contentious political action when compared to those who do not. I observed during my 11 years in the field between 2007 and 2018 in New Orleans that what leaders know and understand about the types of tactics, skills, and more, which they need for a given action strategy within a given place, varies widely. Not all leaders have the same abilities, and sometimes, there is a lack of awareness by groups about how much they don't know, and there are instances where it is the will and energy of charismatic leaders alone that keeps a group pushing for change in the face of 0 indications of success. These experiences suggest that these differences in capacity do, in fact, matter, which this book explores through the development and application of *know-how* as an analyzable concept in contentious collective politics that can open deeper possibilities in qualitative analysis and practical application.

As I learned from IAF, people do need to know what they are doing if they are going to engage in collectives that challenge power structures and decision-makers, which raises questions about acquisition and deployment of groups' abilities in collective political contention. More specifically, this raises questions about the role that groups' knowledge, skills, and experiences (with bringing and keeping collectives together, deciding upon what form of action to take as a group, and engaging other actors involved in the same spaces in which collective contention occurs, for example) play in their abilities to achieve the changes they seek.

Drilling deeper, this book will focus on leaders of organizations and movements to better understand how *know-how* "showed" up in their work. Using both my own practice-based experiences in New Orleans between 2007 and 2018, as well as 43 interviews with still actively involved individuals between 2016 and 2017, I explore the way that *know-how* potentially interacted with efforts to bring about social justice changes between 2008 and 2016. But before entering into the analysis of these data, which are offered in four separate chapters below that explore different dimensions of *know-how*, I would like to first move through some background information on the academic and practice-oriented literature on contentious collective politics and how these works provide the foundation for how I arrived at the concept of *know-how*. This background information is a sort of brief, and in no way exhaustive, discussion of the trajectory of academic research and other works that pave the way for the next chapter in which I operationalize *know-how* by diving deeply into how the concept works and how it can be used in both academic and practice-based work related to collective political action and more.

Looking Deeper at *Know-How*

So what am I talking about here? What exactly is *know-how*, which I have already mentioned a handful of times above? Simply put, *know-how*, as I use it in this book, is the combination of knowledge, skills, and experiences that comes together in a person and gets deployed in political action.[8] In this regard, I conceive *know-how* as a type of knowing that individuals gain about a given phenomenon that orders action in such a way as to have the potential to increase effectiveness and efficiency in execution within the circumscribed social spaces and processes in which the intended action occurs.[9] For the purposes of this introduction, it's important to establish that *know-how* includes abstract and practical knowledge and skills, which are acquired via a combination of formal instruction, training manuals, and other forms of informal instruction that is then combined with knowledge gained from and skills sharpened through real-world practice (relative to a circumscribed social space).

For example, community organizers trained by IAF put the community organizing concepts learned in classroom settings into practice in the real world, and in doing so begin to cultivate their own *know-how* about what works and what doesn't work in the spaces in which they engage. Another way to help facilitate a shared understanding of what I generally mean when I use the phrase *know-how* is to invite you to imagine a fictional scenario in which you are a resident in a dense urban setting who begins to have increasing concerns about properties in your neighborhood that have begun to look abandoned. You are concerned about their impact on safety, and you find that you are not alone. Your neighbors would like to do something about it. You call for a meeting on the issue. Everyone agrees that something should be done. But what? Does anyone

know where to start? Does someone in the group know the steps for this type of action? Can anyone highlight what needs to happen in the next three steps, and then in the next nine, and so forth? Does your town or city have a clearly responsible department, and if so, what are their processes? Does anyone know what is possible in the end?

If you have ever been involved in, or exposed to, similar work, you may have a general idea about possible next steps, regardless of where you live. You may have, in effect, a certain amount of applicable knowledge that you can bring to this situation, which can be applied as a level of *know-how*. On the other hand, if you have never been involved in anything remotely similar, identifying the possibilities for action may not come as easily, if these come at all.

As should be perfectly clear from this small exercise, pursuing any form of social change in the world (regardless of the issue or political leaning) takes a certain amount of knowledge both about the world in which one intends to act and about what actions must be undertaken that will work within that world. In other words, acting in the world with an intent to change it, however small or large the change, requires a certain knowing that I call *know-how*.

Interestingly, this type of knowing has surprisingly garnered scant historical attention in the theory-making and empirical studies of social movement studies (Van Dyke & Dixon, 2013), which dominates the broad subject area of contentious collective politics.[10] In the world of practice, the idea of *know-how* exists mostly as an assumed quality one creates by developing skills through formal and informal trainings and through experiences in the world of practice. In both academic and practitioner spaces, the concept of *know-how* can serve as a vital tool that can help enrich interpretation and analysis as well as learning, teaching, and application. The aim of this book is to bring the concept of *know-how* to the fore for future scholarly endeavors as a conceptual tool that can deepen and enrich analysis of contentious collective action, as well as to provide a general guidepost for practitioners in and educators of public leadership (Brookes, 2014; Hartley, 2018; Marcy, 2023).[11] While the primary aim is to engage scholars in political science, sociology, organizational development, civic engagement, democracy, public leadership, and more in concept discussion and usage as an analytical device (which can be applied with or without a grand theory), the book also explores applicability in the real world for practitioners, primarily through the analyzed case studies and concluding recommendations.

Now, a warning about *know-how*. I have yet to fully develop the concept, but I have no doubt that you have already ascribed to the phrase your own broad understanding of what it could mean – you have undoubtedly filled in the gaps. For example, you may have already had a thought about your academic *know-how*, such as the idea that you know what it takes to make it in the academy, or maybe you have cooking *know-how* and know your way around a kitchen, or perhaps you have mechanical *know-how* and know what to do with a combustion engine. You may have even already concluded, so what? We all have *know-how*, so no big deal. And you'd be right to think so because the phrase *know-how*, which is common enough in public usage, has existed at least since 1838 when it appeared in a review of a mechanical invention in *The Cincinnati Chronicle* on

June 16, 1838, which asserted that the inventor deployed "a good deal of know-how" in the implementation of his ideas.[12] By the late 1800s, the phrase was well established as a type of knowledge that one gains in the practice of something, as this phrase from *The Engineer* demonstrates: "the '*know-how*' of working men has, in many cases, kept pace with the advancement of science."

With such general, widespread usage, the notion that we all possess some *know-how* about something in the world today falls into cliché. We typically presume that *know-how*, of all types in the world, is a given quality of being a modern human. This presumption is so widespread that until someone tells us directly, "no, I really don't know how to fry an egg," the egg frying world takes it for granted that people have learned how to fry an egg without burning down the kitchen before entering adulthood. Such assumptions can lead into all sorts of unexpected troubles. Consider the following example.

Let's assume you, the reader, know how to change a flat tire. Knowing this could mean one of two possibilities. Either you gained the knowledge of how to do it by necessity, when you absolutely had to do it because you were alone, on the side of a dark road, and had no other alternative, so you "figured it out." Or maybe not under such dire circumstances you have changed a flat tire with your own hands, which means you have flat tire-changing *know-how* developed from practice. Or it could be that you may have learned how a tire is changed from someone, either in person or online, but have yet to practice changing a flat tire yourself, making your *know-how* about tire changing not quite what it could be, but at least you know the steps.

Now with this *know-how* in your possession, if pressed, you can change flat tires on just about any sort of personal vehicle with wheels, axles, and nuts and bolts. In other words, you can now apply this flat tire-changing *know-how* to almost anyone's flat tire you encounter on the roads and become a superhero of sorts when you pull over on the highway to help someone change their flat tire. But there's a catch.

You quickly learn that your flat tire *know-how* doesn't adequately transfer to all seemingly similar tires. Your *know-how* is barely helpful with a large 18-wheeler's tire and is even less helpful with any airplane's flat tire. In your eagerness to serve others in need with flat tire-changing problems you learn, in fact, that your flat tire *know-how* powers have limitations that you didn't know existed until you needed to apply them in strange and unusual spaces and circumstances. This is the crux of this book; the idea that when leaders are involved in contentious collective politics – be that in social movements, organized nongovernment organizational coalitions, civic associations, organized worker actions, or disorganized active citizenship (Cohen et al., 2010; Curtis & Petras, 1970; Forestal, 2016; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004) – they bring to their efforts a certain level of knowing akin to the *know-how* you bring to changing a flat tire, and as observers and practitioners, we should be inquiring about the level of *know-how* we believe we possess.[13,14]

But there's another problem that needs to be considered, namely that the transferability and universality of a person's *know-how* can be misinterpreted. In other words, our *know-how* has limitations and boundaries, as it is not universally

and automatically transferrable to all circumstances. This is what I reference in the example above when I say that your personal vehicle-based tire-changing *know-how* doesn't transfer automatically to airplane tire-changing *know-how*. From a practitioner's perspective, misinterpretation of our own or our allies' *know-how* in critical strategic actions can spell trouble. For analysts, regardless of their disciplinary lens, similar misinterpretation can lead to false assumptions about what they are analyzing, which in turn leads to either exaggerated or under-examined claims about what was observed. Let's consider this again from the flat tire-changing point of view.

When we think of others' flat tire-changing *know-how*, we have a tendency to generally assume (1) that such *know-how* is universal and as such others around us also have this *know-how* and (2) that much of it must be transferrable to similar scenarios and circumstances that involve a flat tire, nuts and bolts, an axle, and wheels. But as we saw above, the *know-how* we develop specifically from dealing with our typical personal vehicles only gets us so far. We cannot easily transfer the same *know-how* gained from changing our personal vehicles' flat tire into changing the flat tire on a small airplane.

Similarly, we tend to assume that if we know how to do this, surely many others around us must also know how to do this. In the case of flat tire-changing *know-how*, we assume without deeper analysis or self-reflection that many drivers around us also have this *know-how*. Our only information as to whether others possess the same *know-how* comes typically from our personal experiences. We assume the universal nature of this knowledge, forgetting that until the very moment when we experienced the act of changing a tire ourselves, we had no clue as to how to go about doing this. This is what I call a false universal belief, otherwise understood as egocentrism (Ross & Nisbett, 2011), which I believe has plagued theory-making and empirical observations of contentious collective politics, resulting in decades of work that simply omits this critical element of public leadership in collective contention.

Where Has *Know-How* Been?

If you are in academia and are interested in a brief, nonexhaustive, but informative history of theory-making in and about contentious collective politics, then this next section is for you. If you are a practitioner and would rather skip this part, then feel free to go directly to the next chapter where I begin to develop the concept of *know-how* for analytic and practical application.

As I stated above, we typically bring general (largely unexamined) assumptions about the *know-how* we and everyone around us possess, which seeps into our analysis of, and practice in, contentious collective politics, leaving the unsuspecting (both in and outside of academia) in the full belief that *know-how* must be a given quality already in everyone's possession. This leads to an overestimation of the capacities and dispositions leaders involved in collective contention bring to the table. In turn, this perspective leads to a belief that if public leaders are involved at all in collective contention, then knowledge, skills, and other

capacities must be already present, requiring no further inquiry. Unfortunately, in the early days of social movement theory development, there was a tendency to see the opposite in collective contention, focusing primarily on the emotional state of a mob in a large crowd of people asking for change (le Bon, 1931; Smelser, 1963; Turner & Killian, 1972). For example, early social sciences scholarship of political demonstrations perceived these activities as collective behavior that was irrational, focusing on how their collective protest behavior didn't fit normative political participation behavior.[15]

It wasn't until focus shifted toward how collectives mobilize political influence when they are challengers to those in positions of power that scholarship began to consider the idea that perhaps contentious collective political activities were conducted by well-adjusted folks, after all (Gamson, 1975; Gurr, 2016). Even so, when the literature began to consider collective political contention outside electoral politics, analytical focus bypassed what actors know how to do, how they learn this type of knowing, and how they deploy it when involved in contentious collective politics, and instead embarked on a decades-long endeavor to explain this type of social activity via large macro-oriented theories, beginning with the highly influential ideas created by Charles Tilly (1978). Tilly's exploration of how contentious collectives mobilize resources, in particular, had a lasting effect, as it served to steer future theory-making and analysis away from individual actors and toward macro explanations, such as the development of the political process perspective (McAdam, 1982), which arose directly out of and in response to Tilly's work. This new theoretical development moved contentious collective politics scholarship's trajectory solidly into macrostructural analysis of how contentious collectives come to exist and mobilize.[16]

The next major development and research in this direction led to a focus on macro-level political opportunity and threat structures that allow groups to come into existence and openly challenge established spaces of power or that serve to limit what collectives can do (McAdam, 1982; Tarrow, 1998; Tilly, 1986). In moving along the same macro analytical trend now in full swing, these approaches led to further macro-related questions rather than questions about how the individuals know what they are doing. This trajectory is punctuated by the creation of frame analysis (Bourdieu, 1992; Edwards, 2014; Gamson, 1992; Lichterman & Eliasoph, 2014; Opp, 2009; Snow et al., 1986; Verba et al., 1995), which shed light on how social movements frame their issues of contention. Frame analysis, however, did not ask where or how individuals developed the *know-how* (again, this concept refers to a type of knowing that combines abstract and experiential knowledge, which I will more deeply develop in the next chapter) they deploy in their framing strategies, as the focus never drilled down to that level of analysis. If by now you are wondering why not, I would like to offer the possibility that throughout its history, most academic thinking about social action has been couched in terms of rational thinking and large scale, or macro, analysis.[17]

While focus on macro-level analysis led much of the social science theory-making and empirical research between the 1980s and 2000s even further away from questions about what public leaders know how to do when they are involved in contentious collective politics, it did spark a reactionary trajectory