Sharp Right
Turn Ahead

A Post-Election Analysis from the Grassroots Policy Project

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2017

Sandra would like to acknowledge the input and careful edits she received from her colleagues: Richard Healey, Dave Mann, Christina Roessler and Charlene Sinclair.
INTRODUCTION

On November 9, 2016, when it became clear that the unthinkable had happened — that a demagogue who appealed to white racial resentment, misogyny and xenophobia, who mocked anyone who disagreed with him, threatened the press, had no presidential qualifications and no sense of decency — had been elected the next President of our nation, we each had many long moments of incomprehension along with fear, grief and pain. Each of us has lived through reactionary times before, including McCarthyism and the various backlashes against civil rights gains. Through our shock and pain, we are struggling to get a handle on what is distinctive about this particular right-ward turn.

This foul election’s outcomes threaten to further disrupt democratic norms and values. It is no exaggeration to call this a full-blown crisis, the resolution of which is yet to be determined. We have some idea of what to expect from the reactionary Right: a further unraveling of safety-nets, reversals of civil rights and human rights gains, radical reshaping of courts for several generations, and the permanent damage caused by our nation’s swift retreat from anything that would address the unfolding climate crisis. We also can anticipate a continued coarsening of civil discourse and more political polarization. What we do not know, but should work toward nonetheless, is whether something new can be born out of a politics of resistance. We will argue that it can, but not if resistance is our only response.

For, if this is an ‘interregnum,’ or a period of time between the end of one reign and the start of another, we must imagine and plan for a different resolution to the historic crisis we are in. This is as much about ideology as it is about material conditions: on the terrain of ideas, the new has not been born. While it may look like extremist ideas have triumphed, we should not assume, nor should we act as if progressive ideas have been vanquished.

We would argue that the interregnum began a while ago, sometime late in the 2nd term of George W Bush; the financial crisis and its aftermath suggested an end to an old order; the corporate-conservative order almost did itself in, but we did not birth a new order (we averted disaster with the election of President Obama, but sometimes, we seemed to confuse his election — and the coalition that helped propel him forward in 2008 — with the rebirth we so desperately desired and needed). This toxic election season has rolled out a series of morbid symptoms, and they of course are going to spread and mutate over the next two to four years.

Since November 8 the symptoms have increased in their intensity. Trump has assembled a cabinet of bigots and billionaires with no regard for the greater good, along with generals who demonize all of Islam and admire Vladimir Putin. He has named an advisor who represents the so-called ‘alt-right’—

The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.
Antonio Gramsci, The Prison Notebooks
white supremacists and proto-fascists who have moved from the shadows to now sit at the right hand of power. His nominee for Attorney General will surely reverse course on criminal justice reform, including police accountability, and voting rights.

This election strongly reinforces the need for long-term strategy that guides short-term work, including the necessary resistance work and defensive responses to attacks on multiple fronts. It reinforces the need for integrated electoral work and independent politics in which local and state organizing is oriented toward building a progressive bloc of voters who are treated as much more than voters; as agents of change, as makers of history. It compels us to think and act more boldly about the centrality of race for American politics, for class identities and politics especially, so that, instead of retreating from a politics of liberation, we create new associations between liberation, racial justice, and working-class identity.

Our analysis and reflections are divided into four sections. Part 1 lays out our ‘postmortem,’ with attention to the structural factors that were at play in the election and beyond. Part 2 offers a conjunctural analysis to situate this election historically. Part 3 focuses on the roles of race, class and identity in the election and what it means in terms of the challenges and the possibilities for building a new multi-racial historic bloc, and Part 4 presents our thinking on the way forward, beyond the fog of this election.

PART 1. ELECTION POST-MORTEM: WHAT JUST HAPPENED

Constructive post-mortems of the election can be very useful, and sometimes hard to find amidst the more hastily prepared reactions that are based in limited information, or aimed at blaming a group or person, or that have an ax to grind. We are finding lots of good analysis from activists and leaders, ranging from liberal to progressive to the engaged Left, who want to better understand where we go from here. And, we also see some thoughtful reactions from principled conservatives (yes, there are a few). We have parsed these and added our own in this section, in the interest of informing movement strategy for the next 4 years and beyond.

We organize our post-mortem into two segments, to help distinguish between the structural and the contingent factors that were at play in this election. So much of the immediate responses to the election were focused on contingent factors. How could they not be? Things like FBI Director Comey’s intervention, and the role of the Russians are extraordinary. But we need to tie them to the structural factors, and work toward shifting those more fundamental flaws in our political and economic systems, for it is these structural weaknesses that give rise to such remarkable contingencies. For this reason, we’ll start with the structural factors.
I. The Structural Factors

A. Electoral System Flaws and Dysfunction.

By design, the scope and meaning of democratic participation in our Republic is constrained and limited to voting for representatives in winner-take-all elections. Also by design, this all-important marker of democratic practice, voting, is not very well-protected, and too easily suppressed.

As Eric Olin Wright has noted:

“Democracy” as a way of organizing the state has come to be narrowly identified with territorially based competitive elections of political leadership for legislative and executive offices. Yet, increasingly, this mechanism of political representation seems ineffective in accomplishing the central ideals of democratic politics: facilitating active political involvement of the citizenry, forging political consensus through dialogue, devising and implementing public policies that ground a productive economy and healthy society, and, in more radical egalitarian versions of the democratic ideal, assuring that all citizens benefit from the nation’s wealth.¹

Some historical perspective is in order. From the start, power elites conspired to restrict democratic participation. As we know, slave owners and their allies shaped the Constitution in ways that we still grapple with today. The slave owners wanted to be sure that the federal government would not be able to interfere with slavery, so they set up mechanisms such as the Electoral College, two Senators per state irrespective of population, and a relatively weak Executive. These compromises set the tone of the debate about the role of government in our society, especially with regard to markets, states’ rights, and tilting the balance toward a limited role for government, something that corporations would exploit less than one hundred years later through legal strategies to gain corporate personhood.

The Constitution racialized citizenship, making it synonymous with whiteness. It created a structural relationship of citizen to non-citizen, and this was one of many ways our blueprint for our democracy institutionalized the ideology of white supremacy. It explains why the right to vote is not in the Constitution—there is no federal right to vote; expanding the franchise (and protecting it) is a constant struggle.

This electoral season, these historical realities have been manifested through the following:

1. Voter Indifference and Voter Suppression. Trump’s electoral strategy included efforts to shrink voter turnout, especially among traditionally democratic constituencies, through a combination of suppression (both implied and explicit) and indifference. While allegations of voter

suppression are very serious and deserve our attention, we must also grapple with the problem of voter indifference. This is harder to tackle, and it requires a long-term commitment to year-round, integrated voter engagement on a level we haven’t yet achieved. This should be an integral part of any campaign to challenge overt suppression such as: voter ID laws, reducing the number of poll locations, shortening early voter time periods, etc. It also is integral to our work on felon disenfranchisement (which accounts for over 6 million lost votes). Suppression has a way of breeding more indifference, which is especially present among lower income voters of color. Lower turnout in Detroit, Milwaukee, and Philadelphia may have been decisive in handing those swing states to Trump. Dealing with voter indifference may be harder, in the short-term, given how some segments of voters may respond to the sharp right turn with even more hopelessness and indifference.

2. Money in politics. One of the more maddening talking points from the Trump camp was that he ‘couldn’t be bought’ because he was ‘self-financing’ his campaign (a claim that was not entirely true). The Koch Brothers and other big donors spent huge sums at the state and local levels for conservative candidates. Trump cashed in on this well-funded ground game. Suggesting that the answer to the outsized influence of big donors in our elections is to run self-financing billionaires is absurd. Campaign finance reform and more (and creative) methods of public financing is a prerequisite for building a truly inclusive democracy.

3. Gerrymandering. Looking at voting patterns in most states, there are more Democratic voters than Republican voters. The make-up of the Senate and the House does not reflect this. And in some states, the make-up of their legislatures is similarly skewed.

To be fair, both parties have used gerrymandering to their advantage. But over the last 20 years, Republicans have been more aggressive in redrawing districts to a) reduce the impact of black votes and b) eliminate ‘safe’ Democratic seats. Many new districts are possibly unconstitutional; some have been deemed in violation of the Voting Rights Act. Politicians routinely draw voting districts with the purpose of diluting black voting power. And yet, when voting rights advocates point this out, they are accused of fomenting racial polarization and advocating reverse racism (“you want us to create majority black voting districts? This would violate white voters’ rights to race neutral elections”). Remember Lani Guinier? Just bringing up the racial implications of redistricting destroyed her chances of becoming head of the Justice Department’s Civil Rights division, back in 1993.

4. The Electoral College. For the second time in recent history, the winner of the popular vote has lost the election. And, in this case, the popular vote winner has close to a three-point lead. Given Clinton’s significant lead, Trump’s claims to have a ‘mandate’ are risible. Instead of rehashing the racialized history of the Electoral College’s origins here, we recommend this overview from Bob Wing and Bill Fletcher. Knowing this history of the Electoral College is imperative, because attempts are under way to ‘whitewash’ it. Conservatives who support Trump are out in force, making the case that the Electoral College is good for the country. The argument goes something like this: If we elected presidents by popular vote, smaller states and rural communities would have little or no voice. The Electoral College safeguards our Democracy from the tyranny of the urban majority (dog whistles). Check out this handy little video that is circulating among conservatives.
B. Neoliberalism and the Assault on Labor

Since the financial crisis and its aftermath, neoliberal forces have doubled-down, imposing austerity in Europe, and greatly limiting stimulus measures here. Left-center parties around the world have been unable to hold them back.

Consider our two parties. This election highlights the differences between the parties, and we’ve never been ones to say they are basically the same. Sadly, the election also reinforces what we’ve know since the early 1990s: as one party has been captured by extremists on the Right, and pulled dramatically in that direction, the other has moved to the center, and now inhabits the ‘corporatist’ space. And while we’ve seen populist upsurges on the Left and the Right, the party that should provide an alternative to neoliberalism cannot do so.

As Jeff Faux notes, when they regained the White House in 1992, Democratic leaders fully embraced finance capital. Faux acknowledges, as would we, that in a liberal capitalist democracy, it is no surprise that a major political party would court some segments of the capitalist class, and try to satisfy their interests. But what happened in the 1990s was a decisive shift away from industrial capital and the ‘real economy’ and into a full embrace of finance capital. This was also a decisive break in what had been a partnership with labor unions. When industry ruled, workers had to struggle for every raise and benefit, and to fight for greater control over work processes, but they were at least recognized as stakeholders whose interests had to be taken into account. On the Republican side, the corporate-conservative blueprint prioritized neutralizing organized labor both to weaken a major part of the Democrats’ coalition while turning an increasingly unorganized white working class away from class-based politics. The results of this election clear the way for the destruction of our most powerful counterweight to unfettered corporate power.

Loss of union strength, density and power has been devastating not just for Democrats, but for progressivism and the project of inclusive democracy. At its best, the Labor Movement has provided spaces for political engagement, collective action and development of consciousness that could transcend, at least for a while, race, gender, language, religion, and other differences that are exploited by the Right. Being in a union helped clarify what was at stake, who was on our side and who was against us. It provided an ideological framework for making sense of the world, one that competed with the Right’s scapegoating and othering, and the dominant themes of rugged individualism and market fundamentalism. Organized Labor’s absence in the lives of most private sector workers is deeply felt. As Janice Fine notes, we don’t yet have an alternative vehicle for organizing at scale in the way that unions used to do.

C. The Exploitation of Racialized and Gendered Anxieties

One of the most stunning things about this ugly election season was the degree to which candidate Trump and his supporters on the Right so blatantly dispensed with the dog whistle and went for
boldly racialized rhetoric about immigrants, Muslims, African Americans, and others, while flaunting a virulent brand of sexism. Language and actions that we thought would be disqualifying for a national candidate were repeated rally after rally, tweet after tweet, and echoed by the media. The more we scoffed at and parodied Trump’s blustering nativism, sexism and racism, the more it seeped into our collective consciousness, and for too many voters, became normalized.

Let’s look at the uses of race. Immigrant-bashing was the most blatant, followed by offthe-charts Islamophobia. But underneath a lot of this was ‘fear of a Black President’ and what it had unleashed. Larry Wilmore, on his now defunct late night show, was onto something when he called this election the ‘unblackening.’ Trump and his operatives asked: what’s next? How will whites maintain their natural place in the racial hierarchy if we keep letting black and brown people take positions of national leadership? This fear of blackness, of people of color in general, ‘taking over’ remains in part because many whites cannot imagine what life in America would be like as a truly inclusive society.

Trump channeled this generalized unease about shifting demographics and the growing cultural and political influence of Latinos and African Americans into a nostalgic image of a simpler, more prosperous time, when America was whiter. In the face of that racialized nostalgia, blatant lies about what’s happening at the border and false claims about immigrants’ impact on jobs, and on local economies, appear to have won the day.

A critical element in this nostalgic image of a more prosperous (whiter and safer) America is the notion that it was also a more Christian America. Trump echoed a rightwing meme that white Christians are under attack from non-Christian outsiders. The reality is that we are far more vulnerable to domestic terrorist attacks, mostly perpetrated by white men on the Right, than by ISIS-inspired Muslims. And, of course, terrorist attacks are pretty low on the list of things that are likely to happen to us. But these realities don’t speak to the multiple, and visceral sources of fear that Trump’s campaign exploited. It seems that many people (mostly white) wanted a candidate who would affirm their fears.

Add in a few generous dashes of misogyny and you have a fear-based recipe to defeat the first woman to ever be nominated by a major party. If you are concerned that your country is become unrecognizable to you, and that your leaders are too soft on immigrants, terrorism and criminals, and this tough-talking man comes along who ‘tells it like it is,” you are less likely to accept a woman as Commander-in-Chief, even with her track-record of toughness. It is an old story: ‘strong woman eclipsed by insecure man.’

In her post-election essay in the *New Yorker*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche says it best:

If everything remained the same, and Hillary Clinton were a man, would she still engender an overheated, outsized hostility? Would a woman who behaved like Trump be elected? Clinton was expected to be perfect, according to contradictory standards, in an election that became a referendum on her likability.

The role of misogyny in this election is in no way undermined by the fact that 52 percent of white women voted for Trump. If anything, that figure should sound alarm-bells for feminists of all stripes,
and redouble our commitment to a more intersectional expression of feminism.

II. The Contingent Factors

We elaborate on what we see as the main contingent factors in our website blog. In the interest of time, we will note them very briefly here:

1. The Clinton Campaign’s Mistakes. Many commentators have notes the campaign’s self-inflicted wounds. Kevin Drum summarizes three major mistakes.

Most significant among these campaign-related factors is the Democratic Party’s failure to reconstitute the coalition that elected President Obama, especially among youth and African Americans. The Party, its progressive allies, the professional consultants, pollsters and media all assumed that the coalition of voters that supported Obama would still be there, ready and willing to push Clinton over the top. But the coalition did not hold. As Anthony Thigpen argues in “Thoughts on the Elections and Strategic Implications, Going Forward,” progressive electoral mobilizations act like an ‘invading army’ that swoops in during elections and then disappears, leaving no permanent structures in place. We don’t use elections effectively, as vehicles for movementbuilding, or as opportunities to advance new narratives. Episodic voter engagement does not a durable voting bloc make.

2. The Media. They got played by Trump. They were slow to see it, as were many progressives. Every outrageous comment or action got amplified, which gave candidate Trump all the free airtime he needed. Meanwhile, Hillary Clinton was held to a much higher standard of reporting. This exacerbated the media’s ‘false equivalency’ tendency, so that the Clinton email server story appeared to be on the same level as the outrageous lies and unfit behaviors exhibited by Trump.

Like the media, we all were, and continue to be, distracted by Trump’s tweet porn.

3. The FBI. The mounting evidence suggests that FBI Director Comey’s eleventh-hour intervention may have had a decisive impact on the election.

4. The Russians! The objectively far more serious email story, involving Russian hackers, continues to unfold, proving either that truth is stranger than fiction, or that we are all trapped in a comedy of the absurd.

PART 2. NAMING THE MOMENT: A CONJUNCTURAL ANALYSIS

Times of crisis — of great upheavals in political and economic structures, when worldviews, ideologies and established theological narratives are called into question, and when identities
become dislocated — carry possibilities for great historic shifts. Unfortunately, there are no guarantees that those shifts will advance human liberation.

Such a moment is what Gramscians refer to as a *conjuncture*. We've been in the midst of a series of overlapping crises since the financial crisis of 2008. Despite global popular resistance to no-strings-attached bailouts and imposed austerity measures, we have yet to force a resolution. And, for the moment, the Right has the upper hand in “resolving” the crisis.

Stuart Hall, in *The Great Moving Right Show*, used conjunctural analysis to explain the rise of Thatcherism in the late 1970s. It was a time when an economic crisis combined with cultural and ideological tensions and contradictions in ways that gave the advantage to right-wing forces. It was not so different from the crises we faced here and around the globe in 2008 thanks to the Great Recession. There are lessons for us today, as we confront our own sharp right turn, or “moving right show.” For the economic, cultural and ideological contradictions laid bare in 2008 have yet to be resolved. Therefore, it is imperative that we understand how, at this moment, both here and throughout Europe, the kind of authoritarian populism Hall described is on the rise, and offers a compelling ‘resolution’ to the crises that people are feeling and experiencing. If we fail to grasp this, we have little chance of pushing back and forcing a more progressive, social democratic resolution.

What Hall observed that is relevant for today, is the way in which extremists on the Right, who operate within the margins of the ruling bloc, lay the groundwork to take full advantage of an economic crisis. When the more liberal and progressive elements of the ruling bloc fail to deliver relief, the Right steps into the breach. Their ideological themes are ready for action, as they already exist within the culture, and already resonate with segments of the population. They include: law and order, naming an ‘enemy within,’ calling for strong authoritarian response to enemies foreign and domestic, and reclaiming a narrow conception of ‘citizenship,’ a process that involves a lot of ‘othering.’ In the case of the UK in the late 1970s, this took the form of arguing that ‘Brittishness’ had been diluted by black and brown immigrants. In the US today, ‘Americanness’ is being forcefully re-articulated as ‘whiteness’ in the face of growing influence of people of color.

But how could the working class switch allegiances so quickly (in the UK, from Labour to Tory, in the US, from Obama to Trump)? According to Hall, right-wing forces can realign working class interests during a crisis when it appears that the ruling parties have too little to offer. In a liberal democracy, the party (or coalition) in charge has two jobs that are difficult to balance. The first is to convince their constituents, and especially their core base, that the national interests, as they define them, are aligned with the bases’ interests. And the second is to enact policies that resolve economic crises in ways that satisfy capitalist interests. The ruling bloc elements that are on the fringes, with some distance from the mainstream of the ruling bloc (in contemporary terms, the leadership of both parties are the mainstream, while Trump claims to be the ‘outsider’), are positioned to step in and realign working class interests with an authoritarian vision for the nation, and one that is exclusive — naming an ‘us’ vs ‘them’ is critical to this realignment. And it works because the seeds of white resentment and reactionary tendencies are already there. They did not suddenly appear out of thin air.
In summary, we may be witnessing a re-articulation of ideas and a re-alignment of governing institutions on the part of forces on the Right. Hall called this an authoritarian populist turn, which he distinguishes from a fascist turn in the following ways: authoritarian-populism weakens democratic institutions, and shakes up democratic norms, but it does not eliminate them. And this re-alignment of institutions and practices will not hold without popular consent. Thatcher succeeded in aligning working class interests with her vision for the nation, which combined nativism with anti-collectivism. But what of the argument that the so-called alt-right are fascists? We would argue that they are proto-fascists, and white supremacists, and we should take those tendencies seriously, but the wave of authoritarian-populist sentiment that they helped create and now can ride, at least for a while, is more authoritarian and reactionary than fascist. Again, consent will be key to their success. Will Trump and the authoritarian white supremacists succeed in gaining popular consent of a majority? We may not have the answer to this yet. And it will be more difficult for him, for them, to do so, if/when we step up our resistance to normalizing anything about this incoming administration, or about Trumpism. Let us be clear about this: we will not consent to Trumpism. And perhaps, neither will a significant number of working class people, even those who voted for him, if we pull together a stronger historic bloc that can attract working people across lines of race, nationality and gender.

PART 3: POPULISM, RACE AND CLASS

1. The role of populism. According to John Judis, populist upsurges are the warning signs of a political crisis. The current wave, here and in Europe, has resulted from worsening economic circumstances and the sense that none of the major parties are able or willing to do anything about it. Some of these upsurges cut to the Left, as in Podemos in Spain, Syriza in Greece, and Sanders in the US (in part building upon momentum created by Occupy Wall Street, along with the spaces created by the Movement for Black Lives, though we’d argue that Sanders was not as good at articulating the intersections of race and class as we would have liked). Others tap indigenous right-wing, authoritarian, nativist and racist tendencies. As Judis argues, right-wing populism shares one thing with Left-leaning populism: disdain for the people and groups at the top, the ruling elites. But the right points middle-and working-class people’s anger toward an ‘other,’ situated closer to the bottom. In their narrative, these ‘others,’ and the elites who unfairly reward them, will bring down our nation. This accords with Hall’s analysis and suggests that we are in the midst of an upsurge that cuts in many directions.

A few weeks before the election, Robert Kuttner prepared a summary of writings about Trump supporters, especially those white working class voters everyone was puzzling over. One report that Kuttner reviewed was based on Katharine Cramer’s research of white working class voters in Wisconsin (who, in many cases, had switched from Democratic to Republican supporters in the last 4 to 6 years). She found people making sense of politics in a way that places resentment towards others at its center. Rural residents think cities take too much at their expense. The largest city, Milwaukee, has a large black population. The next largest, Madison, is seen as a hot-bed of leftists who look upon rural Wisconsinites with disdain. Attitudes towards Milwaukee and its residents betrayed the respondents’ racial resentments, and how it is accelerated by economic anxiety and
cultural dislocation.

The preexisting reactionary base that Trump was able to exploit (much more effectively than we had imagined) is fed a steady diet of resentment by right-wing media and by conservative churches. It speaks to their sense of loss, and of dislocation, as their small towns and economic bases continue to decline. And they reinforce the sense that there are no alternatives to capitalist exploitation. As Arlie Hochschild’s book illustrates, white people living in Cancer Alley in Louisiana know that oil companies have exploited their land and polluted their communities, but they see no alternatives. And they blame big government, welfare, immigration, affirmative action and outside elites for both their economic and their cultural dislocation. We can find similar stories in Eastern Kentucky, Ohio (Kirk Noden) and elsewhere from the South to the Rust Belt. And, without a program for creating new kinds of jobs for the displaced, and revitalization for hollowed out communities, it makes some sense to go for the guy who promises to bring back your old job, no matter how improbable that is (Gary Younge).

While this makes some sense, it does not excuse the fact that these white voters either went along with or were willing to overlook Trump’s overt racism, xenophobia, misogyny, homophobia and general unfitness for office. Among the many bone-chilling sentiments expressed by Trump voters, this one may be the most chilling: “He says the things I am thinking.” As we try to figure a way to reverse this sharp right turn, we cannot dodge the fact of resurgent racial resentment. Which brings us to one of the more disturbing debates among liberal-left groups coming out of the election: which is blaming the Democrat’s losses on identity politics. Not only is it insulting to those who have been directly and viciously attacked and ‘othered’ by Trump and his most deplorable supporters (and the white supremacist/proto-fascists emboldened by his campaign, whom he has been unwilling to disavow), it is a misreading of the history of class formation in this country. Here’s our historical corrective:

2. The Racialization of Class. The phrase “white working class” carries a lot of historical baggage. And we need to unpack it, even as we talk about what to do, how to reach some segments of the ‘white working class.’ Racialization of class, of labor relations, is in our national DNA, just as racialization of citizenship and Americanness. The basic formula, one that we never really broke from: worker = white, slave/servant/under-employed/unemployable = black. After the Civil War, the transition from enslaved to fully enfranchised worker and citizen was thwarted by systematic violence and resistance, which became codified in Jim Crow. The criminalization of blackness, from the 13th Amendment onward, replaced formal slavery while maintaining servile conditions (see Ana DuVernay’s The 13th).

The desire to control Black labor was behind some of the worst Jim Crow practices. It was not acceptable for former slaves to ‘flood the labor market’ and compete with white workers; African American labor power had to be contained; Black codes and Jim Crow made sure that African Americans would not be seen as workers, as part of the working class. At the same time, some European immigrants were being offered the ‘race bargain,’ a shared ‘white identity’ that aligns white working class interests with white ruling elites. The color line was being shaken up by Asian immigration; Mexican farmers and workers were being moved from the white to the colored side of
the color line. Black people were marked out for the lowest wages and worse jobs; as they are forced to the bottom of the labor market, the material conditions of their lives are consequently worse than for the comparable white worker.

3. **Race and national identity.** The very definition of “Americanness” is whiteness. This definition is under threat, in the minds of those for whom it matters, because they see outspoken and powerful people of color everywhere; their numbers are growing, and they are making demands (to be treated as fully human persons with full human rights). Fear of the new demographics runs deep, and it is more easily mined by so-called leaders on the Right than we dared allow ourselves to imagine. We cannot pretend it is not there, or that economic interests are more salient. They are intertwined.

White voters who want to restore ‘whiteness’ to its former, dominant place in politics are “sacrificing themselves,” as Toni Morrison noted in her post-election essay. Alongside of breaking the ‘whiteness-working class’ association, we must break the association between ‘whiteness’ and ‘Americanness.’ Race-neutral populist appeals just won’t do. We also have to call out the morally-bankrupt theological framework that elevates whiteness over all else. As the Reverend Barber points out: “Trump ran his campaign sensing the feeling of dispossession and anxiety among millions of voters — white voters, in the main. And many of those voters — not all, but many — followed Trump because he was willing to trumpet their fury and affirm their sense, deeply rooted in this nation’s history of race and class, that a new world had conspired against their interests. Trump offered no answers to their fears. He merely said, ‘You are right to be afraid and very afraid. Obama is the bogeyman of coming diversity that will undo the world you grew up knowing, and I alone can save you.’” Reverend Barber unsparingly calls out the ways in which the Religious Right that stood behind Trump is theologically wrong and morally bankrupt. He also challenges progressives to reclaim the moral high ground:

“We can’t succumb to those who bought Christianity. Nor can we yield the moral high ground because we’re angry with them.”

4. **The Role of Identity Politics.** When it comes to capitalizing on white resentment, Trump was masterful. But he did not invent white resentment any more than liberals invented identity.

Perhaps the most notorious critique of liberal identity politics came from Mark Lilla, who claimed that liberal discourses on identity are expressive but not persuasive. “Diversity discourse exhausts political discourse.” And political discourse should be larger, and should be about a larger, common good. There is a kernel of truth to this critique of identity politics, in that discourses on the intersections of identities with class are not well-articulated, and they largely are not heard in the noise about ‘political correctness’ on campus, or how Target labels its bathrooms.

Being left progressives, we talk about class a lot, and we talk about it as a set of relations, connected to structural power. And we tend to agree that liberal discourse in general doesn’t deal well with class (which after all, is more than an identity, as is race, as is gender). But Lilla’s critique falls short when he lays the blame for white resentment at the feet of progressives and liberals who care about diversity and identity. Is this the reason white, rural and blue collar Americans experience high
degrees of both economic anxiety and cultural dislocation? Given the onslaught of right-wing narratives that scapegoat and direct anxieties toward ‘others’ who have been ‘unfairly advantaged’ by political and cultural elites, a good many of these folks may believe it. But, in reality, their identities, their ways of life are being threatened, not by transgender rights, but by neoliberal policies and ideas that have hollowed out rural communities and spread the experience of precarity beyond poor communities of color.

If the Democrats have any hope of regrouping and then seizing the future, they would do well to heed this advice from Sean McElwee:

The solution is not for Democrats to abandon “identity politics,” a sneaky term for its commitment to racial justice, gender equality, LGBTQ rights and inclusivity. Rather, Democrats must put forward their own populist agenda, one that addresses the real causes for stagnant wages (financialization, weaker unions, lower minimum wages, slack labor markets) rather than scapegoating immigrants and people of color.

White workers’ identities are in flux. We can and must feel curiosity and sympathy for the conditions and experiences that are causing such a sense of dislocation for this segment of the working class without ignoring how some (perhaps many) people grasp for ‘whiteness’ and ‘nativism’ to make sense of their conditions. Some, hopefully, many, in these segments of the working class are reachable. Some may be willing to step back and examine the racist impacts of their decision to empower a race-baiter who embraces white supremacist fascists. And how these reactionaries will harm our democracy while worsening economic conditions for working people. But many are not reachable. And we should not waste our time on them. They may be part of the 99%, but they will not be part of the new multi-racial bloc that we need to knit together.

In their post-election statement, the Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society argues that question has been called: “Who does America belong to and who belongs to America?” If we dodge the question, for fear it will further alienate the white working class, shame on us. We aren’t doing the white working class any favors. We will be pandering to them in much the same way that conservative elites have done, and continue to do, when we could be working to forge a new power alignment.

PART 4: NAVIGATING THROUGH REACTIONARY TIMES

We like the quote from Dr. King about the arc of history bending toward justice. At the same time, we agree with Stuart Hall that history offers no guarantees. This is why we have to struggle to make history, to actively bend the arc. We know that for the next two to four years, we will need to resist and disrupt the normalization of Trumpism and the potential slide toward fascism. We will need to protect, defend and provide sanctuary to those who will bear the brunt of a reactionary politics steeped in white resentment and ideologies of white supremacy. We will need to defend labor unions, and we will need to keep raising our voices against the further deregulation of Wall Street and extractive industries, as well as the many ways in which the new administration will turn this country into a kleptocracy. As we do these things, let us not abandon the long game. As Dave Mann
puts it, let us “resist forward”: sowing the seeds for longer-term realignment of power. To this end, we will highlight some of the proactive things that are happening at state and local levels that can serve as models for working from and pushing forward a long-term agenda.

Our framework for thinking about the next four years builds off of Gramsci’s notion of forming an historic bloc that can take on the ruling bloc in all of the arenas of struggle, including electoral arenas. We think about it this way: Occupy helped popularize the 99% vs the 1%. And this was powerful; it helped give resonance to Bernie Sanders’ campaign. But the 99% is not a homogeneous grouping, it is full of tensions, contradictions and fault-lines, which we saw so clearly (and painfully) in this election. Our imperative, going forward, is to figure out how to organize key segments of the 99% into a more unified force that is aligned ideologically and strategically, in a way that honors groups’ differences. Without alignment, we won’t have a bloc that is powerful enough do more than defend against attacks.

One of the things Gramsci was confronting when he was writing about Italian working class support for Mussolini in the 1920s and 30s was a tendency on the Left to think of the ‘working class’ as one generic whole that could be united by what he called economic-corporate struggles. He recognized that the ‘working class’ comprised many segments with differing identities and specific needs and interests. People aren’t just “workers” or “black” or “women” or “gay” or “immigrant.” These identities overlap with each other and with other group experiences. Forming a new historic bloc is about the hard work of aligning these multiple and sometimes contradictory identities together, under a common purpose, without collapsing or dismissing those identities. At its best, this is what ‘intersectionality’ might look like.

So what does alignment look like? Shared ideological themes, woven into shared narratives. A shared vision of radically inclusive democracy. A new set of relationships between the economy and our communities — economic democracy. A shared strategic blueprint, including an analysis of the kinds of structural reforms we need, and a sense of the steps we need to take in order to move them. While it may be unlikely that we can advance structural reforms at the national level in the next 2 to 4 years, we will have opportunities in several states to create these kinds of blueprints and align our work around them. Alignment also needs a durable, flexible infrastructure, so that groups can coordinate, sort out a division of labor, and accrue their power.

As we’ve noted before, the current ruling bloc is not homogeneous, and less aligned than it has been in a while. This creates opportunities for us, if we can figure out how to exploit them. Our competing, multi-racial bloc will not be homogeneous, either. This bloc will not hold unless groups representing people of color are at the center, along with organized groups representing the multi-racial working class, which will include white working class folks who can align with inclusive democracy.

Black leadership will be imperative for achieving alignment and for pushing groups to embrace a more liberatory politics. We need black leadership that revives the historic role that black-centered ideas and experiences have played in catalyzing progressive and democratic social movements. White leaders just are not likely to reach for liberation, nor will they be able to operate effectively in multiple spaces, across constituencies, in ways that align different sets of interests. Black leadership
can accelerate progressive efforts to disrupt the mutually reinforcing hierarchies in our society that keep large segments of poor and working class people of color and whites at a disadvantage.

As we break the associations between ‘working class’ and ‘whiteness,’ we will need to strengthen the vehicles that can organize the diverse and often contradictory working class. That includes unions. One thing we are sure to see in the next 2 to 4 years is a much sharper assault on unions; as they are further weakened it will be even harder to center a new bloc around class issues, let alone intersect them with race, gender and climate justice.

For these reasons, we need each sector of the emerging bloc to work on articulating a class politics that actively struggles against the racialization of class in the US. Alongside of this, we can and must put forward policies that redress structural racism and the harm that it has done (targeted universalism, reparations, etc.). Some groups will take the lead on this, others will need to have their backs as they do so. For the next 2 to 4 years, these may be symbolic efforts. But without these efforts, we won’t lay the groundwork for redressing racial injustices later.

Another significant grouping in the bloc (and a grouping with multiple identities) is organizers and leaders of faith. This election, the Christian Right has shown its true colors, so to speak. It is more white than Christian. It is willing to sell out basic tenets of faith and morality, in part because conservative white Christians really believe they are under siege, being discriminated against, marginalized in their own country and communities. We cannot change their minds about this, most likely. But we can lift up a very different moral code, based in a more liberatory theology. And many are doing this: through actions like those led by We Say ENOUGH! and Moral Mondays. In spaces like the Interfaith Organizing Initiative and in faith based organizing networks like the PICO National Network and the Gamaliel Foundation.

Conservative white Christians who have strayed from the faith tenets that support the worth and dignity of all people are not the only face of Christianity in this country, nor are they the exemplars of faith in America; they are not more “American” than Muslims, Jews, Hindus, or progressive Christians. And more mainstream groups, including the US Catholic Bishops, are recognizing that Christian conservatism has gone too far on issues like immigration. We must embrace and work with and support faith-based groups who are interested in liberation, and who see liberation as a core principle of faith, and who ‘get’ intersections of racial and economic justice. They can be a powerful force for change, and a rich source of progressive narrative themes. They must be part of the multi-cultural and multi-faith historic bloc that will move us out of this interregnum toward a popular, democratic and inclusive settlement.

Given the central role of ideological struggle in building an historic bloc, we want to suggest some tools. “Ideological struggle” can sound off-putting, perhaps rigid. In our work ideology is about “making meaning,” including analysis, beliefs, norms and values.

Ideology is important because it is about power, the power to shape people’s conscious and unconscious understandings of the world. As organizers and leaders who are committed to deeply
democratic and inclusive social formations, our approaches to meaning-making are participatory. It is not about telling people what or how to think; it is about creating spaces and opportunities for shared analysis and reflection, where we each bring our hopes and aspirations, our tacit and formal knowledge, our many life experiences, and our identities, to the process of shaking up commonsense and shaping new, resonant narratives. We find that developing narratives is both a concrete and meaningful tool for ideological struggle.

Developing new narratives involves analyzing and unpacking competing narratives in political discourses, and in daily life, as well as shaping our own progressive narratives for social, political and daily life. Through our work on narratives, a few core elements have emerged that can become the basis for a shared ‘meta-narrative;’ these elements can reinforce each other and be reconstituted for different narrative purposes. They connect with fundamental values and beliefs in our many communities and histories, from traditions of resistance to oppression, from religious sources, and more. They are not external to us, they are part of the ‘good sense’ that is within us. Check our website for more about our work on narratives.

ELEMENTS OF STRATEGY FOR THE NEXT 4 YEARS

1. The National Level
This will be an arena of mostly defensive battles, to stop bad stuff where we can, to address the harm done by bad stuff when we must. As we engage in these defensive battles, we will need to critique liberals who call for bi-partisanship or reconciliation, without making them or other liberals the enemy. We will work with them and with Democrats when possible. And we will work around them when we have to. This will be a test of our ability to be critically independent.

We have to think carefully about who should play these roles and work out a strategic division of labor among and within the organizing networks, policy shops, advocacy groups and unions. Some groups will need to go all-in to resist assaults on their communities, and they will need all the support they can get. Others will need to defend safety-net programs, public education, public health and many other public goods from full-on attacks. Unions will need to play a role in this, and progressive allies will need to have Labor’s back as the full-on assaults roll out (national ‘right to work,’ undermining public sector unions, etc). We all will have to respond to a massive reactionary backlash, the likes of which most of us have never seen. To do this well, we will need both greater alignment and an ability to coordinate our efforts.

As we do this, we still need a strategic compass, a sense of large-scale policy proposals that can guide our work. To be clear, resistance and defensive work are not the opposite of offensive and proactive work. Each should contain the seeds of the other. As we resist, we lay the groundwork for advancing more proactive demands. And in the places where we can have more advanced programs (mostly in a few states and cities), we will need to do defensive work as well. For example, in California, even as we move forward with more structural reforms, we will be defending and protecting vulnerable communities. And we will be dealing with the fallout, if and when the Federal government cracks down on the state’s opposition to mandates on immigration, climate, education and other issues.
2. State and Local Possibilities

We think the most promising place to promote a major strategic advance today is at the state level – we can build coherent progressive infrastructure in several states that can lead the resistance while doing more than resist: We must continue the efforts to shape long-term agendas that aim for major transformational goals. As some states move beyond policy campaigns, toward developing a new and collective way of working together, progressives can begin to achieve enough power, i.e. governing power, that it makes a real difference in the conditions for poor and working-class communities, urban and rural, in ways that embrace inclusive democracy, with leadership from communities of color. These models of progressive power in the states will lead us toward a different national politics.

As states work somewhat independently of each other, they also need to network with each other, learn from and support each other, and perhaps in the near future, create multi-state compacts around key issues.

Some interesting ideas for what state-level resistance could look like include what many are calling progressive federalism. This will be complicated for us because of the ways in which federalism has been tied to the noxious history of ‘states’ rights’ advocacy.

The founders had furious debates about the relationship between former colonies and a central government. The emerging ‘federated states’ model hampered what the Federal government could do. States’ rights were invoked to preserve slavery, protect the Jim Crow regime, resist labor reforms, limit New Deal initiatives, as well as to resist desegregation, voting rights, environmental regulations and so much more.

Understandably, we find it difficult to invoke ‘states’ rights’ for progressive causes. But, as Heather Gerken argues, at a time when all branches and agencies of the Federal Government are being taken over by reactionaries, we need to tactically use “federalism” to our advantage, especially in blue states.

Federal policies on the environment, immigration and border control, drug enforcement, health care, education, infrastructure projects and more rely upon state cooperation. The norm is ‘cooperative federalism.’ Conservative state leaders have been willing to break this norm on policies they oppose. Two examples from the past eight years are the implementation of the Affordable Care Act and the Common Core for education.

What if progressive states (and cities) adopted a conscious, calculated ‘uncooperative federalism’ to resist reactionary agendas on immigration, climate policy, healthcare and criminal justice? It carries some risks, but it also can force compromises, while keeping the issues in play. It also has potential to further our work to shake up neoliberal commonsense and put forward new narratives for our collective future.

Another thing states can do is to take leadership in setting higher standards on things like emission controls, living wages, healthcare and other safety-net issues. These initiatives can have spill-over
effects, driving up standards in other states and putting them back on the federal agenda, as well. To paraphrase Michelle Obama, when the Feds go low, blue states should go high.

Frank Ackerman suggests a bold tactic on climate change for blue states. In anticipation of major setbacks in Federal climate policy, and a retreat from global leadership, Ackerman proposes a Green-State Climate Agreement wherein those states whose leaders support strong climate action band together to affirm their commitment to the Paris Agreement’s emissions control targets. Ackerman suggests that as many as 18 states, several cities in red states, tribal leaders across many states, and the District of Columbia could form such a compact. Realistically, it would have to start with a handful of states and then build momentum. Taking a stand with the global community on climate change could set a precedent for multi-state leadership on other issues of global concern, such as the rights of migrants, and of indigenous peoples. These states can affirm that not all of the US is turning its back on progress on climate justice.

This notion of blue state strategies, compacts and alliances that resist the reactionary agenda while asserting global leadership rests upon a level of coordination that we’ve rarely seen in progressive/left politics and organizing. It involves building and supporting state infrastructure as well as multi-state alliances. Where progressive infrastructure already exists, we must shore it up, and move it into higher gear, and do so with a sense of urgency. Some states need to hit the ground running, with efforts to resist bad federal initiatives. Others need to jump-start their efforts to build progressive infrastructure. Still others do not have statewide infrastructure. Even so, they have pockets of progressivism that need to be connected, within their states and across states. But what do we do about the unprecedented number of red states, where both the legislatures and governorships are in conservative hands (not just Republican, but ultra-conservative)? We would argue that it makes the most sense to support local and state organizing led by communities of color, especially where there are opportunities to strengthen an alternative multi-racial bloc that can, over time, transform a state, as may be the case in Texas and Georgia, and ramp up the work in purple states like North Carolina, Colorado and Virginia.

As for the many liberal-leaning cities that are surrounded by a sea of red, let’s not underestimate the symbolic value of their resistance to parts of the Trump agenda. There is great potential in these cities for alignment with segments of blue state infrastructures. They will need protection, and legal support. As they resist; they will be attacked by both their states and the Federal government (which is already making plans to go after ‘sanctuary cities’). These isolated cities and the groups organizing in them need to connect with colleagues in blue states, and with each other, through multistate alliances as well as national networks. Our infrastructure needs to provide spaces for their leaders, while providing resources to help them withstand the state and federal backlash. Blue states can lead the charge. To do so, they will need to resist the temptation to fall back on single-issue work, or issue silo-ing.
3. Climate Justice as a Cross-Cutting Issue

Addressing climate change could emerge as the greatest cross-class and cross-regional issue of the next period, with the greatest potential to split the power elite and corporate world. We need to factor that into our strategy, even while we feel such despair about all-but-certain reversals of existing environmental protections. As gloomy as these prospects are, we can take much inspiration from movements like Standing Rock and work on a just transition, which are about so much more than climate change.

The activists and leaders at Standing Rock have given us a model for using powerful counter-narratives to expose the bankruptcy of the dominant narrative about energy, economic development, exploitation of natural resources, and the prerogatives of corporations. It is a compelling example of how to link climate justice with racial and environmental justice, with demands for respect, dignity and sovereignty, and a demonstration of what a more democratic and ecological way of life could look like, led with faith and love.

This also is playing out in several regions of the country in the form of work on sustainable jobs for a greener future, referred to as “Just Transition.” From the coalfields of eastern Kentucky to the oil refineries of Richmond, California, communities and workers most directly affected by extractive industries are demanding sustainable local economic development and job creation. They want more than false promises; they know that the dirty jobs of the past cannot be the jobs of the future. The slow, steady work of creating and transitioning to a sustainable future will involve every sector in these frontline communities.

4. An Electoral Strategy for Building Political Power

This is no time to retreat from electoral engagement. To address the structural factors at play in this election we need smarter, more focused and more year-round electoral engagement as well as more independent political formations that can operate both within and outside of existing party. We see signs of electoral fatigue, understandably, and some discussion about whether we should continue to invest in electoral engagement. As Anthony Thigpen argues, to get through this immediate period, we will need multiple forms of power, and many modalities: direct action, mass protest, alongside legislative and electoral campaigns, and leadership that can navigate each of these kinds of activities and help knit it all together. In order to do this, we need to discuss and address the ways in which protest and mass action gets counter-posed with electoral work and building electoral political power.

A more critically independent political infrastructure in the states will help with creating alignment for our multicultural progressive bloc (something like Bill Fletcher’s NeoRainbow Coalition.) One pitfall we need to avoid is magical thinking about demographic shifts. As we have seen, white fear of a multiracial people of color majority is part of what fuels the current backlash. The white supremacist, proto-fascist ‘alt’ right that now has access to the federal government will do its best to impose limits on the emerging majority’s political and economic power. We can see it playing out right now in North Carolina where reactionary Republican legislators have taken unprecedented measures to hamstring the incoming liberal-leaning Governor. But even without a well-organized
backlash, we cannot assume alignment among groups that make up the emerging majority. Alignment must be built. It has to be constantly negotiated in good faith.

In terms of a blueprint for year-round and strategic electoral engagement at the state level, we recommend Anthony Thigpen’s essay. Along with his aforementioned critique of ‘invading army’ approaches to voter mobilizations, he makes the case for why integrated voter engagement builds power that permeates all of social change, not just voting. If we can connect our voter engagement base with the civic engagement infrastructure, we can more effectively exercise power in multiple forms.

**CONCLUDING THOUGHTS**

We have difficult days (and years) ahead of us. We must be clear-headed and ‘pessimistic’ (in the Gramscian sense) about what we are facing. Veterans of the civil rights movement who lived through the many backlashes that followed know what it is like to see everything you’ve worked for under threat of being rolled back. And we can scarcely imagine what it was like for a newly enfranchised black American during the days when Reconstruction was dismantled and replaced by Jim Crow. But these same veterans of past historic struggles against reactionary forces have lessons to teach us about how we can rise above this particular reactionary moment. We have the tools to move toward the truly inclusive democracy that this nation has yet to achieve. If, as Reverend Barber suggests, we are witnessing the birth pangs of something new, (what he calls a “Third Reconstruction”), then we must become skilled and creative midwives.

It is a long-haul struggle. And we have more questions than answers. Our aim, going forward, is to work collaboratively with the organizations and networks that have been in the struggle for the long haul, and that are willing to push beyond their strategic limitations, to advance a long-term agenda while resisting the reactionary forces. At the same time, we also will support those who need to create new kinds of organizations and formations, especially in communities of color, with an emphasis on black leadership. With optimism of the spirit, we pledge to work on creating opportunities and spaces for bringing these formations and constituencies together into a powerful historic bloc that represents our complex, diverse, and often contradictory, communities.