

Organizing for Governing Power

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INTRODUCTION

In 2008, National People’s Action (NPA) and the Grassroots Policy Project (GPP) began working together to explore new ideas about organizing, power, and strategy. The partnership has continued. This paper represents a snapshot of NPA’s evolving understanding of these concepts, and an invitation for others to comment and move the process further.

NPA and other community organizations that followed in the tradition of Saul Alinsky saw their work as operating in civil society and holding public officials accountable, not supporting them or encouraging their members to become elected officials. Labor unions and organizers from other traditions were more open to direct engagement in elections and public office, but generally within an assumed pluralist framework: “it’s our turn in office now.” However, in African American, Latino, and other communities that had been excluded from public life, there was an understanding that more was needed than new faces in office – we all needed to promote some larger political agenda.

Today, more organizations are coming to feel that the vast majority of people in this country are de facto excluded from real representation in government; that government is dominated, at least at the national level, by big corporations and the ultra-rich. This means that the federal government is unable to address the major crises facing this country, including the drivers of inequality. Moreover, when we analyze the growth of inequality, the persistence of structural racism, the impasse around climate change, and the global surge in migration, we see system-level challenges. Dealing with these challenges requires structural reforms, not adjustments to current policies. Indeed, we believe that the future of organizing, to respond to these challenges, must be focused on winning governing power.

POWER ANALYSIS

There are many definitions of power and many ways of doing power analysis. After the bank crash of 2007-2008, NPA realized they needed a power analysis that they could use at the system level. GPP proposed a framework of the “three faces of power,”¹ which – with some modifications – turned out to be a good fit. Our version of the three faces of power is:

- 1) First face of power: organizing people and resources for direct political involvement in visible decision-making. The first face of power recapitulates the definition of power that most organizers learn early in their careers: power is organized people and organized money. Most of the campaigns, labor organizing, and electoral work that are done today are dealing with the first face of power.
- 2) Second face of power: movement-building. Or better, building political infrastructure - networks of organizations connected functionally to move a political agenda and program. In much of traditional community organizing, however, there was a dictum of “no permanent friends.” Compare that to the corporate-conservative infrastructure, which consists of a loosely coordinated and overlapping network of organizations operating at national, state and local levels. Some of the more prominent organizations include the US Chamber of Commerce, the National Association of Manufacturers, Tea Party groups and parts of conservative denominations; anti-abortion groups, the NRA; think-tanks such as the Heritage Foundation, and parts of both political parties.

The second face of power is about organizing organizations – and we’ve seen over the years the power in doing this. More organizations today are thinking about long-term alliances with other progressive organizations, not just ad hoc coalitions. But there aren’t enough powerful progressive organizations to form an infrastructure that is in any way comparable to the corporate-conservative infrastructure.

3) Third face of power: the battle of the big ideas (ideology, narrative and worldview). The third face of power is about the power to shape people’s conscious and unconscious understandings of the world, particularly in ways that prevent them from asking questions or seeing any possibilities for change. This kind of power operates in the arena of worldview, culture, myths, stereotypes and values. It is exercised in part through control of the institutions that shape and create meaning: religious institutions, educational institutions, the media, television, mass consumer culture, popular ideas about government, major political parties, and so on.

Stuart Hall defines ideology as “The mental frameworks, the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the systems of representation, which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, define, figure out and render intelligible the way society works.”² Ideology describes systems of meaning-making. It is where the core themes of politics are situated, and it shows how the ideas relate to each other and to the key values that they attempt to operationalize. As there is not an agreed-on progressive ideology or anything approximating it, we find it useful to look at the Right to understand it.

The Right uses a mix of neoliberalism, libertarianism, and right-wing populism to give meaning to social and political issues. Each of these has its own perspectives, but they share a core set of big ideas:

1) Government is inefficient and wasteful; its intervention in society should be minimized except for the necessary and appropriate functions of military defense and the defense of the market and property. And using government policing powers to manage those who transgress class, race or gender norms.

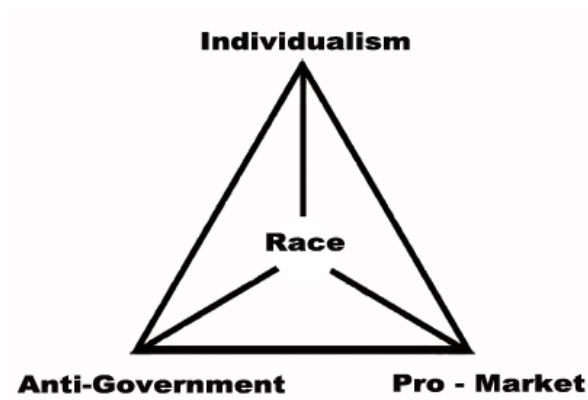
2) The free market is inherently efficient; competition and choice provide the appropriate and natural way to judge and reward the winners versus the losers in society.

3) The individual is self-constituted; as Margaret Thatcher famously said, “there is no society, there are individual men and women and there are families.”

4) Appeals to white supremacy; sometimes blatant, but more often coded. Consider the narrative about “takers” and “makers.” The “takers” are dependent on government; their dependence hurts them and wastes the resources that are generated by more productive, wealth-makers (who are assumed to be white and most often, male).

These four big ideas, or core themes, have been invoked together in essentially every policy fight

and national election for the past 40 years. These four ideas function together to create a powerful idea of how to understand our society. They are articulated, as Stuart Hall says, to create something more than the sum of their individual parts. Conservatives invoke many other themes about gender, sexuality, national identity, safety and security as well (we see these especially now, with a cast of presidential candidates who willingly exploit fears of the ‘other’). Conservative themes about gender, family, sexuality, nationality, etc. have more power when they are articulated with and through the four core themes. This is one of the ways in which different strands of conservatism can be knit together.



These four themes are articulated together as key elements of a political philosophy that in this era has condensed into neoliberal ideology, with a particular American emphasis on race. The Right has been successful in disseminating these ideas, to the point where many people take them to be commonsense. It has been intentional in the use of race to stigmatize government, to justify mass incarceration, and to dramatically underfund social welfare provisions. The ideological linking of African Americans and Latinos in particular, with wasteful government programs, with criminality and other social ills is so deep that now any discussion of government programs and with social welfare invokes the implicit presence of those “Others.” Ian Haney López uses the term *strategic racism*³ to capture the intentional use of race to stigmatize government, taxes, and so on.

Many progressive groups are moving from messaging to narrative, but it is *their* narrative, not an expression of common ideological elements for the progressive movement.

There is a fourth face of power: coercion and force.⁴ Ideology, narrative, framing, values – these inter-related concepts are often discussed as the key to winning “consent” to the status quo. It is important to see that alongside of consent there is still coercion, and for people of color, coercion can be the key form of power that they experience to maintain the status quo. The most recent manifestations of this power are around the War on Drugs, mass incarceration, stop and frisk, and immigration raids, incarceration, and deportation, and police shootings of unarmed Black youth. While coercion is a face of power that the state, and some powerful private entities can deploy, it is not something we would advocate as part of a strategy for building power and capacity for progressives.

THE POWER TO GOVERN

Until relatively recently, community organizations and trade unions tended to put most of their time and energy in the first face of power. One could think of this as relatively isolated organizations fighting a series of tactical battles. The point of the three faces power analysis is that we need an infrastructure of interconnected organizations with a long-term strategic framework and a common narrative to deal with the structural crises in our society. Various organizations are beginning to think in these terms – NPA has been among the most explicit of them.

Three years ago NPA adopted a “Long-Term Agenda for a New Economy,” after a multi-year process that involved more than 500 leaders working intensively on it, in church basements, community group offices, and labor halls. The Long-term Agenda provides a rough picture of the structural reforms that would be necessary for a transition to a thoroughgoing democratic, equitable, and sustainable society. The key aspect of any such transition is that the big corporations and the ultra-rich would lose the power to block such reforms, and that there are more grassroots organizations that have the power to promote and embody these reforms. This strategy for a democratic, equitable and sustainable society requires changes in the political framework of our institutions, such as overturning the Citizens United decision or strengthening the right of labor to organize. Those reforms have to be complemented with corresponding changes in the institutional power of democratic people’s institutions – e.g., new associations and stronger existing ones, such as unions, that support structural reforms such as universal voter registration and ex-felon re-enfranchisement.

Governing power is often thought of as winning electoral majorities in legislatures and winning executive branch seats. While such wins are necessary for “governing power,” they aren’t sufficient. Corporations have enormous power to shape the conditions of governing, in particular through their deployment of capital – think of progressive city councils and mayors faced with the urban growth machine,⁵ or the role of the Federal Reserve. For a government to successfully enact and carry out progressive structural reforms, there have to be an alternative set of powerful institutions in civil society that support, and at times demand, such reforms – like the labor movement did with the federal government in the 1930s.

Thus there are three prongs to organizing for governing power, corresponding to the three faces of power:

1) Running long-term integrated campaigns to win elections and structural reforms (this is the linkage of electoral and issue work, as currently done, to a deeper level).

2) Building people’s power in civil society to create a powerful, grassroots-oriented progressive political infrastructure. There is a rich literature about building new institutions and strengthening existing institutions in civil society. This isn’t the space here to do more than reference some of the most pertinent thinking:

- Associational democracy. See the work of Joel Rogers and Joshua Cohen⁶ and Paul Hirst⁷.
- Deliberative democracy. See the work of Eric Olin Wright and Archon Fung⁸.
- New Economy. See the work of Gar Alperovitz⁹ and Jessica Gordon Nembhard¹⁰.

3) Developing the core elements of a progressive worldview/narrative that can provide a foundation and source for narratives for the progressive political infrastructure and for the campaigns and electoral work.

These three prongs are obviously intertwined: we need more powerful institutions in civil society that are part of a political strategy for governing power, and simultaneously we need to use the political sphere to promote better legal frameworks for establishing and promoting more powerful institutions in civil society. And we need a common narrative that articulates a new common sense to support all of the work.

THE PATH TO GOVERNING POWER

Given the impasse at the federal government, and the level of power and coherence among our organizations, the primary emphasis at this point in a strategy for governing power is in cities and at the state level. The cautionary note is that we can win legislative majorities and executive office at the city and state level now – which we should aim for – while understanding the limits of that power. It is because of those limits that we need to build the strength and independence of grassroots institutions at the same time as building electoral power. There are too many examples of the danger of doing the latter without being clear about the necessity of powerful grassroots institutions that can support our own elected officials, and also hold them accountable.

Finally, we need organizing. Below the surface of these processes, in every locality, we need organizers: organizing people, developing leaders, and building organizations – organizations that are creating a new progressive infrastructure, such as Minnesotans for a Fair Economy, and that are developing a progressive narrative that can take on white supremacy and the anti-government ideology of the Right. What is exciting is that today we can see instances of this process around the country, in particular with an explicit emphasis on racial justice. It is enough to make one hopeful.

ENDNOTES

1 Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, 1975. GPP thinks of power as “structural power,” a different definition than Lukes adopted. For a discussion of structural power, see Jeffrey Issac, *Power and Marxist Theory: A Realist View*, and Dave Elder-Vass, *The Causal Power of Social Structures*.

2 Stuart Hall, “The problem of ideology: Marxism without guarantees,” in D. Morley and K-H Chen (eds.) *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*.

3 Ian Haney López, *Dog Whistle Politics*.

4 The discussion of consent and coercion draws on Antonio Gramsci’s work. For an introduction to Gramsci, see, for example, Roger Simon, *Gramsci’s Political Thought* (Revised 2015).

5 See for example Barbara Ferman, *Challenging the Growth Machine*.

6 Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers, *Associations and Democracy*.

7 Paul Hirst, *Associative Democracy: New Forms of Economic and Social Governance*.

8 Archon Fung and Eric Olin Wright, *Deepening Democracy: Institutional Innovations in Empowered Participatory Governance*.

9 Gar Alperovitz, *America Beyond Capitalism*, 2nd Edition.

10 Jessica Gordon Nembhard, *Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Economic Thought and Practice*.

