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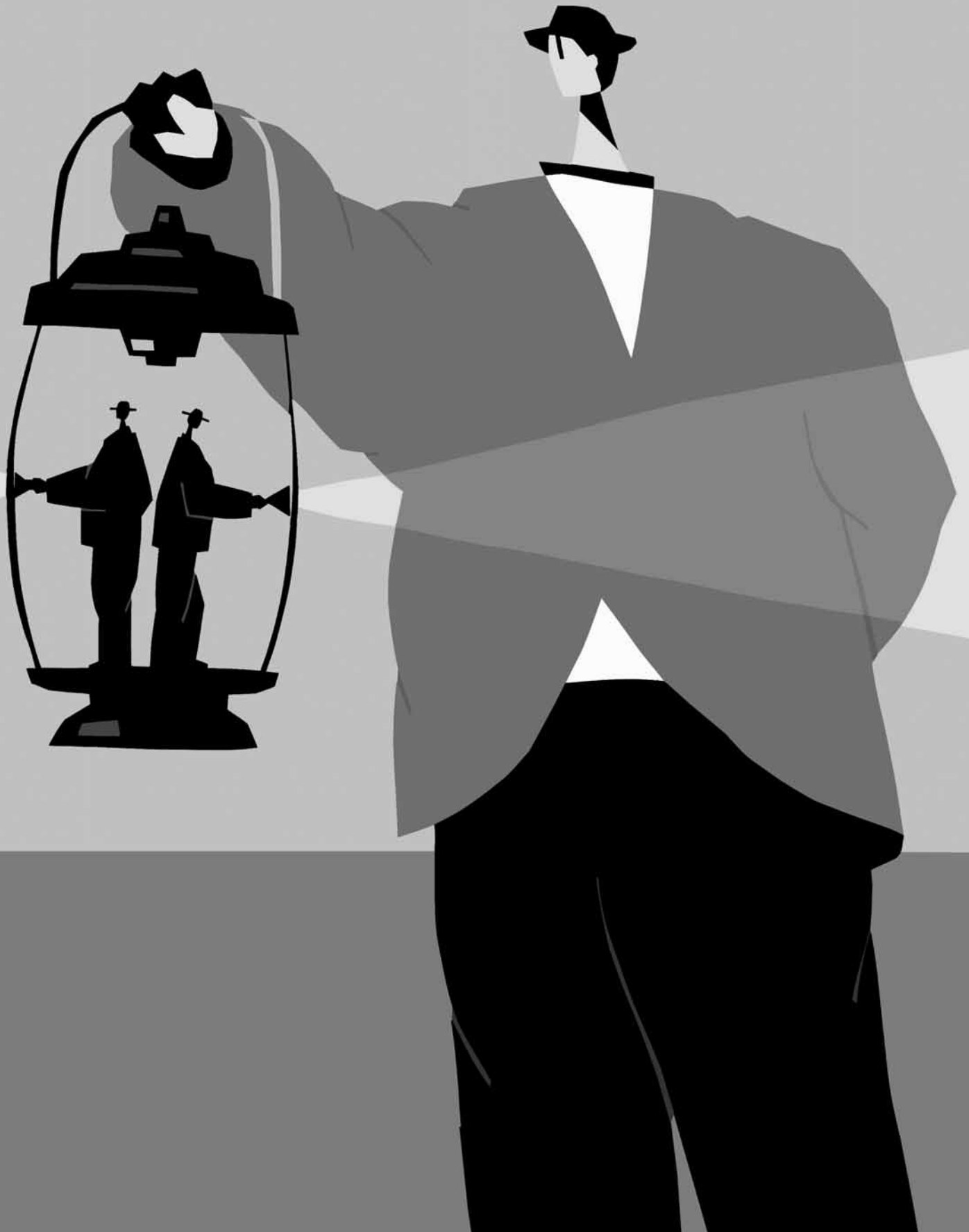
STANFORD SOCIAL INNOVATION *review*

Harnessing Purity and Pragmatism

By Alana Conner & Keith Epstein

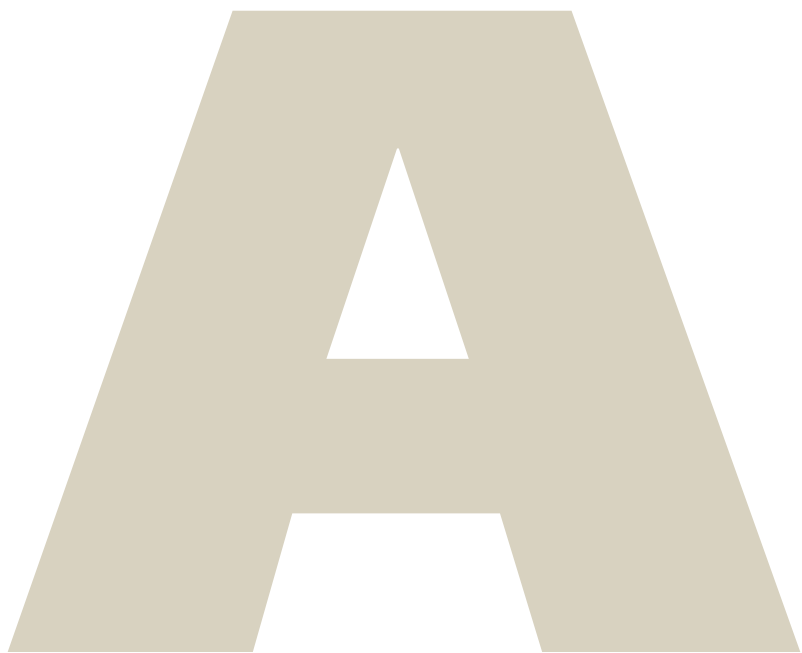
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As the wall between the nonprofit and corporate worlds crumbles, many social change organizations are asking themselves: Do we stick to our activist guns, or do we cross the divide and work with business? Both pure and pragmatic strategies exact their costs. But in the end, research suggests that social movements need both kinds of organizations to make the changes they seek.

Harnessing Purity and Pragmatism



As they do every winter, fleets of Japanese ships sailed into rough Antarctic seas to hunt whales last January. And as they do every winter, Greenpeace activists greeted the hunters with dramatic nonviolent protests, such as positioning their boats in front of the whalers' harpoons and painting "Whale Meat From Sanctuary!" on one whaler's hull.

Displays like these never satisfied Paul Watson, a founder of Greenpeace who parted ways with the organization in 1978 to create the more militant Sea Shepherd Conservation Society. He has called his onetime colleagues "the Avon ladies of the environmental movement" and "a bunch of wimps." When confronting Japanese whalers, the bearded captain prefers a more direct approach. He raises a skull and crossbones flag on the mast of his vessel, the *Farley Mowat* (named after the Canadian wildlife author and activist), and then rams his enemies' hulls with the 7-foot steel blade on his starboard bow that he calls "the can opener."

"Nobody would walk by a kitten or a dog being kicked to death," Watson explained to the Reuters news service last February.

Both the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society and Greenpeace are provocative environmental organizations with sim-

by ALANA CONNER & KEITH EPSTEIN

The gulfs between many pure and pragmatic organizations – even those with shared objectives – are widening.

ilar goals. Yet Sea Shepherd is more ideologically pure, with its long history of uncompromising stances, radical actions, and contempt for corporations. Greenpeace, in contrast, is becoming more pragmatic, with its recent history of working with Coca-Cola, General Electric, and other corporate giants to create greener products and processes. (For more details about Greenpeace's collaboration with Coca-Cola, see "Chilling With Greenpeace" in the Summer 2006 issue of *Stanford Social Innovation Review*.) In turn, both organizations are viewed as purer and less pragmatic than Environmental Defense and the Natural Resources Defense Council, which are even more focused on working with businesses to cultivate market-friendly solutions to environmental problems.

As environmental organizations, like the nonprofit sector as a whole, increasingly join forces with and emulate businesses, the gulfs between many pragmatic and pure organizations – even those with shared objectives – are widening. Consequently, Sea Shepherd and Greenpeace's greatest rivals often aren't Japanese whaling companies. They're each other.

Bickering between purer and more pragmatic organizations is not confined to the sea. Back on shore, the Native Forest Council roasts the Nature Conservancy for many of its practices, including its decision to sell land in Texas to trustees, who then allowed drilling for oil in the formerly protected areas. After the press exposed these and other actions, the Nature Conservancy established a risk evaluation committee and explored ways to mitigate the damage. Nevertheless, Timothy G. Hermach, founder of the Native Forest Council, still calls the conservancy "the real estate company that cares."

"Pragmatic, as the term is being used by most of Gang Green, is but a justification for being dishonest," Hermach says.

In response, Steven J. McCormick, the Nature Conservancy's chief executive, says: "You have to sort of admire the nobility and passion and purity behind [Hermach's stance]. But on the other hand, it's rare you get much out of it."

Which organizations do the most for their cause: the purer, or the more pragmatic? Sociologists increasingly conclude that "this is the wrong question," says William P. Barnett, the Thomas M. Siebel Professor of Business Leadership, Strategy,

and Organizations at the Stanford Graduate School of Business. "What's most effective is to have both involved." While purer nonprofits blow whistles on malfeasant companies, mobilize the public with worst-case scenarios, and muscle legislation through sluggish governments, more pragmatic nonprofits enact the small changes and quiet compromises that often make the biggest differences.

Pure and pragmatic nonprofits also make each others' work easier. Without the threat of pure nonprofits' radical actions, corporations and governments would often not be willing to work with more pragmatic organizations. And without the subtle legwork of pragmatic organizations, pure nonprofits would enjoy considerably fewer results from their actions.

All social movements need a variety of ideologies, but individual nonprofits must still decide where they will land on the purity-pragmatism spectrum. They must also learn to balance the purist and pragmatic tendencies within themselves. To do so they must first understand the price of being practical, as well as the cost of being pure.

Pragmatism Isn't Cheap

Although nonprofits' tilt toward pragmatism has led many major corporations to adopt more socially responsible practices, it sometimes takes a toll on membership and funding, finds Nicholas Switanek, a doctoral student working with Barnett at the Stanford Graduate School of Business. In his research, Switanek first classified more than 12,000 U.S. environmental nonprofits as either pragmatic – that is, working with companies on such tactics as carbon offsets, habitat conservation plans, and mitigation banks – or pure – that is, not working with companies. His analyses showed that between 1999 and 2006, more pragmatic organizations failed than did pure organizations.

Switanek thinks that the frailty of pragmatic nonprofits lies not in the organizations, but instead within the psychologies of their would-be members, volunteers, and donors. When people choose to support a nonprofit, they aren't just deciding where to volunteer their talents or donate their dollars. Instead, they are choosing how to build their identities, which they construct, in part, from the organizations with which they associate themselves.

Many people want to view themselves as unique from – and even in opposition to – the mainstream. In other words, they want to construct what sociologists call *oppositional identities*. Associating with clearly unique, even antagonistic groups is one way to build such an identity.

Traditionally, environmental organizations were a good source of oppositional identities, says Barnett: "They had to take an oppositional stance to business to be true blue." Yet as environmental nonprofits adopt tactics from business, they drift closer to the undifferentiated middle of the social world. "There are no identity benefits for pragmatists when polar bears and

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Despite its recent partnerships with corporations, Greenpeace (left) still uses protest and other purist tactics to protect the environment. In contrast, the more pragmatic Environmental Defense (right) emphasizes collaboration with businesses and government.

climate change are on the cover of every magazine on every newsstand,” notes Switanek.

Many committed environmentalists gravitate toward purer organizations to get their identity fix, but some middle-of-the-road environmentalists are actually leaving nonprofits altogether. “People who would have worked for NRDC or Environmental Defense are now going to work for Shell,” says Switanek. “And people who might have written a check to these organizations are now funding alternative energy start-ups.”

As a result, membership and funding for more pragmatic environmental organizations seem to be dropping off over time, while those of purer organizations seem to be holding steady, or in some cases even growing, says Switanek. For example, the more pragmatic Rainforest Alliance has had a rocky time financially, he finds, whereas the purer Defenders of Wildlife, Rainforest Action Network, and Earthjustice have watched their funding steadily grow over the past eight years. And though pragmatic organizations may turn to corporate contributions to make up for their losses, this reliance on corporate dollars sometimes calls into question their independence from the business sector.

Environmental organizations’ departure from their traditional roles of watchdogs and whistle-blowers can hurt them in another way, notes Switanek: “Only those organizations that have the purest, greenest credentials can go into a corporation and maintain their credibility. When they become market pragmatists, however, they cast doubt on their commitment to being credible monitors, which should make them less likely to attract funding” – as well as public trust.

Other sociologists have reached similar conclusions about the price of pragmatism. In their 1978 classic, *Poor People’s Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail*, Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward argue that social movements are most effective when they’re purest, most radical, and most disorganized. “The mob in the street is always more effective than the bureaucratized, institutionalized organization,” summarizes Doug McAdam, a professor of sociology at Stanford. The father of sociology, Max Weber, made a similar argument some 30 years earlier,¹ observing that as organizations get older, larger, and more bureaucratized, they lose their radical edge – a process he called the “routinization of charisma.”

A Crisis of Legitimacy

The Russian-American nonprofit partnership known as the Wild Salmon Center learned firsthand how difficult it is to walk the line between purity and pragmatism. The center’s original mission focused only on conservation: Protect and learn about one of the world’s last remaining strongholds of wild Pacific salmon and steelhead, located on the Kamchatka Peninsula in Russia’s Far East. Better to preserve the breeding grounds of perhaps one-fourth of all Pacific salmon, the organization reasoned, than to focus solely on areas where salmon had already headed into steep decline.

The center created a novel fundraising and education model. It charged anglers some \$7,000 for two-week trips into the Kamchatka wilderness, and then spent the proceeds on its own research. Helicopters ferried both fishermen and scientists deep into the wilderness, which lowered the cost of doing research, and the anglers helped the scientists collect data. The best way to enlist guardians of wildlife, the founders figured, was to get them both waist-deep in fly-fishing and elbow-deep in research. How better to save an ecosystem than to build a wealthy constituency that has been there, seen it, and fished it?

Foundations weren’t so sure. Helicopter-loads of anglers with net worths of \$5 million to \$30 million apiece did not help perceptions that the Wild Salmon Center needed foundation grants. “They got wary about the idea they were subsidizing rich fishermen,” notes Barnett. “They said, ‘Wait, are you an environmental organization or are you a tourism outfit?’”

The center’s Russian partners also grew suspicious, says Guido Rahr, president and CEO of the Wild Salmon Center: “They asked, ‘Do you want to protect this river because you want to protect a globally important source of biodiversity, or because you want to get angling concessions for foreign tourists?’” At the same time, many ecotourism operators – including the center’s commercial competitors – spun holiday travel as environmentally beneficial, and so the organization was having a hard time maintaining its unique identity.

Ultimately, the fishermen themselves were confused about what, exactly, the Wild Salmon Center did. “When we asked them for 5K to go fishing, and then for another 5K in donations, they thought they were being hit twice,” says Rahr.

For the Wild Salmon Center, the situation became nothing



An Animal Liberation Front activist (left) rescues a chinchilla from a fur farm. Using a less radical tactic, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals members (right) protest fur at a fashion show. Pure and pragmatic organizations complement each other in social movements.

short of what Barnett terms a “legitimacy crisis.” Just how pure could this organization be?

As a solution, the founders created two organizations, one with a purer focus, and one with a more pragmatic approach. The Wild Salmon Center continues to concentrate on conservation and science. Meanwhile, a newly formed nonprofit, Wild Salmon Rivers, continues to offer angling tours. “It has been a bit of a challenge that among some audiences, for example, fishermen who went to Kamchatka in the early years of the program, we are still seen as an organization that runs trips to Russia,” acknowledges Rachel Uris, vice president of resources and communication at the Wild Salmon Center. “But this challenge is fading.”

And both organizations are prospering, says Rahr. Foundations like that each organization sticks to its knitting and develops its core competencies, which makes both the Wild Salmon Center and Wild Salmon Rivers more competitive for grants. The organizations’ Russian partners are also reassured. “To do conservation in Russia,” says Rahr, “everybody needs to be perceived as not making an end run at capturing a resource. It’s important to be seen as providing technical and financial assistance. But ecotourism is a very different model. By creating a firewall between conservation and ecotourism, we assured the Russians that we are supporting their efforts to protect important watersheds.” With its partners’ trust restored, the Wild Salmon Center has been able to implement its projects more easily, and thereby attract even more foundation funding.

Purity Is Also Pricey

Despite the challenges facing pragmatic organizations, both Barnett and Switanek believe that more pragmatic strategies may prove more effective than purer ones when it comes to making change across social issues. “Capitalism is a great engine for innovation,” says Barnett. “If you really want to get something done, you are going to play the pragmatist.”

Barnett cites the alliance between Environmental Defense and Wal-Mart Stores as an effective nonprofit-corporate partnership. (See “Partners for the Planet” in the Summer 2007 issue of *Stanford Social Innovation Review*.) Pushed by Environmental Defense, the world’s largest retailer claims it is well on the way to reducing its energy use by 30 percent, trimming its

annual solid waste production by 25 percent, and saving 5,000 trees and 1,300 barrels of oil by reducing its use of cardboard. The corporate giant also intends to launch windmill-powered stores. By partnering with Wal-Mart, “Environmental Defense has done much more to help the planet than many organizations,” says Barnett.

Still, when Barnett recently asked a group of environmental activists, “Who here is too pure to work with Wal-Mart?” about a third of the hands went up. “They regard Wal-Mart as the enemy,” he says. “They’re saying, ‘We’re not going to contaminate our ideological stand and sleep with Wal-Mart just to make some changes at the margins.’ Their identities have become more important than the ultimate objective.”

Granted, cultivating identities is an important psychological need that affiliating with purist organizations can satisfy, says Barnett. Yet purist tactics may leave unchecked not only wayward businesses, but also recalcitrant governments. In the early years of the environmental movement, purist environmental organizations enjoyed powerful legislative successes, including the passage of the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, and the Endangered Species Act. But since the Carter administration, activists have had far fewer legislative victories. As purist organizations continued their fruitless sparring with lawmakers, pragmatic organizations sidestepped government altogether, worked with business, and achieved some of the very same goals for which purist organizations had been fighting in courts and legislatures.

Purity is also hard for organizations to sustain internally. “Very few nonprofits have the luxury of being pure,” observes Elizabeth T. Boris, director of the Urban Institute’s Center on Nonprofits and Philanthropy. That’s because few organizations can operate in a vacuum of like-minded members, founders, and funders. An organization always answers to myriad stakeholders. “If nonprofits are dependent on the public, its members, or foundations, their constituencies are varied and have a claim on them. An agenda that may have been set by a few people in a room may not make it out into the real world in that form.”

Finally, time is not always on the side of purity. “Purity is a higher-risk strategy,” notes Barnett. “If the times are right, it can enhance the organization. A staunchly antinuclear group was the place to go during the Three Mile Island accident. But now,

PHOTOGRAPHS (LEFT, RIGHT) COURTESY OF ANIMAL LIBERATION FRONT AND PEOPLE FOR THE ETHICAL TREATMENT OF ANIMALS

“All social movements have an extreme faction,” which moves the center forward, says PETA’s Ingrid Newkirk.

staunchly antinuclear groups are falling out of favor because people are beginning to think that nuclear power is a good idea. If you were really focused on opposing nukes in one era, you were a hero. But now, you would be seen as not progressive or unwilling to deal with the larger issue of climate change” – and membership, funding, and effectiveness would all suffer.

Movements Need Both

The tensions between pure and pragmatic organizations are especially uncomfortable in the nonprofit sector, where scarce resources and high stakes make everyone just want to get along. “There is a feeling in the nonprofit world that, ideally, we would all cooperate,” says Barnett. “And in a lot of cases, cooperation does make sense.”

Yet the clash of approaches feeds innovation, says Barnett: “We need just as much vitality and beautifully uncoordinated innovation in the nonprofit sector as there is in the economy at large.”

Within the ecosystem of a social movement, pure and pragmatic organizations play different yet equally important roles that, when combined, make change happen. Even someone like Captain Watson, the whaler hunter labeled a rogue pirate and ecological terrorist, may accomplish more for the movement than his opponents realize. His model might not be sustainable, since few governments are likely to adopt his method of enforcing international wildlife treaties. But such activists at the fringes of a movement can tug other organizations – and society – in important new directions.

“Pragmatic groups get more done, but part of why that is is the threat of a radical flank,” observes McAdam, using a term – “radical flank effects” – first coined by the sociologist Herbert H. Haines.² In their analyses of the civil rights movement both McAdam³ and Haines argue that purer groups made it easier for more moderate groups to pursue their agendas. In the 1950s, for example, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was illegal in the South. But once the more radical Martin Luther King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference surfaced, mainstream support began pouring into the NAACP, says McAdam. And once the Black Power movement emerged, he notes, white leaders became much more willing to meet with King.

“When you have a really radical wing of the movement, it tends to increase the legitimacy, respectability, and leverage of more moderate groups,” says McAdam.

“The most radical group during the civil rights movement, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, realized that they weren’t getting the credit they deserved for King’s success,” he continues. “But they were willing to pay that price for the sake of the movement as a whole.”

“All social movements have an extreme faction,” agrees Ingrid Newkirk, founder of People for the Ethical Treatment

of Animals (PETA), an organization whose tactics include juxtaposing photos of slaughterhouses with concentration camps, promoting nudity over wearing fur, and tossing red paint on fashion show runways that featured animal products. “Such activity seems to move the center forward,” she says, noting that the even more radical Animal Liberation Front, which has raided mink and chinchilla farms and released the animals, makes her organization seem less threatening.

Pure environmental organizations do more than just make the moderate ones seem more reasonable. They also continue to perform the very important function of checking the less savory tendencies of business. “If all environmental organizations cooperated with businesses,” asks Barnett, “then what about all those businesses that decided not to worry about their environmental footprint? Worldwide, the economy is capitalist, and it will reward firms that do well on the business dimension – including those that are eco-unfriendly. Who’s going to be the whistle-blower?” This is a role that purer organizations are more likely to play.

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), for example, Greenpeace – which, Sea Shepherd’s opinion notwithstanding, often undertakes quite pure missions – recently discovered that a small group of European and U.S. logging companies had convinced a local village chief to exchange his community’s rights to an extremely valuable hardwood forest for 20 sacks of sugar, 200 bags of salt, some machetes, and a few hoes.⁴ The gifts totaled about \$20,000 in value, whereas each tree in the forest would fetch roughly \$8,000. Greenpeace reports that this is just one example of unfair contracts that companies have signed with DRC tribal chiefs.

“Greenpeace is playing its role there,” says Barnett. “We don’t want Greenpeace playing the role of Environmental Defense. We want this complementarity in the movement.”

Like many social movements, says Barnett, “the environmental movement is marked by a notion that there are right and wrong practices. I would like to see lots of people experimenting with different methods of building sustainability.”

Beyond the environmental movement, many other social change efforts need both pure and pragmatic organizations to move their agendas forward, research suggests. Whether their aim is to heal the sick, educate the ignorant, support the artistic, or promote a worldview, pure and pragmatic organizations play distinct and vital roles in pursuing their common goals. □

1 Max Weber. *The Theory of Social and Economic Organizations*. Translated by A.M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons. New York: The Free Press, 1947.

2 Herbert H. Haines. *Black Radicals and the Civil Rights Mainstream, 1954-1970*. Knoxville, Tenn.: University of Tennessee Press, 1988.

3 Doug McAdam. *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.

4 John Vidal. “Few Bags of Sugar Buy a Forest: Congo Villagers Fear Destitution as Western Timber Firms Drive Into Virgin Lands.” *The Guardian Weekly*, 20 April 2007.