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# FROM ORGANIZATION TO IDENTITY

## *The Case of the New Age movement*

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### **ABSTRACT**

The quality of the relationship between the organization of a social movement and its collective identity is largely unexplored until now. Here the hypothesis is put forth that resource poor movements enjoying little institutional support are more likely to develop universalist and traditionally coded collective identities, while movements whose members command considerable amounts of tangible resources and cultural capital tend to develop more primordially coded identities. The plausibility of this hypothesis is illustrated with the case of the New Age movement which is, if necessary, compared to the Lesbian Feminist movement.

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## Introduction

Over the last decade several studies that merge the strategy and identity oriented paradigms<sup>1</sup> in social movement theory have evolved.<sup>2</sup> Surprisingly, though, little attempt has been made to explore the relationship between the core variables of the two approaches in a systematic fashion.<sup>3</sup> One notable exception is the recent discussion of the relationship between organizational form and the use of identity by Mary Bernstein.<sup>4</sup> At best it is assumed that resources and organizations central in resource mobilization theory and its offspring political process theory are necessary or at least helpful in the creation of a collective identity, the *sine qua non* of constructionist theory. How different types of resources and organizations might effect the outlook of a movement identity or vice versa is, however, left unclear.

In this paper I put forth some preliminary hypotheses on the mechanics between resources, the organizational form and the collective identity of a movement. My main contention is that the distribution of (tangible) resources among the potential constituency shapes its organizational patterns, which in turn determine the form and the viability of the collective identity. Specifically, I will show that the collective identity of movements that mobilize mainly resource poor constituents is likely to be constructed with the help of sacratized universalist and traditionalist codes,<sup>5</sup> i.e. their *esprit-du-corps* will mainly rely on the sacredness of the goal of the movement and shared rituals of the movement participants. On the other hand, materially better equipped movements will develop a collective identity that is marked by primordialization, which in the current societal context is not only more durable, but also facilitates the implementation of movement goals.

The cases that will illustrate these theses are the New Age movement on the one hand and separatist Lesbian Feminism on the other. I chose these two movements, since they are located on

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Cohen (1985).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Benford (1987); Eder (1993); Ellingson (1995); Eyerman & Jamison (1991); Gamson (1991); Gamson (1992a); Gamson (1992b); Gamson & Modigliani (1989); Klandermans (1990); Klandermans (1991); Klandermans & Tarrow (1988); Snow & Benford (1988); Snow et al. (1986).

<sup>3</sup> McAdam, McCarthy & Zald (1996: 7) promise such a synthesis in their recent anthology on social movement research, yet with some exceptions most of the articles again focus either on organizational outlook, political opportunity structure or collective identity.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Bernstein (1997).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Eisenstadt & Giesen (1995) for this typology.

the opposite poles on all three ideal types of collective identity construction, New Age being strongly universalist and moderately traditionalist with hardly any sign of essentialization.

In what follows I will first describe the different organizational patterns of New Age and Lesbian Feminism and connect these organizational forms with the resource basis of the (potential) constituents. After having introduced a typology of collective identities, I will then discuss the discourse in the New Age identity field, that includes protagonists, antagonists and audiences of the movement,<sup>6</sup> and try to show that this discourse has been heavily influenced by the specific organizational form of the movement. At selected venues I will show, that Lesbian Feminism due to its organizational form and ultimately the resource basis of the constituents does not face some obstacles New Age does.

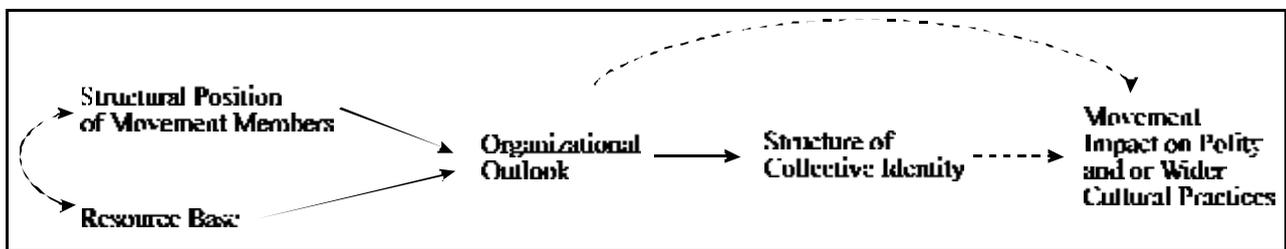


Figure 1: Principal Model (dotted paths are not elaborated upon in this paper)

My main argument is visualized in Figure 1. I contend that specific structural locations of would-be movement protagonists are chief determinants of the organizational outlook of a movement, which in turn has a strong effect on the type of collective identity a movement adopts (or better: is let to adopt).

## Data

The data I use for this essay come from different sources. As to the movement and countermovement discourse, I rely mainly on internet data, obtained WorldWideWeb and newsgroup, data. The web data I received through searching the *Yahoo!*<sup>7</sup> “Society and Culture: Religion: New Age” and “Society and Culture: Women: Lesbian and Bi” categories and obtained a snowball sample from the resulting websites. I also followed regularly the newsgroups *talk.religion.newage*, *alt.support.ex-cult*, *soc.women.lesbian-and-bi*, and *alt.feminism*

<sup>6</sup> Hunt, Benford & Snow (1994: 186). For a more detailed mapping of the identity field, consult Johnston (1995: 237f and Figure 11.2) .

<sup>7</sup> <<http://www.yahoo.com>>, November 10, 1997.

throughout 1997. In the case of New Age, on which I focus here, I also surveyed 204 New Age organizations in Southern California and Southern Wisconsin. Data for audiences are obtained in the form of the discourse in the print media. I selected *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *die tageszeitung*, and *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* as nationally circulated papers and *San Diego Union-Tribune*, *The Arizona Republic* and *Wisconsin State Journal* as representatives of local newspapers accessible to a more diverse audience. *Time* and *Newsweek* represent weekly magazines. For *The New York Times* I could collect data for the period from 1971 to 1997; *Los Angeles Times*, *Christian Science Monitor* are analyzed from 1980 forward, *Time* and *Newsweek* from 1983 onward. The records for the three local American papers start in 1984, for *die tageszeitung* in 1986, and the remaining German speaking papers in 1990. All records have been obtained through the data bank *Lexis/Nexus*, except for *die tageszeitung*, whose CD-ROM has been searched. Although it would have been desirable to include yellow press papers such as *The National Inquirer* or *Bild Zeitung* with their superior circulation and reach into different population strata, time and cost restraints prevented me from doing so: There are no computer-readable records of these papers. Since this is work in progress, I can currently only recur to data from the years 1988 and 1996, when I recur to any quantitative analysis, because to date I have only processed these data.

It may seem odd to many readers that I do not distinguish explicitly between the different cases of the New Age Lesbian Feminist movements in different countries. For one, both Lesbian Feminism and New Age are movements that operate across international borders. Secondly, globalization of the communication networks (internet, electronic mail, global TV companies) blurs these borders increasingly. But, most importantly, my reason for this proceeding is that I do not subscribe to the view, that different nations quasi *a priori* constitute different societies.<sup>8</sup> What is rather different in different countries is the institutional political opportunity structure, which in this case, for instance, is far more hostile to New Religious Movements such as New Age in Germany than it is in the U.S.<sup>9</sup> However, this is one of the variables whose impact I choose to ignore due to space restrictions in this paper, just as I also exclude other (possibly) important variables, like urban-rural differences from analysis here.

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Luhmann (1992) for an elaboration of this assertion.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Beckford (1981: 253f).

## Organizational Outlook of New Age and Lesbian Feminism

The organizational underpinnings of the New Age movement, while still being crucial for movement success, play a different role than is usually attributed to them in resource mobilization or political process accounts.

Classic political process theory suggests that movement success is first and foremost brought about by a strong informal network among its constituents.<sup>10</sup> This network supplants and translates into formal organizations, which are the backbone of movement efficacy. Persons in the lower echelons of the social strata usually lack both the material resources and the organizational skill to erect powerful organizational structures, which explains, why there are virtually no “poor people’s movements” lacking external benefactors.<sup>11</sup> On top, there usually does not exist any prior network among the most deprived strata.

There also does not seem to exist a strong network among most New Agers, but still there is a strong web of New Age organizations: *The New Age Yellow Pages* list about 40,000 organizations. New Age differs sharply in the network aspect from other New Social Movements: Empirical studies on the network structure of these movements have emphasized the importance of personal network ties between the movement members for the latter’s successful development.<sup>12</sup> Hence, the question becomes, how organizations for New Age still could develop.

### New Age: Business Organizations

One promising way to explain the latter phenomenon is to analyze the relationship of social movement organizations and their members to the larger social movement and its constituents. Unlike in other social movements, most New Age organizations are not run by movement members in their spare time, but rather by movement entrepreneurs in the true sense.<sup>13</sup> While certainly a

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Bearman (1993); Bearman & Everett (1993); Kim & Bearman (1997); Diani & Lodi (1988: 115); Donati (1984: 843); Fantasia (1988); Friedman & McAdam (1992: 158); Gould (1993); Hechter (1987: 47); Jenkins (1983: 535); Klandermans (1990: 131); ; McAdam (1982; McAdam (1986); McAdam (1988); McAdam & Poulsen (1993; McAdam (1994: 43); Marx Feree (1992: 39); McCarthy & Zald (1987 [1977]: 20f); Marwell, Oliver & Pahl (1988: 502); Marwell & Oliver (1993); Snow & Oliver (1995: 574); Zwick (1990: 68).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Piven & Cloward (1977); Cress & Snow (1996: 1104ff).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Donati (1984: 843); Friedman & McAdam (1992: 158); Klandermans (1990: 131); Kriesi (1988: 53, Table 4, p.54); Schmitt (1990: 117ff).

<sup>13</sup> See McCarthy & Zald (1987 [1977]) for the terminology used in this paper.

substantial number of these entrepreneurs do share most of the movement goals, for most of them their business is their only means of financial support. This dependency on business success of the movement organization is in stark contrast to the experiences of movement leaders in other New Social Movements, such as the women's movement. The former usually enjoy a far greater success in traditional career venues, in particular the professions, and, thus are able to devote their resources to the movement regardless of the financial payoff.

The pattern can be illustrated by the career trajectories of the most public leaders of the two movements in question. Most recently, Deepak Chopra and Andrew Weil represent New Age most strongly in the media discourse. While both did actually receive a degree a traditional academic field, namely medicine, there exists virtually no institutional affiliation of neither with academia. Rather both present their M.D. titles as symbol of their legitimacy, while at the same time they have chosen to depart the academic field and instead focused on their respective businesses. Thus, their success depends heavily on the expansion of their clientele, read: recruitment and retention of movement members.

### **Lesbian Feminism: Institutionally Supported Volunteerism**

Consider, on the other hand, Catherine MacKinnon and Adrienne Rich as media figures representing Lesbian Feminism. Much less publicized in media intended for a general audience they are omnipresent in academic journals. Both hold high profile positions in academic field: MacKinnon, who has obtained a B.A. from Smith College, a J.D. from Yale Law School, and a Ph.D. in political science from Yale University and held positions at UCLA, University of Chicago, Harvard, Yale and Stanford University, is professor for law at University of Michigan and co-editor of the Yale Law Journal. Rich has received an abundant amount of academic awards and teaches at the University of Pennsylvania. Compare those Ivy league records to the appearances of Weil as guest lecturer at the University of Arizona<sup>14</sup> and Chopra's own private "university" in Encinitas, California.

Those career differences between the prominent figures are not accidental. There is a wealth of institutionalized opportunities for Lesbian Feminists.<sup>15</sup> They can recur to departments for Gender

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. *Time*, May 12, 1997, p. 71.

<sup>15</sup> Whittier's (1997, Fn. 4) listing of radical feminist organizations in Columbus, Ohio, for instance, contains mainly university-affiliated groups.

Studies or Gay and Lesbian Studies established at most American universities. That means they can gain valuable experiences benefiting the movement in an environment that is not directly related to movement success. I am not only talking of those persons that can enhance the strength of the movement, while teaching in those and other university departments and, thus, at least partially independent of immediate economic success. The existence of these departments furthermore lays a fertile ground for Lesbian Feminist recruitments and mobilizations. Gay or women's studies' seminars frequently bring together like minded persons for the first time, thus creating first network ties. Likewise the university environment usually includes meeting spaces, the most central tangible resource for emerging movements.<sup>16</sup> On top, the establishment of academic institutions that visibly employ movement participants adds legitimacy to the movement causes. It can even be argued that there is a considerable number of students that acquires resources that help the represent movement goals, while at the same time these students can pursue their own professional careers, that may or may not be related to movement activities. Thus, many Lesbian Feminist activists and organizers are fairly independent of the actual movement success and growth. To clarify, I am not contending that Gender or Gay and Lesbian Studies are - partly publicly funded - disguised movement organizations, but I rather suggest that those departments deliver the organizational underpinnings, which facilitate the development movement networks. At the same time, they supply the institutional resources that enable potential movement members to succeed in traditional career paths. Thus, there is ample opportunity for potential future movement entrepreneurs to acquire both cultural and material resources crucial for movement success without salvaging the possibility of economic success in spite of movement failure.

In contrast, neither New Age organizations nor its representatives are rooted in established institutions. At best, New Age utilizes the cultural symbols of these institutions to gain legitimacy, but there is virtually no organizational overlapping with academia or any other powerful collective actors within the polity. Almost the only support New Age derives from the institutional framework is the establishment of a market economy.

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. Cress & Snow (1996).

## Implications for Movement Goals

These differences of social positions of Lesbian Feminist and New Age movement entrepreneurs translate into different goals of their social movement organizations. The most important goal of New Age organizations, for the most time private businesses, is recruitment, while there exists no clear defined specific instrumental goal.<sup>17</sup> Continual recruitment, which secures customers, is necessary for the survival of these private businesses. What is more, most New Age businesses deliver private, rather than collective goods to its clients with at best a blurred notion of a spiritual transformation of society in the background. One might contend, that indeed New Age organizations attract new members with selective incentives with the only collective goal of the creation of a movement identity, whose only payoff seems to be a sense of belonging for New Age members.

Lesbian Feminists, on the contrary, usually are concerned with collective goals without any immediate financial payoff for the activist. Their organizations are staffed with volunteers, rather than professional entrepreneurs dependent on economic success.

A very crude Marxist interpretation of these differences between the goals of the two movements in question thus could point to social locations of New Age participants. Participants in New Religious Movements usually are less resourceful than their counterparts from the New Social Movements.<sup>18</sup> Not only do they lack class consciousness, but their movement, i.e., New Age in this case, faces formidable obstacles in the development of class consciousness, because of its institutional environment: The social movement organizations of New Age as opposed to Lesbian Feminism, or all other classic New Social Movement for that matter, cannot draw on institutional resources, which in turn forces movement entrepreneurs to employ business techniques, the only possible route to accumulate material resources given the capitalist mode of production. This “pure” market environment, however, is highly conducive only to the production of private goods, which prohibits the emergence of class consciousness, a collective good.<sup>19</sup> This also explains, why the decidedly apolitical prosperity and health currents of New Age have flourished recently, while other

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. Johnston (1980: 336) for a similar argumentation regarding Transcendental Meditation, a New Age organization.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Barker (1989: 14); Hess (1993: 5); Knoblauch (1989: 517); Robbins (1988: 4, 44); Schneider (1991: 53); Stenger (1990: 400); Turner (1991 [1983]: 200).

<sup>19</sup> This is a reinterpretation of Olson's (1965) classic argument.

currents less supportive of the status quo, e.g., theosophy and New Physics, have remained on the same level or even have lost ground.<sup>20</sup> In this vein the number references to the New Age health current in those analyzed papers for which there are records in both years rose from 39 in 1988 to 68 in 1996 (11 and 15% of all records, respectively). In the same period the reference to the science current remained about the same (34 in 1988 and 32 in 1996).

Let me now leave the Marxist framework and discuss some other implications of the New Age organizational setting of New Age for its collective identity.

### **The Impact of Organization on Collective Identity**

The properties of the organizational network of New Age contain some quite important implications for New Age identity. In what follows I will analyze, what are the effects on both type and viability of a collective identity.

I will consider first, which type of identity suits best the different organizational forms, since, as I argue, different types already entail different degrees of viability, the second quality of collective identities I will try to connect to organizational form.

### **Typology of Identity Codes**

The collective identity types I am employing here have been developed by Shmuel N. Eisenstadt and Bernd Giesen. They distinguish between universalistically, primordially and traditionally coded identities. Primordialist identity codes appear as nature to the vast majority of the audience. Many Lesbian Feminists try to essentialize their gender identity and thereby integrate primordialist elements in their identity. Traditionalist identity markers on the other hand emphasize *la mêmeme*, the historical continuity of an identity. Finally, in universalist identity codes there exists a special relation of the collectivity to the sacred that is, of course not necessarily consciously, utilized to solidify a collective identity. This type of identity formation does not necessarily appeal to what is commonly labeled religion, but might equally refer to secular “eternal” institutions, such as “progress” or science. New Age seems to draw heavily on codes of this type.

According to Eisenstadt and Giesen all three ideal types entail elective affinities to specific forms of relationships between individuals and/or groups, both inside and outside the demarcated

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. Heelas (1996: 45, 126).

collectivity. Primordialism is coupled with ingroup egalitarianism, while at the same time their boundaries remain virtually impermeable for outsiders.

Conversely, traditionalist codifications allow for temporal permeability, but simultaneously promote hierarchical relationships within the ingroup: The more one complies with traditions marking the boundaries, the more one is located at the center of the collectivity. Commemorative rituals that frequently relate to mythical origins of the collectivity, such as “founding fathers” or “historic” events like revolutions or, preferably, battles, enhance the collective identity markers of the traditionalist type.<sup>21</sup>

Finally, collective identity codes that rely on a presumed special relation of the collectivity to the sacred display universalistic tendencies, i.e. their boundaries are most easily permeable. Although they usually imply notions of “laity” and “clergy” as hierarchical subgroups of the ingroup, they therefore seem to qualify best for the establishment of emerging collective identities, who still require an enlargement of their constituency. However, it is exactly the potential universality, which puts them on the fringes of most identities and exposes them to threat of becoming traditionalized.

Let me now elaborate, which of the above codes are utilized by New Age.

## Universalism

“I don’t want to frighten away my mainstreamers.”

New Age store owner Jacquie Glasner<sup>22</sup>

“A sort of satanic ‘Pentecost’ of New Age occultic, cultic and Eastern mystical ideas is sweeping the globe.”

Paul McGuire, fundamentalist Christian author<sup>23</sup>

“In New Age circles, where paradigm shifts are as common as carrots...”

Philip Zalesky, staff writer, *The New York Times*<sup>24</sup>

In order to be economically successful, New Age entrepreneurs need to attract large numbers of potential participants, while at the same time the potential for movement activism, read: competition, should be held low. Hence, even more than in other movements a proliferation of movement goals,

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. Giesen (1996: 12).

<sup>22</sup> In: Carla Hall: “Tehachapi’s Mind Trip,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 20, 1996, p. A-3.

<sup>23</sup> <<http://www.charismamag.com:80/stories/cn196105.htm>>, January 12, 1997.

<sup>24</sup> Philip Zaleski: “Planet Hayden,” *The New York Times*, September 19, 1996, p. C-32.

read: products, is beneficial. A universalist identity delivers just that. It does not exclude anybody a priori, while at the same time the usually stronger allegiance to traditional or exclusionary primordially coded identities is avoided. Unfortunately, universalism blurs the movement's *ipséité*, i.e. the delimitation of the collective identity from its environment.

### **Movement Discourse**

New Age members are confronted with a starkly proliferated social movement industry, whose strength it is to engage successfully in "product diversification." Take the magazines catering to a New Age audience: There are about one hundred different commercial magazines available in Southern California appealing to a variety of New Age currents. Of those, only the *New Age Magazine* and *Going Bunkers?* are addressed to the entirety of the movement. Other magazines address very specific niches of New Age: There is, for instance *Green Egg* for pagans, *The Angelic Messenger* for persons interested in angels, *Shaman's Drum* for Native American healers,<sup>25</sup> and *Sage Woman* for spiritual Feminists. Some magazines are even more focused: *Sedona! Journal of Emergence*, e.g., exclusively deals with the power of electromagnetic vortexes in Northern Arizona; *The Green Man* addresses only male pagans. Although it is "understood" (by the audiences) that all of these papers belong to the realm of New Age, there is hardly any discussion between the writers and producers of different persuasion, although, they frequently hold vastly incompatible views. The bulk of these magazines is professionally edited and is printed on better marketable glossy paper.

Compare that to Lesbian Feminist publications: Most of them are addressed to the entirety of the movement within a certain geographical area. The views expressed within each of those newsletters differ frequently sharply. There are a few expressly commercial Lesbian Feminist Magazines, such as *Girlfriends*, but even those magazines encourage intra-movement conflict.

The discourse on the internet displays the very same structures. Although New Age businesses do refer to different New Age branches, hardly any conflictual discourse takes place. Consider "talk.religion.newage," the only newsgroup that explicitly is dedicated to New Age. There are some controversial postings cross-posted from "alt.support.ex-cult," a newsgroup dedicated to

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<sup>25</sup> Note, that shamans in the original sense only meant Tungu medicine men from Siberia (cf. Benjamin Epstein: "Shamanic Frequencies," *Los Angeles Times (Orange County Edition)*, May 16, 1996, p. E-1). Such ignorance on their special subject is typical for New Age groups.

countermovement activities. However, most genuine New Agers do not reply to postings made by anti-cult movement members. Most intra-movement controversies, on the other hand, are based on personal animosities,<sup>26</sup> rather than disagreements about movement goals or practices.

The “*alt.feminism*,” “*soc.women(.lesbian-and-bi)*” newsgroups on the other hand contain a considerable number of postings concerned with controversial lesbian feminist issues. Likewise, personal websites of Lesbian Feminists frequently contain references to intra- and inter-movement adversaries. One website<sup>27</sup> by a self-declared Feminist, for instance, is set up solely to offer a host of links to both what the author calls “traditional antifeminists,” i.e. representatives of the countermovement and adversaries within the polity, and “faux feminists,” Lesbian Feminists on the “false” side in the debate on pornography within the movement.

Since it has been argued that New Age is primarily articulating itself on the book market,<sup>28</sup> let us finally have a look at the view of New Age in New Age books. “Anything can work,”<sup>29</sup> proclaims Marilyn Ferguson, theorist of the New Age and suggests biofeedback, autogenic training, music, social movements, Self-Help networks, Zen, Tibetan Buddhism, Christianity, yoga, *est (erhard seminar training)*, *Silva Mind Control*, theosophy, psychotherapies, Gestalt therapy, T’ai Chi Ch’uan, Rolfing, wilderness retreats as appropriate means *inter alia* for a New Age transformation. Even more extreme, Shirley MacLaine, in the media most frequently quoted spokesperson for New Age, asserts her famous “everybody is god,”<sup>30</sup> that explicitly puts no restraints on attitudes or behavior. For Matthew Fox, by now excommunicated Catholic New Age priest, even this universalism does not suffice. He also wants a “social conscience”<sup>31</sup> for the New Age movement, appealing openly to environmentalists and feminists.

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<sup>26</sup> This communication trait has become so omnipresent in computer mediated communication, that even a technical term, “flaming,” has been developed to describe it. Cf. Spender (1995: 196f).

<sup>27</sup> <<http://www.webcom.com/~yeolde/wlo/antifem.html#faux>>, May 12, 1997.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Knoblauch (1989: 506). Blumer (1951: 62) even considers general social movements as characterized through a literature.

<sup>29</sup> Ferguson (1980: 86).

<sup>30</sup> MacLaine (1983: 282).

<sup>31</sup> Robert di Veroli: “New Age’ Priest to Speak Here Despite silencing,” *San Diego Union-Tribune*, November 5, 1988, p. A-12.

In sum, the New Age movement identity contains an abundance of universalist elements, which partly contradict themselves. One would thus at first expect that these contradictions are exploited by the countermovements.

### **Countermovement Reaction**

Surprisingly though, the bulk of Fundamentalist Christian and anti-cult movement activists seems to be unfamiliar with New Age organizations and their internal discourse and its resulting contradictions, even though they are presented as experts on the topic. For instance, about every other pamphlet on New Age contains references to *Scientology* as one of the most powerful organizations of New Age. However, I could not find any reference to this organization in any of the approximately two hundred New Age organizations I surveyed. On the other hand, the seemingly most efficient New Age businesses, *Transcendental Meditation* and the *Landmark Forum* and its predecessor *est*, are hardly ever mentioned.<sup>32</sup>

Rather than depicting internal inconsistencies, countermovements to New Age focus nearly exclusively on the external negative effects. Fundamentalist Christians view the New Age movement as force from Satan, while the anti-cult movement focuses on the “brainwashing” capacities of various New Age sects or, at best, debunks the unscientific methods employed by the movement. I will return to this practice below. For now, it is sufficient to remark that countermovements do not effectively threaten the universalist image of New Age.

### **Media Discourse**

The eclecticism that marks the universalist aspect of New Age identity explains to some extent the concomitant ambiguity over surrounding the New Age goals in the view of the audiences. *Newsweek*, for instance, subtitles the cover story on the collective suicide of *Heaven’s Gate* members with:

“How Herff Applewhite, a sexually confused, would-be apostle, led a flock of lost New Age dreamers to their deaths.”<sup>33</sup>

*Time*’s concurrently released story on *Heaven’s Gate* did not contain any reference “New Age” at all. Instead, it subtitled five weeks later:

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<sup>32</sup> My own empirical observations and Heelas (1996: 16, 109) support this assertion.

<sup>33</sup> *Newsweek*, April 7, 1997.

“Medicine Man Dr. Andrew Weil has made New Age remedies popular. Is it sound advice or snake oil?”<sup>34</sup>

While the two normally barely distinguishable magazines cannot agree even on compatible definitions of New Age, they allude in this extremely brief passages alone to a variety of beliefs and practices when referring to the seemingly well defined New Age term, among them homosexuality (“sexually confused”<sup>35</sup>), pseudo-Christianity (“would-be apostle”), American Indians (“medicine man”), traditional science (“Dr.”) and implicitly the UFO cult. To be fair, all those currents have frequently been related to the New Age, but they hardly define the collective identity most New Agers themselves ascribe to the movement.

The mainstream (print) media not only depict New Age as ambiguous phenomenon, they also evaluate this ambiguity and most of the time negatively. “Mumbo-jumbo,” “babblespeak,” “mishmash” are expressions frequently used in association with New Age. Coupled with the weak status of most New Age protagonists, this leads to the predominant reception of New Age as being not a serious contender in neither the political nor cultural sphere. In 1996, of the 222 articles in *Los Angeles Times*, *The New York Times*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *San Diego Union-Tribune*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* that contained a n y expressed evaluation of the New Age movement 78, i.e. 35% did not take the movement or its goals or practices seriously.<sup>36</sup> On the other hand, only two articles (1%) tried to resolve the apparent ambiguities via an internal differentiation of the movement. There are at least two reasons for this unfavorable image in the media. One is the ignorance of most journalists on the New Age phenomenon. As one journalist covering religion (sic!) for *The New York Times* puts it in a review of a book by Fundamentalist Christians on New Age:

“[T]he authors do introduce a reader like myself to New Age thinkers and groups that influence millions but are largely unknown to elite culture.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> *Time*, May 12, 1997.

<sup>35</sup> It has been widely speculated in the media that Herff Applewhite let himself be castrated, since he could not deal with his alleged homosexuality.

<sup>36</sup> For the German speaking papers published in polities far more hostile to New Religious Movements the ratio is even much worse: Six of the seven (85%) evaluating articles in *Süddeutsche Zeitung* do not consider New Age a serious phenomenon. For *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* the respective figure is five of eight (63%).

<sup>37</sup> Peter Steinfelds: “Idolatries of the 1980ies,” *The New York Times*, April 17, 1988, p. 7/28.

The second reason is the absence of any umbrella organization partly resulting from the fact that New Age truly is organized as a social movement industry, not only in the sociological meaning of the word. The competitor relationship between the New Age organizations impedes the development of such an organization. Worse still, the movement industry, so to speak, is organized in a perfect market, i.e. there is no dominating competitor or group of competitors. Thus, in 1988 and 1996 the analyzed media mentioned only three organizations - *est*, *silva mind control* and *Transcendental Meditation (TM)* - more than once and none of them more than twice. Interestingly enough, the of the 102 New Age shops I surveyed in Southern California, none carried material by or on *silva mind control*, only one on *est*, and five on *TM*. Hence there is no organization that represents, legitimately or not, New Age to the media and thereby could solve the boundary problem universalism creates. I will return to this problem below.

## Traditionalism

“New Age wisdom is essentially a revival of ancient wisdom”

New Age adherent Burt Wilson<sup>38</sup>

“When the tenets of the New Age Movements are examined, they are not really new at all,”

*Probe Ministries*, a Fundamentalist Christian Organization<sup>39</sup>

“Throughout history people have believed in mumbo jumbo.”

Ed Regis, journalist, in *The New York Times*<sup>40</sup>

Universalism by itself is too little appealing to a wider audience. Assuming for a moment that most persons in modern society have difficulties to create a consistent personal identity, universalism for its lack of ability to create difference is a weak collective identity that cannot successfully enhance personal identity, when it is integrated into the latter. Historization, i.e. the projection of a long and continuous movement history into a collective identity regardless of its empirical validity, or traditionalization of a collective identity, on the other hand, can deliver those presuming invariant reference points, with the help of which a stable personal identity can be created.

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<sup>38</sup> In a letter to the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, February 21, 1988, p. 7.

<sup>39</sup> Anderson (1997), <<http://www.probe.org/newage.htm>>, May 11, 1997.

<sup>40</sup> Ed Regis: “Speak of the Devil,” *The New York Times*, November 17, 1996, p.7/32.

## Protagonists

Friends and foes of the New Age movement alike take part in this historization. Nearly all introductions into New Age directed at the general public, both by movement supporters and the countermovement dominated by fundamentalist Christian organizations, include passages like the following posted on the WorldWideWeb by a movement member:

“The New Age movement is hardly novel! Its philosophy is rooted in ancient traditions, sometimes based on mythical experiences, each within different context.”<sup>41</sup>

This venue successfully circumvents the fact that New Age really is of recent origin. Although frequently ascribed to the counterculture of the 60ies, I would date its starting point in the late 70ies, due to the fact that there has been no reference to any New Age movement in *The New York Times* from 1972 until mid-1977, the only newspaper, for which such early computerized records are available. By coining the practices New Age employs as historically rooted, ancient or even natural, while only a new label, New Age, has been attached, they try to integrate traditionalized elements into its collective identity -with considerable success.

These blueprint of these assertions can be found in the theoretical writings of New Age proponents at its inception. Marilyn Ferguson, one author frequently cited in scientific treatments of the New Age, but of seemingly inferior importance for actual New Agers, writes with respect to the seemingly dominant organizational form of New Age: “[A] twentieth century version of the ancient tribe or kinship has appeared: the network,”<sup>42</sup> traditionalizing one of the presumed<sup>43</sup> central aspects of New Age. Ferguson even rationalizes the superiority of traditional over primordial identities, “identities are constituted more truly by our beliefs than by our bodies,”<sup>44</sup> and presents the amorphousness as virtue, rather than vice, claiming because there exists no New Age manifesto, New Age delivers a less fragile identity as other historical social movement.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Rogge (1997), <<http://www.xs4all.nl/~wichm/newage3.html>>, April 4, 1997.

<sup>42</sup> Ferguson (1980: 213).

<sup>43</sup> As has been clarified above, I believe that one of the most striking empirical aspects of New Age is the lack of a substantial network.

<sup>44</sup> Ferguson (1980: 112).

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Ferguson (1980: 229).

## Antagonists

Countermovement organizations and spokespersons agree on the historicity of New Age practices:

“The first thing we must understand about the New Age Movement is that it is not new. It is a compilation of old myths, of ancient Buddhism, all dusted off and translated into high-tech Western scientific terms. What has been coined the New Age Movement by the mass media is really the combining and blending of various spiritual movements that are centuries old.”<sup>46</sup>

Christian Fundamentalist Paul McGuire is not the only New Age adversary, who attests to the ancience of New Age practices. Another Christian Bulletin, the *Watchman Expositor* even seems to imply that New Age supporters would like to conceal the presumably ancient roots of New Age: “The New Age movement: Is it really new? [...] Satan is very deceitful, but not very original.”<sup>47</sup> Nearly 80% of all approximately six hundred accessible WorldWideWeb sites dedicated to New Age as recovered by the search engines endorsed by *Netscape*<sup>48</sup> contained such allusions to the traditionality of New Age or at least the practices embraced by New Age.

## Audiences

The (print) media, however, are more skeptical about the historic character of New Age and its practices. Most media accounts on New Age do prolong the historical lifespan of the movement itself into the late sixties' counterculture. In 1996 and 1988, 41 out of 45 articles that discuss the origin of New Age point to the counterculture, three go even beyond the 60ies - one to the beatniks, one to theosophy in the end of the last century and one to the 1920ies - and only one, in my view correctly, points to the early 80ies. It is also acknowledged widely, that New Age does employ practices that predate the label by far: “Elements of the New Age movement [...] incorporate and commercialize some traditional practices,”<sup>49</sup> asserts Rick Vanderknyff in the *Los Angeles Times*, for instance. Fifteen articles in 1996 and twenty in 1988 contain similar phrases.

But, at the same time congruent with the non-seriousness image of New Age, it is claimed that those practices are not authentically employed by New Agers. This reproach of artificiality is directly

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<sup>46</sup> Paul McGuire: “*Tracing the Sources of the NEW AGE*,” <<http://www.charismamag.com:80/stories/cn196105.htm>>, January 12, 1997.

<sup>47</sup> <<http://rampages.onramp.net/~watchman/chair.htm>>, March 7, 1997.

<sup>48</sup> <<http://www.netscape.com/search.html>>, February 1, 1997.

<sup>49</sup> Rick Vanderknyff: “He Wants Us to Get the Connection,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 19, 1994 p. F-2.

contained in ten articles in 1988 and eleven in 1996. Indirectly is the same objection also made in the emphasis of commercialization of New Age. The figures for this accusation are 41 and 38 articles in 1988 and 1996, respectively.

### **Efficacy**

Hence, once again the business structure of the New Age movement impedes the development of an unproblematic identity. But there is also a tenet of the ideology of New Age partly brought about by the business structure of its organizations, that - at least in rational choice framework - supports the development of a viability of the identity, and that is its efficacy. Again, both movement and countermovement agree on the image of New Age as being economically efficient. Much of the talk on New Age in the countermovement discourse centers around the extremely high efficacy of the movement. Most participants in “*alt.support.ex-cult*” agree on the sociologically long ago discredited conversion theory, that assumes that cults, and New Age is a cult in this sense, are capable of recruiting new members via brainwashing. This theoretical conjecture frequently is supported by seemingly authentic recollections of former participants in one of the New Age organizations.

“After leaving the New Age movement I realized that a demon was oppressing me.”<sup>50</sup>

“My cult involvement was included in a cultic relationship [...] in the WE&A<sup>51</sup> organization.”<sup>52</sup>

“A well known psychiatrist and a psychologist went undercover to study the [New Age] cult I was in. They both concluded that the leader of the group used strong hypnosis techniques as well as techniques that were mentally abusive. The psychiatrist had a psychotic break the evening after his visit. He had to be hospitalized. [...] All the journals and studies you read will never, ever give you the knowledge to know what we have been through.”<sup>53</sup>

The list of these and similar quotations is much longer.

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<sup>50</sup> <<http://web.idirect.com/~bhph95/newage2.htm>>, February 20, 1997.

<sup>51</sup> WE&A (Werner Erhard and Associates) is a derogatory acronym for *est* (*erhard seminar training*) and its successor organization, *Landmark Forum*. It alludes to the fact that most defectors of this organization, do no longer consider it a religion, but rather a business void of any spirituality.

<sup>52</sup> Posted on April 25, 1997 by p.fitz@worldnet.att.net to *inter alia talk.religion.newage* and *alt.support.ex-cult*.

<sup>53</sup> Posted on April 25, 1997 by skye@comcat.com to *inter alia talk.religion.newage* and *alt.support.ex-cult*.

The print media in this case suggest two aspects of movement efficacy. First, many newspaper authors reiterate the (mostly unfounded) conversion and brainwashing stories of the anti-cult movement. They do so sometimes even explicitly. The *Heaven's Gate* suicide in April 1997 is a case in point. Most stories start with a recapitulation of the infamous *Jonestown* episode that happened almost a decade earlier and bears no ideological, organizational, or personal relationship with *Heaven's Gate*. Neither there have been any apparent situational analogies that would have justified the reference.<sup>54</sup> Although most victims were well above the age of forty (37 out of 39, with the youngest victim aged 28), the image of misled youth was upheld. To be fair, early police releases also described the victims as in their teen and twens, but within 24 hours this mistake, most likely made under the dominant image of New Religious Movements being authoritarian communities that convert misled youth quasi-coercive into their beliefs, as it has been successfully constructed by the anti-cult movement.

But, there is also a usually more positively judged efficacy of the New Age omnipresent in the media and that is the apparently above average business success. In 1996, 31 articles mentioned the trendiness of New Age and the concomitant financial prosperity of New Age business projects, while only one mentioned the (factual) decline in revenue in New Age stores. Clearly, the business character of New Age movement organizations has prompted this image of financial success.

Thus, an integral part of the New Age identity both from outside and inside the movement, is, much to the comfort of rational choice theorists, the high effectiveness of movement tactics, regardless, if one evaluates these tactics negatively or positively in moral terms.

### **Viability of Movement Identity**

What consequences entail the above qualities of New Age identity for its viability? I contend that there exist masterframes, namely metanarratives that have moved beyond empirical scrutiny, that are particularly useful in the construction process of viable collective identities.<sup>55</sup> The strongest of these

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<sup>54</sup> It is well known, that the *Jonestown* tragedy, a combination of mass suicide and mass murder of several hundred persons of a sectarian community in the late 1970ies, had a negative effects for all New Religious Movements in the mass media and from most states. (Cf. Richardson [1983: 104])

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Somers (1995: 255-257) for the notion of "metanarrative" and cf. McAdam (1994: 41-43) for that of a "masterframe." I consider "metanarratives" a generic (analytical) category, while "masterframes" is the set of the actual empirical frames (Gamson et al. [1992: 375]) propose the same

metanarratives currently is primordialized national citizenship identity has become a metanarrative instituted on state and inter-state level as well as in the scientific community.<sup>56</sup>

Thus, currently codes of primordialist and quasi-primordialist traditional quality have become those codes most likely to become metanarratives. Once a primordialist identity for the organization that (by definition) shall override most other allegiances, namely the state and civil society as its presumed originator, is adopted, all primordially coded identities acquire a strong legitimacy advantage. Essentialist identity codes, obtained via ‘frame transformation’ or ‘frame extension,’ already have become prevalent in public discourse.<sup>57</sup> Queer and gender politics have become essentialized to an extent that is worth their comparison with the classic ethnicities.<sup>58</sup>

A predominantly primordially coded identity has become thus the most unproblematic collective identity. What is more, due to the apparent historical continuity of primordial identities the modern individual can with its help easily define his or her own personal *mêmete* which in turn heightens the allegiance to the movement carrying such identities. For instance, despite the well-documented obstacles women face in internet communication,<sup>59</sup> one can easily find about two hundred personal websites of self-identified Lesbian Feminists.

The search for New Agers, on the other hand, is nearly in vein, despite the fact that New Age definitely has more total supporters than Lesbian Feminism. Almost all New Age postings, however, are by New Age businesses. The bulk of Lesbian Feminist organizations on the web in contrast can mostly be attributed to volunteer work. More than half of the Lesbian Feminist web addresses end with the “.org” and “.edu” extensions, while four fifths of New Age oriented websites contain the “.com” extension. While some of these differences might be attributed to the higher institutional and cultural resources at the command of Lesbian Feminists, the conspicuous absence of even those

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distinction, that meet the metanarrative criterion. Gamson’s (1988: 220, 227) ‘more enduring ‘cultural themes’’ fulfill the same function.

<sup>56</sup> That nation states promote nationality principle seems self-evident (cf. Anderson’s [1983] elaboration on “official nationalism”); for the inter-state level cf. Barkin & Cronin (1994: 126, 128); Calhoun (1995: 253); Hobsbawm (1990: 97f); Soysal (1996: 11f, 16f); with respect to the scientific community see Soysal (1994: 5) with respect to the predominant melange of national and citizenship identity in scientific discourse.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Gitlin (1994: 153).

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Duggan (1992: 15f); Epstein (1994: 194); Kimmel (1993).

<sup>59</sup> Cf., e.g., Brail (1996: 146); Hall (1996: 154); Spender (1995); Star (1996: 34f); Sutton (1996:176).

New Agers highly attracted to high technology such as UFOlogists on the personal website directories testifies to weak allegiance of New Age supporters to their movement.

Worse, still, many of the more prominent New Agers try to distance themselves from the movement, once they gained strong commercial success. William Ackerman, co-founder, of the New Age music label *Windham Hill*, for instance claims with respect to New Age:

“I think of monotonal, soporific music, I almost bleed when I hear the term”<sup>60</sup>

despite the fact that only through sales to New Agers that huge success of the label was possible. He is not alone: In 1988 one can find in the analyzed newspaper articles 13 from the outside defined New Agers distancing themselves from the movement.

### **Conclusion: New Age - A High Volume, Low Impact Identity**

That poor people's movements face formidable obstacles in creating successful movements has been well documented.<sup>61</sup> This paper, I hope, shows that movements, whose potential adherents do not command such dire resource basis as does, for instance, a movement for the unemployed, but still are deprived of strong institutional support and at the same time are not wealthy, may be successful in creating a movement identity, but one that is essentially ineffectual in implementing movement goals in larger society. One reason for this might be, that such movements create their organizations on a market basis, which in turn prompts a strongly universalist identity that allows only for a weak allegiance of the movement members. The business character of the movement also shapes the outside view of the New Age movement as a commercialized, successful, yet not authentic movement. This image helps, on the one hand to sustain the movement, but renders at the same time any attempt to render the movement into a serious political contender infeasible.

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<sup>60</sup> In: Zan Stewart: “New Age Music Money Machine,” *Los Angeles Times Magazine*, January 31, 1988, p.22.

<sup>61</sup> See Piven & Cloward's (1977) seminal study.

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