Making the Invisible Visible: Prophetic Drama as a Tactic for Social Change.

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Abstract

What possibilities of success exist for those who respond to the destructive trajectory of their societies by doing things like walking about naked for a few years, marrying a shrine prostitute, wearing an ox yoke, dramatizing a foreign invasion, or lugging a stone around their city? The purpose of this paper is to speak to that question. My central argument in this paper is that symbolic actions, which I will refer to as "prophetic drama," can yield a range of tactical successes for those who aim to change their societies.

"The first task of an activist," Nadine Bloch has said, "is to make the invisible visible."[1] Contemporary activists do this, as did the Hebrew prophets of the Old Testament. Sometimes the prophets spoke words they received from God to reveal the unseen. But other times, God called on them to engage in symbolic behaviors that would demonstrate by their actions what God wanted God's people to see. Just as a Hebrew prophet walked the streets naked and another walked the streets wearing a yoke like an ox, so a contemporary activist might walk the streets bearing a burden that would make visible the burdens of racism that African Americans carry each day.

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[1] N. Bloch, "Make the Invisible Visible," in *Beautiful Trouble: A Toolbox for Revolution*, eds. A. Boyd and D. O. Mitchell (New York, NY: OR Books, 2013), 272–275.

The Prophet Isaiah was living in Judah when Sargon II, King of Assyria, captured Ashdod. The domain of Assyria had been violently expanding and dominating the known world through ferocious military campaigns and draconian, imperial policy. News of yet another Assyrian victory must have threatened the hope of the already frightened Mesopotamian states—like Israel and Judah—to maintain their sovereignty. To avoid imperial takeover, several of these non-imperial states "sought to organize a major rebellion and to elicit aid from Egypt."[2]

At around this time, the word of the Lord came to Isaiah: "Go, and loose the sackcloth from your loins and take your sandals off your feet" (Isaiah 20:2). Isaiah did what he was commanded, walking about naked and barefoot in Judah for three years to show what would happen to the very powers the Judahites hoped would save them from Assyrian rule:[3]

> Then the Lord said, "Just as my servant Isaiah has walked naked and barefoot for three years as a sign and a portent against Egypt and Ethiopia, so shall the king of Assyria lead away the Egyptians as captives and the Ethiopians as exiles, both the young and the old, naked and barefoot, with buttocks uncovered, to the shame of Egypt. And they shall be dismayed and confounded because of Ethiopia their hope and of Egypt their boast. In that day the inhabitants of this coastland will say, 'See, this is what has happened to those in whom we hoped and to whom we fled for help and deliverance from the king of Assyria! And we, how shall we escape?'" (Isaiah 20:3–6, CEB)

[2] J. M. Miller and J. H. Hayes, "Judean History from Ahaz to Amon," in *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah* (Louisville, Ken.: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 406–407.
[3] Miller and Hays (406–409) correlate the suppression of the Ashdod rebellion in 712–711 B.C.E. with the events described in Isaiah 20, suggesting that the process of taking Ashdod was a protracted conflict, occurring in stages over time. Judah was among the revolutionary conspirators: "Punitive action was probably taken against Judah for its participation in the revolt" (407).

Isaiah and his contemporaries—including Micah, Amos, and Hosea—announced that no world power could save Israel or Judah from foreign takeover because they understood the coming defeat of their home states as the inevitable consequence of breaking covenant with YHWH.[4] During the period that Isaiah embarked on his prophetic career, the word of the Lord also came to Hosea: "Go, marry a prostitute and have children of prostitution, for the people of the land commit great prostitution by deserting the Lord" (Hosea 1:2). Hosea did as he was instructed and married a woman who worked as a shrine prostitute named Gomer. When they began having children, YHWH spoke to him again:

> "Name [the firstborn] Jezreel; for in a little while I will punish the house of Jehu for the blood of Jezreel, and I will destroy the kingdom of the house of Israel. On that day I will break the bow of Israel in the Jezreel Valley." Gomer became pregnant again and gave birth to a daughter. Then the Lord said to Hosea, "Name her No Compassion, because I will no longer have compassion on the house of Israel or forgive them" (Hosea 1:4–6).

Centuries after Assyria conquered Israel, a young man from the southern village of Anathoth went roaming about Judah with a report that was similar to Isaiah's. He announced that King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon would lay siege to Jerusalem, destroy the Temple of YHWH, and deport her citizens. Nebuchadnezzar had already made Judah a vassal state of his empire, deporting some of people to Babylon and placing a "king of his liking" on the throne.[5] Nevertheless, the people of Judah remained hopeful that their subjugation to Babylonian hegemony could be reversed. Delegates from Mesopotamian states assembled in Jerusalem, at the invitation of King Zedekiah, to organize a rebellion.

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[4] This understanding of the inevitable trajectory of defeat as divine judgment for covenant infidelity, some scholars suggest, is the result of a Deuteronomistic theology (c.f. Deuteronomy 28).

[5] J. M. Miller and J. H. Hayes, "The Last Years of the Davidic Kingdom," in *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah* (Louisville, Ken.: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 468–469.

Around this time, the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah: "Make a yoke out of straps and crossbars and put it on your neck" (Jeremiah 27:2). Jeremiah did as he was commanded, interrupting the international council to announce: "Bow your neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon; serve him and his people, and you will live" (Jeremiah 27:12).

Meanwhile, across the Chebar River, the word of the Lord came to Ezekiel concerning those to whom Jeremiah was preaching back home in Jerusalem, including the vassal king:

> ...mortal, prepare for yourself an exile's baggage, and go into exile by day in their sight; you shall go like an exile from your place to another place in their sight. Perhaps they will understand, though they are a rebellious house...Dig through the wall in their sight, and carry the baggage through it. In their sight you shall lift the baggage on your shoulder, and carry it out in the dark; you shall cover your face, so that you may not see the land; for I have made you a sign for the house of Israel (Ezekiel 12:2–6).

Ezekiel did as he was commanded. When his compatriots asked him what on earth he was doing, he told them, "This oracle concerns the prince in Jerusalem and all the house of Israel in it...I am a sign for you: as I have done, so shall it be done to them; they shall go into exile, into captivity" (Ezekiel 12:10).

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In the summer of 2016, a young man named Philando Castile was shot by a local police officer in front of his girlfriend and their four-year-old daughter. This tragic, lethal encounter with police was seen by many as a clear instance of racial profiling. Consequently, it became a national headline, sparking widespread protests against police brutality and reinvigorating the Black Lives Matter movement.

Three weeks after Castile's death, I had a vision: I was walking by a park, about a mile from my house, in downtown Pasadena, California. From inside the park, I could hear a street preacher. My curiosity led me to follow the man's voice, and when I came to where the messenger was standing, I saw that the street preacher was me. I was standing next to a large, white granite boulder. On the stone was written all types of racial injustices: the names of victims of police brutality, mass incarceration, housing discrimination. I was reciting whole passages from Isaiah and Revelation, announcing a world full of justice and free of racism.

Then I came back to myself, alone in my living room again, and I began to weep. I was crying because I felt like the vision was an instruction and I did not want to do it. Nevertheless, I found myself stumbling through a classroom door the next day as I tried to fit a rolling flatbed through it with the largest boulder I could manage in tow.

When people asked me why I was lugging a boulder with me, I eventually learned to tell them: "This boulder represents the burden that systemic racism lays on the psyches of many black Americans." I lugged that stone everywhere I went, to make visible a social problem that informs every part of American society and yet remains invisible to many.

To save myself the energy of repeatedly explaining what I was doing and why, I eventually posted about the boulder on Facebook. One commenter asked, "What good will it do?" Whether or not that was a sincere question, it remains an important one, as it speaks to concerns of success. This person's question could be rephrased as follows: What possibilities of success exist for those who respond to the destructive trajectory of their societies by doing things like walking about naked for a few years, marrying a shrine prostitute, wearing an ox yoke, dramatizing a foreign invasion, or lugging a stone around their city? This paper addresses that question.

My central argument in this paper is that symbolic actions like the ones above, which I will refer to as "prophetic drama,"[6] can yield a range of tactical successes for those who aim to change their societies. A frame will need to be laid, however, through which such conceptions of successes may be explored. The first side of that frame clarifies what counts as prophetic drama, as far as this paper is concerned. The second side of that frame highlights some important considerations for any serious conversation about success. Third, I will argue that biblical prophets and contemporary activists aim to make the invisible visible through symbolic actions, but I make a caveat about the distinct versions of success that are likely to exist among the two groups. With that caveat in mind, I view prophetic drama within the terms of the common language of contemporary nonviolent activists: that is, the language of strategy and tactics. At that point, as a conclusion, it will make sense to consider what types of successes social change agents can possibly achieve through prophetic drama.

Defining Prophetic Drama

To explore the utility of symbolic actions in general in efforts at social change is a worthwhile endeavor. This paper, however, is interested in a specific type of symbolic action: prophetic drama. I use the term *prophetic drama* to refer exclusively to instances of embodied, non-ritual, nonverbal communication aimed at delivering a message through symbolic actions. Focusing on prophetic actions in this way creates a distinction between different prophetic prerogatives, such as visions and dreams, sermons and oracles, predictions, parables,

[6] W. D. Stacey, *Prophetic Drama in the Old Testament* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2018). I've borrowed this term from Old Testament scholar W. D. Stacey, who prefers the term *drama* because the language of "sign" and "symbol" seem to him insufficient. I prefer the term *drama* as well because the terminology of "signs" and "symbols" have such technical meanings in the fields of rhetoric and symbology that I'd like to avoid as much confusion as possible. For our purposes here, the minutiae of what distinguishes a "symbol" from a "sign" is not as salient as the utility of the prophet's dramatic, nonverbal communication.

letters, and other forms of written and verbal communication.[7]

The distinction from ritual is also important because a number of regularly occurring, symbolic actions happened in ancient Israelite society at all times. "Every society has its repertoire of covenantal signs and actions. When people meet for the first time, they shake hands. Brides wear white and wedding guests wear flowers."[8] Ancient Israel was no different with its everyday symbolic actions: the wearing of sackcloth or tearing of garments by those in mourning (2 Samuel 13:31), the cutting of animals to ratify a covenant (Genesis 15:9–12), boring a hole in the ear of a slave who chooses not to go free (Exodus 21:6). All of these actions are symbolic. However, they are categorically different from the types of actions employed by the likes of the prophet Jeremiah in that their frequency turned them into conventions. As conventions, these actions were unlikely to be remarkable to ancient Israelites in the way that the actions of the prophets were—so remarkable that they were recorded as scripture.

Nearly everything about the prophets' dramatic acts was unusual. People did not go walking about naked in public, or wearing ox yokes, or digging through walls packed for exile on a regular basis. Even the prophets' more familiar actions were made unconventional by the context of the execution, or the execution of the act itself: Marriage is a convention, but no one would expect a prophet of YHWH to marry a shrine prostitute as Hosea had; land purchase is a conventional act, but no one would have expected Jeremiah to eventually buy a field in the very land from which he predicted he and his compatriots would be deported (Jeremiah 32:6–15).

The prophets explicitly state that the modus operandi of their type of ministry constituted a decisive break with the conventions of their society (Amos 5:21–24; Isaiah 1:13–15; Jeremiah 16:5–13). They proclaim that the common life of Israel and Judah, a common life that had come to include a litany of social injustices,

[7] C. B. Hays, "Prophetic Symbolic Acts," in *Hidden Riches*: *A Sourcebook for the Comparative Study of the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near East* (Louisville, Ken.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 239–243.
[8] Stacey, 23.

should and would come to an end. But were they "successful"? What good did their actions do?

Important Considerations About Success

Before any assessment in regard to the success of prophetic drama can be made adequately, certain general points about the nature of success must be considered. The most salient of those considerations is that success is highly contextual.

It is easy for one to read the ministries of the biblical prophets as a bunch of failures because none of the prophetic dramas they performed prevented exile. However, such conclusions might be based on invalid assumptions. That no one seemed to change their behavior after witnessing prophetic drama is only a failure if the aim was to change people's behavior. These assumptions must be interrogated in order to rightly discern what good prophetic drama did or can do.

For example, it would be inappropriate to measure the success of Ezekiel's ministry based on how many people changed their behavior because of his dramatic activity. YHWH had already instructed the prophet: "whether they listen or fail to listen…they will know that a prophet has been among them…You must speak my words to them, whether they listen or fail to listen" (Ezekiel 2:5,7). Therefore, Ezekiel's primary task was to make the exile visible to his neighbors. Ezekiel's faithfulness to YHWH's command was the measure of success.

This same principle applies to contemporary social change agents. "Success" could be defined a number of ways, depending on who the activists are and what contexts they are responding to. In my case in 2016 Pasadena, it would have been easy for an observer to assume that I thought that lugging a stone everywhere I went would somehow magically end racism. That is how I read the "what good will it do?" comment initially: "that action won't do any good." My only objective, however, was to carry out what I'd seen in the vision, to make visible a burden that black Americans often bear that white Americans never carry.

Success Defined by Biblical Prophets and Contemporary Activists

A Venn diagram could be accurately drawn to show that biblical prophets and contemporary activists share some similarities but also maintain some significant distinctions in their objectives. Old Testament prophets and contemporary activists both participate in revelatory activities.

In the background of the prophets' biographies are countless unnamed members of vulnerable communities. These are the widows, orphans, impoverished, and foreigners, the marginalized communities of that ancient society that the prophets name as social blocs for whom YHWH has great concern (Isaiah 3:14–15; Jeremiah 7:3–6). The vulnerable communities these prophets champion in the name of YHWH are also the invisible that need to be made visible because "many injustices are invisible to the mainstream."[9] Thus, the revelatory objective (i.e., the goal to reveal what would otherwise be invisible) is one prophetic conception of success that overlaps with the aims of contemporary social change agents.

An essential part of building contemporary social change movements is the process of raising "cause-consciousness."[10] Cause-consciousness is, like the prophetic task, a revelatory endeavor. Nonviolent activists may employ an arsenal of tactics to inform their compatriots about the global carbon budget, the high rate of human trafficking in their city, or the racial discrepancies in the mass incarceration system. Activists are constantly trying to make visible those issues and people who have been rendered invisible in society. Their tactics can include a range of actions from passing out flyers in the parking lot of their local grocery store to walking the streets in a white tunic dragging an entire tree on one's back (a real act of protest I witnessed years ago). Regardless of the methods an activist might choose, the revelatory aim remains consistent and salient. A problem that cannot be seen cannot be solved. Therefore,

[9] N. Bloch, "Make the Invisible Visible," in *Beautiful Trouble: A Toolbox for Revolution*, eds. A. Boyd and D. O. Mitchell (New York, NY: OR Books, 2013), 272–275.
[10] G. Sharp, *The Dynamics of Nonviolent Action* (Boston: P. Sargent, 1973), 473.

making the invisible visible is an imperative that social change agents share with the biblical prophets.

However, the ends prophets and activists seek through revelatory activity also differ. Contemporary activists often aim to change the very structure of their societies through laws, policies, and institutions. To that end, they often employ symbolic actions to raise cause consciousness as part of a larger strategic campaign for social change. Often, such campaigns employ a diverse array of nonviolent methods to coerce power holders in the social establishment to change the status quo.

The biblical prophets, however, were not social movement strategists. In truth, the concepts of democratic rule and theories of pluralistic political power that support the work of contemporary activists would have been unthinkable to them. Therefore, the ends to which they sought to make the invisible visible understandably fall short of revolution—at least any conception of revolution that many contemporary activists would likely articulate today.

A possible conception of social change appropriate to the ancient world is worth mentioning here: the possibility of mass repentance. It would be reasonable to suggest that some of the prophets expected social change in the form of religious revival and behavioral change. There is something to be said about the logic that assumes that changed individuals—that is, Hebrew citizens returning to Torah observance—would result in a changed society. This logic might be sound, but it is much different than the logic that informs the work of contemporary activists. Contemporary activists generally focus on mobilizing social blocs and institutions toward revolutionary aims—that is, changing the structure of the society through direct political interventions—rather than changing individual minds. Although some contemporary people will conceive of social change in a way that is similar to how the prophets probably saw it, as mass conversion, this is generally viewed as one of the least effective—and therefore undesirable—mechanisms by which to pursue social change.

Whereas the biblical prophets might have made the invisible visible for nothing more than to obey the command of YHWH, contemporary activists are likely to make the invisible visible in

order to mobilize an inspired majority or a creative minority to strategically create a new social reality through nonviolent struggle.

Prophetic Drama as a Tactic of Nonviolent Social Change

Literature on social movements suggests that symbolic actions can play a significant role in a grand, strategic plan to change the structure of a society. Because prophetic drama is a type of symbolic action, it stands to reason that it could be implemented in ways that other symbolic methods of nonviolent struggle are utilized to meet conceptions of success held by contemporary activists.

At this point, it will be necessary to view prophetic drama through the lens of nonviolent strategy. To do so, some terms need to be defined, specifically *strategy* and *tactics*. Those two words denote particular meanings in the world of nonviolent social change. I am suggesting prophetic drama could be utilized strategically or tactically in contemporary movements for social change, so being clear about what these terms mean in the context of nonviolent struggle will be helpful.

According to Popovich and Miller, in nonviolent struggle, *strategy* often refers to:

> the conception of how best to achieve objectives in a conflict....Strategy is concerned with whether, when, or how to fight and how to achieve maximum effectiveness in order to gain certain ends. Strategy is the plan for the practical distribution, adaptation, and application of the available means to attain desired objectives.[11]

An example of strategy would be something like "economic noncooperation." Such a strategy would be implemented, for example, by concerned citizens against a grocery store that refused to serve black people. The strategy would work as a sort of guiding principle. Those opposing the store might not know the exact type

[11] S. Popovich and M. Miller, *Blueprint for Revolution: How to Use Rice Pudding, Lego Men, and Other Nonviolent Techniques to Galvanize Communities, Overthrow Dictators, or Simply Change the World* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), 158.

of actions they will perform when deciding upon the strategy, but they have determined that the type of actions they choose must reduce the store's revenue.

The specific methods used to implement a certain strategy are *tactics*. In the case of the racist grocery store, those citizens would implement the strategy of economic noncooperation through organizing specific methods like a boycott or an employee strike. The boycott or strike would be the tactic by which the strategy is deployed.

In his book *The Methods of Nonviolent Action*, movement scholar Gene Sharp lists 198 methods (or tactics[12]) of nonviolent action, separated into three different strategic categories: protest and persuasion, noncooperation, and direct intervention. Sharp lists tactics of symbolic action under the first category. "Their use may simply show that the actionists are against something.... Nonviolent protest and persuasion also may express deep personal feelings or moral condemnation on a social or political issue."[13] In his classification, symbolic actions include tactics such as displays of flags, public liturgies, destruction of one's own property, marches, picketing, and delivering symbolic objects. The list is not meant to be comprehensive or exhaustive, but it is not difficult to see how prophetic drama could also fit into this category.

The biblical prophets were in clear protest of the status quo. They lamented that ancient Israelite society was plagued by corrupt leaders, poverty, and violence. Moreover, their dramatic acts expressed the displeasure of YHWH at the recurring injustices that came to characterize ancient Israelite society. Through their prophetic dramas, these messengers expressed YHWH's "deep personal feelings or moral condemnation on a social or political issue." Isaiah's nakedness, Hosea's marriage, Ezekiel's solo siege, and Jeremiah's ox yoke are all actions that display YHWH in protest. Through the lens of nonviolent struggle, those actions could be viewed as tactical actions to raise cause consciousness.

[12] The terms *tactic* and *method* are often used interchangeably in social movement conversations.

[13] G. Sharp and M. S. Finkelstein, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* vol. II (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1973), 118.

Tactics are, however, only one component of skillfully pursuing social change. Would-be social change agents will be sorely disappointed if their theory of change is as follows: (1) challenger group executes a creative tactic of protest; (2) "powers that be" respond with deep moral conviction and concede challenging group's demands. Instead, "in a long-term struggle, a tactic is better understood as one move among many in an epic game of chess....Thus a tactic is a kind of stepping stone."[14] In order to be more than an unusual act that is ultimately ignored or dismissed by the powers that be, tactics need strategy. Tactics are the building blocks; strategy is the blueprint.

Possible Conceptions of Strategic Success for Prophetic Drama as a Tactic in Contemporary Social Movements

One weakness of many contemporary social movements is the lack of strategic planning. An unarmed black man is killed by the police and people respond with a march, thinking that the march will have some direct effect on police brutality. This is unlikely. Marches are useful, but they are not movements. A march is a tactic, and a tactic can disrupt the daily rituals of society momentarily, but a tactic is most effective when combined with a diverse array of other tactics in a larger strategy of social change. Would-be social change agents that are drawn to prophetic drama would do well to think of how their symbolic acts might fit into a larger strategy for social change. This can be done by choosing the types of targets that symbolic actions are best suited to hit.

A great deal of the struggle for positive social change has to do with cognitions; that is, the narratives, ideologies, and beliefs that people foster to make sense of the societies we live in. Cognitions in general are a source of political power that can be cultivated in support or wielded against the status quo. For example, the idea that it is normal or necessary for police to kill civilians so often in the United States is a cognition that supports the social problem of high numbers of police-involved deaths. The idea that we live in

[14] J. M. Smucker, *Hegemony How-to: A Roadmap for Radicals* (Chico, Calif.: AK Press, 2017) 147.

a post-racial society is a cognition that allows people to deny the statistics that prove a special vulnerability to police violence among nonwhite U.S. residents. The idea that black people are generally more prone to criminal activity is a cognition (racism) that allows many Americans to search for a reason to blame a black victim of police violence for their own death. The cognitions listed above are not suited to lead people to the conclusion that the social problems many black Americans have been lamenting for centuries are real and unjust.

In addition, many Americans would agree that police brutality is a problem and that something should be done about it. However, there are issues that they regard as more salient that demand their attention and resources. Their cognition (apathy) for the problem of police brutality helps to sustain the status quo.

Others agree that something must be done about police brutality but are afraid that if they organize, they might be arrested or beaten by the police. That cognition, fear of repression, might be so great that would-be insurgents conclude that the cost of resistance outweighs the benefits.

The task of the activist is to strategically induce the process by which cognitions like the ones above are so undermined that they are no longer tenable, at least, if not transformed altogether. Sociologist Doug McAdam calls that process, by which people's cognitions are so thoroughly changed that they come to see their current context as unjust and mutable through collective action, *cognitive liberation*.[15] Symbolic actions can be formidable tactics in a strategic campaign where cognitive liberation is an objective.

In his book *Blueprint for Revolution*, activist Srdja Popovich conveys a sobering truth about most people:

> I want to be absolutely clear about this principle of nonviolent activism: namely, that people, without exception and without fail, just don't give a damn. They believe in the immortal words of Liz Lemon from

[15] D. McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency: 1930–1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 34.

> the television show "30 Rock", that all anyone really wants in this life is to sit in peace and eat a sandwich.[16]

People in general, says Popovich, are not mobilized by abstract ideals like racial justice. People are concerned about things that they perceive as having immediate import to their everyday lives: the welfare of their kids, the price of groceries, or that Netflix show they need to catch up on. This principle is referred to as issue salience,[28] and social change movements can live and die on that principle. When issue salience is low, people are less likely to be mobilized to address the problem.

The civil rights movement holds many examples of this principle at work. The 1964 Freedom Summer project, which brought white college students to live and work alongside Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee activists in rural Mississippi and register as many black voters as possible, illustrates this principle at work. "Stokely Carmichael spoke to them that night," recounts one Freedom Summer participant. "...he told them 'While these [white] people are here, national attention is here. The FBI isn't going to let anything happen to them. They let the murderers of Negroes off, but already men have been arrested in Itta Bena just for threatening white lives.'"[29] In the case of the Freedom Summer Project, the involvement of white people increased issue salience for other white people through the letters these young people wrote to their families recounting their experiences, media attention garnered from increased white participation, and the threat of white collateral damage in episodes of racial violence.

Apathy is one of the most obvious cognitive obstacles the Hebrew prophets confront in their ministries as well. The people just don't seem to care about the things the prophets protest. "They don't even know how to blush [at their sins]," laments Jeremiah (Jeremiah 6:15). Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann refers to the general context into which the prophets spoke as a culture of numbness.[17] The slogan of that culture of numbness, says

[16] Popovich, 45.
[17] W. Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Fortress Press, 1980), 46.

Brueggemann, is "All is well." The prophets sometimes seek to break through that numbness with prophetic drama: "The appearance and utterance of the prophets evokes a crisis circumstance where none had been perceived previously."[18]

The prophets bear witness to the suffering of the vulnerable in society and the frustration of God at those social injustices. They want the people to feel—to grieve and to care—possibly even to repent (Joel 2:16–17). Brueggemann writes: "I believe the proper idiom for the prophet cutting through the royal numbness and denial is the language of grief, the rhetoric that engages the community in mourning for a funeral they do not want to admit."[19]

Some social activists also participate in this same prophetic prerogative, addressing public apathy with symbolic demonstrations that ask the public to attend to social issues they'd rather ignore, avoid, or feel too inadequate to address. "The investigation into the causes of the conflict, the documentation of actual grievances and the resulting demands of the oppressed must be widely disseminated in a form which is comprehensible to the public and to the oppressor."[20]

Attempting to raise issue salience through prophetic drama is one strategy activists can adopt in their efforts to confront apathy. My experience lugging a stone around Los Angeles allowed me to make an issue many Americans usually avoid to bear on routine, usually apolitical, exchanges. One afternoon, a young woman who knew about my protest saw me dragging the boulder and approached me. "I didn't know that you were still doing this," she said. I answered: "It's still happening." I began to tell her about a new story that week, of a black security guard who stopped a gunman, only to be killed by the police who arrived on the scene after his heroic act. I could see the shock in her face as she tried to process the tragic events I recounted to her. The issue of police brutality had clearly lost its salience to her since news coverage had waned. But the symbolic action raised her cause consciousness again.

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[18] W. Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology: An Introduction,* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 2008), 624.
[19] W. Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 51.
[20] Sharp, 473.

"Social problems are often obscured by distance, ideology, or simple chemistry (when was the last time you noticed PCBs in your drinking water?). If you can't see it, you can't change it."[21] Symbolic actions have the power to do that: to bring distant issues near to people. If the appropriate methods are chosen for a specific context, issue salience can be increased and possibly confront apathy.

Confronting Cynicism with Hope

Social change movements will not occur if people don't believe that change is possible or that their efforts will be worthwhile. "Before collective protest can get under way, people must collectively define their situations as unjust and subject to change through group action."[22] The latter part, the belief that a social problem is changeable, is key. If people believe their votes are useless, climate disaster is inevitable, or that the authorities will always succeed in squashing movement activity, people are much less likely to mobilize.

To counteract the cognitive obstacle of cynicism, rhetorical strategies that induce hope are appropriate. It is a mistake to limit the task of prophetic drama to expressing grief and pronouncing judgement. "Alongside this intense preoccupation with the burden and demand of the present, the prophets characteristically anticipate Yahweh's future; that is, they think eschatologically, and mediate to Israel an imagined possibility willed by YHWH."[23]

Possibility is a key word in our discussion about hope. Hope should not be read as certainty. Rather, as historian and activist Rebecca Solnit comments, Often, the injustices we witness, and the systems that make them possible, make certainty about social progress untenable and untrustworthy. The type of cognitions that are needed to confront cynicism are those that contain humility about the future. Social change agents must poke holes in the pervading certainty within the populace about the status quo, that currently the arrangement is too complex or mysterious to change, or that change efforts are certain to fail.

[21] Bloch, 152–153.
[22] McAdam, 51.
[23] Brueggemann (2008), 64.

Brueggemann suggests that the prophet must offer symbols to a cynical people that illustrate that "the closed world of managed reality is false."[24] The people must come to at least consider that things do not have to stay the way they are. The prophet Zechariah embodies this prophetic prerogative of hope in his crowning of Josiah the high priest.

Zechariah lived among the post-exilic community of Jews who returned to Syria-Palestine from Babylon in 583 B.C.E. The returnees set about to reconstruct the Jerusalem Temple, but the project laid dormant for eighteen years due, in part, to cognitive barriers. The returnees exhibited a "profound pessimism" about the restoration of their society that Zechariah's prophetic ministry addressed.[25] This pessimism is demonstrated in the account of the unveiling of the new temple's foundations:

> The older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid, while many others shouted for joy. No one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping, because the people made so much noise. And the sound was heard far away (Zechariah 3:13).

This passage is an example of the people's despair about their present and their belief that their best days were behind them. The task for Zechariah was to suggest to his neighbors the possibility of a wonderful future, by presenting to them a grand, compelling eschatological vision. He usually articulates his hopeful imagination through relaying the contents of his mystical experiences, but at least one instance of prophetic drama in the scroll bears his name: collecting precious metals from members of the Diasporic community, creating a crown, and placing it on the head of Josiah the high priest (Zechariah 6:9–13). The oracle that accompanies the action relates a future where the temple is complete, the priesthood

[24] Brueggemann, 67.
[25] M. F. Unger, *Zechariah: Prophet of Messiah's Glory* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2014), 62.

is empowered, and a king sits on the throne (Zechariah 6:9–15). Zechariah provides an instance of prophetic drama specifically to counter cognitions of despair with a counter-narrative of hope.[26] "With [the prophet] Haggai, Zechariah provided the leadership to enable their compatriots to bring the build task successfully to completion."[27]

Hope is also about alternativity. At the end of the day, part of what keeps people from pursuing positive social change is the inability to imagine alternatives. In *Making the Abolition of War a Realistic Goal*, Gene Sharp argues that a creative alternative must be offered to counter the idea that war is inevitable.[28] Presenting possibilities for newness is what other social change experts have called crafting a "vision of tomorrow."[29] Social change agents should consider tactics that help people imagine possibilities for a different social arrangement.

In the vision I saw that inspired me to drag the boulder, I was reciting poetry that articulated an alternative future. But in the execution of the drama, I did not perform any nonverbal actions to communicate that racial violence is only one of many societal realities from which we are able to choose. Rather, I believed my prophetic jurisdiction at the time was to convey the grief of black Americans to my neighbors. I was preoccupied with performing a lament with my body. One could argue, conversely, that biblical literature often holds grief and hope together in tension. Indeed, form critics observe that biblical laments often contain a turn where the psalmist's complaints give way to an affirmation of trust in YHWH. Thus, my embodied lament could have legitimately, at least occasionally, turned toward doxology or at least a tacit affirmation of trust in God.[30]

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[26] Ake Viberg, *Prophets in Action: An Analysis of Prophetic Symbolic Acts in the Old Testament* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2014), 265–270. Viberg provides a precise analysis of the complex symbology in this action that is worth considering.
[27] Merrill, 62.
[28] G. Sharp, *Making the Abolition of War a Realistic Goal* (Cambridge, Mass.: Albert Einstein Institute, 1980).
[29] Popovich, 55–76.
[30] Form critics have noted that biblical laments often contain a turn where a psalmist's complaints give way to an affirmation of trust in YHWH.

However, at the time, I had no conscious vision of how to act out the possibilities of an anti-racist future. I don't know whether that is the result of immaturity or narrow vision, or if it simply was not a part of the mandate for me. If, however, I were to engage in prophetic drama as a strategic method for social change—without the sense of divine compulsion to do something specific, as had previously been the case—I would make sure to think strategically about how the symbolic action might signal cognitions of hope. The first thing I could have done was commit to communicating the content of the biblical passages I heard in the vision where I saw myself as a street preacher. I could have called together artists to draw some of the world Isaiah envisions with street chalk on the pavement downtown. The act of writing it together could have been read as a symbolic action of exactly what we will need to do to create a better world, as what would have been required to create the street mural would also be required to change society: that is, to think creatively together, to talk about what it is we are trying to create, to collaborate on gathering the resources, and to plan strategically how we will create it. That is just one possibility of symbolic action to present a counter-narrative of hope. Regardless of what the specific tactic might be, tactics that communicate possibility and alternativity are needed. Without some type of compelling vision of what society can be, people will be resigned to accept things as they are.

What Good Could It Do?

To make the invisible visible in order to induce cognitive liberation could be considered a form of success. However, movement strategists usually aspire to ends beyond confronting certain cognitive obstacles. It is more likely that a movement for social change will consider all that is discussed above—tactics of prophetic drama to create counter-narratives fostering cognitive liberation—as possible elements of a grand strategy for social revolution. Many biblical prophets often make the invisible visible and leave the results up to God. Social activists, however, make the invisible visible—more often than not—in order to upend the status quo.

I have already argued above that it is plausible that prophetic drama, as a type of symbolic action, could play a significant role in social change movements, because symbolic actions are a historically proven method of nonviolent struggle. Nevertheless, in an effort to clarify, I will rephrase the question to fit specific conceptions of success that contemporary activists may hold, and the question I believe was being posed to me on Facebook when I first began lugging the boulder: Can prophetic drama mobilize people to build the type of capacity necessary to shift U.S. society from racist to anti-racist?

That question can be best answered by considering a historical instance of prophetic drama: the 1965 protest march across the Edmund Pettis Bridge, led by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). The organizers chose voter suppression as the emblematic target of America's racial caste system.

If the first task of the activist is indeed to make the invisible visible, then the second task is to build the capacity for change-making. That topic is the scope of this paper. Fortunately, a vast library exists on how people might organize and mobilize to change their societies for the better[31].

As the movement for change evolves, there will continue to be a need to dramatize the injustices to face and the future world that could be. Through continuing to reveal the present in need of change and the possibilities of a wonderful future, activists might be able to shape the appropriate cognitions to sustain a revolution. Cognitions are not all that are needed, but they are essential. That is the good prophetic drama can do.

[31] I would suggest starting with Popovich's book, *Blueprint for Revolution*, mentioned earlier. He also cites many other authors and scholars who are worth adding to one's reading list.