

GRASSROOTS POLICY PROJECT

Theories of Power for Activists

January 2007

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There is growing recognition among many leaders in labor, community organizing, environmental groups, anti-poverty advocacy and cultural activists that fragmented, issue-by-issue approaches have failed to build progressive power. As leaders shift more of their focus toward building movement infrastructures that could include research, policy, and academic institutions, roles for scholars become more evident. Within the context of infrastructure, we can imagine roles, relationships and many possibilities for joining together scholarship and action.

Power Analysis

While there are many unexamined assumptions about power among activists, the leaders we work with say they want to build power, not just have access to and influence with decision-makers.

In fact, most of the organizations we know about, far beyond the ones we work with directly, think and talk about power, and have some ideas about building power. Probably the most common approach to power derives from “common sense” observations of local politics and decision-making. Common sense suggests that power is the ability to get people to do things they don’t want to do, and organizers say that there are two sources of power – organized people and organized money. Common sense and good organizers have built impressive organizations that have achieved important victories for millions of people over the past 30 years.

This approach to power is familiar to social scientists; we might think of it as pluralism seen through the eyes of a pragmatic community organizer. It has all the strengths and weaknesses of pluralist models of decision-making in America. It is better than a belief that power is something other people do and that an organization will win because it is “doing the right thing.” The modified pluralist model makes sense. It offers measurable results in terms that are easy to understand. This is important in terms of the “incentives structure” to which most movement organiza-

tions are subservient: foundations and large donors give money to things that they can understand and measure. GPP works with organizations that have operated with this model, and under these incentives.

Using these approaches, groups have achieved significant victories. Nevertheless, the leaders of these groups are dissatisfied and self-critical. They want to do something more than all-out mobilization for a legislative victory (or defeat), or one more electoral cycle that seems just like the last one. They want to be less reactive. These feelings have opened the door to a broader discussion about power and strategy.

The Three Faces of Power

Most groups engage in some form of ‘power analysis,’ whether it is mapping current players or imagining what our society would look like if progressives had power on a larger scale. Since we are also deeply interested in questions of power, we can engage groups about something they are already interested in.

The tools that groups use for power analysis tend to provide one-dimensional snap-shots — force field analysis, mapping the alignment of groups and resources, etc. Power maps are particularly useful tools for developing issue campaigns and tracking their progress. A good power map also can illuminate the need for longer-term strategies to shift power relations in a region. However, these one-dimensional tools do not lend themselves to an analysis that pushes the theoretical boundaries, beyond groups’ pluralist assumptions.

As we struggled to find and develop better tools for power analysis, we needed a theory that could explain the shift in the political agenda over the past 30 years. Better yet, we wanted a theory that could help groups move to a

* Excerpted from “Movement Strategy for Organizers” by Sandra Hinson and Richard Healey. In *Rhyming Hope and History: Activists, Academics and Social Movement Scholarship*. University of Minnesota Press, 2005

more proactive level of contesting for power. For the past four years, we have used an analysis of power derived from Stephen Lukes' book, *Power: A Radical View* (1974). We started with Lukes' three dimensions of power, which we summarize as 1) observable decision-making based on observable differences of interests; 2) non-decision-making based on observable differences of interest (i.e. agenda-setting), via the "mobilization of bias;" 3) decision-making and non-decision-making based on preventing people from understanding and articulating their real interests.

As we did workshops and trainings using these concepts, we found that in going from the academic sphere to the activist organization, we needed to:

- translate ideas and terms
- shift from analysis to strategy
- adapt the strategy to concrete circumstances.

The first task is translation. Lukes' book was intended as an intervention in a long-running academic debate, not as a manual on strategy. His framework needs some translation for the situations activists face in their organizing, networking, coalition-building, media and communications strategies, etc. The first face of power — observable decision-making — is familiar to the activists we work with and needs little or no translation. The second face of power needs a complicated kind of translation. The idea of getting something onto the political agenda, or keeping something off the agenda, makes a kind of immediate sense. Translating mobilization of bias into organizational power makes sense, but it leaves out too much of the large-scale, networked organizational structure we are interested in. All the organizations we know think about capacity building, but rarely about the relation of organizational power to long-term goals and to the architecture and the ideological and political glue that holds disparate organizations together. It is the networked and goal-oriented structure that we want to get at in translating the phrase mobilization of bias for activists.

We define the second face of power in terms of *developing infrastructure*. That is, organizations create formal and informal networks to wield power for achieving larger goals. Coalitions, trade associations, overlapping boards, and country club memberships are ways of building ties between organizations to pursue common goals. We use the term political infrastructure to indicate the most developed and coherent networks of organizations that have implicit or explicit goals that go beyond the immediate interests of the member organizations.

This last point is the most interesting one: how and why do organizations work together in ways that go beyond their self-defined or manifest goals? For example, the Christian Coalition, the NRA, and the Business Roundtable are part of the corporate-conservative infrastructure. To better understand the relationships between them, we ask: How do members of the NRA, whose members endorse the stated goals around guns, understand their organization's relationship to corporate interests? There is a tension between the NRA's manifest goals and its activities as part of the corporate-conservative network. Managing this kind of tension is a key aspect of conservative strategy. For progressive and left social change activists and organizers whose focus has been single-issue politics, the absence of an infrastructure has made it extremely difficult to navigate the inevitable tensions between social, economic and environmental justice goals, not to mention identities.

The third face of power is about the common sense notion that people derive much of their conceptual framework from society at large. We define the third face as using cultural beliefs, norms, traditions, histories and practices to shape political meaning, the ways that people understand the world around them, their roles in the world, and what they see as possible. This definition of the third face provides a fairly clear translation of Lukes. It was his inclusion of the third face that led to the word radical in the subtitle of his book. Our translation is intentionally naïve in that it avoids what we might call "the ideology problem." Flacks and others have noted that social movement scholars tend to avoid dealing directly with questions of ideology. As Flacks puts it, "Once upon a time, the study of ideology in relation to action was a topic of major interest, but it is one of those questions that now are out of fashion." (2002)

In order to work with groups on bringing worldview into their work, we have to confront at least 30 years of resistance to talking about ideology as part of organizing. The 70's saw a rise in public interest and community organizing that was decidedly non-ideological, as exemplified by the common saying, "organizers check their ideology at the door." One aspect of the legacy of Alinsky and the professionalization of organizing was the tendency to avoid ideological struggle. One assumption that took hold in both community organizing and public interest advocacy is that organizers should avoid talking explicitly about ideologies. The prevailing wisdom in organizing was that, when people come together around a common interest, or to solve a particular problem, the experience of collective action to achieve a goal will precipitate a shift in their consciousness. This reinforced the notion that organizers

did not need to directly engage members in ideological discussions and analysis. This evolving orthodoxy about non-ideological organizing was bolstered intellectually by Boyte's writings about 'free spaces' (Fisher and Kling). Alternatively, congregation-based organizing generally saw Judeo-Christian beliefs as the ideological basis for their work.

We use the term worldview to describe the terrain of struggle around the third face of power, in part to avoid the connotations associated with the word 'ideology.' We talk about how people are influenced by multiple, often contradictory, belief systems. We stress that though there is a dominant worldview, people live with contradictory beliefs and behaviors. Further, peoples' instincts and beliefs can move in either democratic or authoritarian directions. We also stress the centrality of race in shaping peoples' political consciousness. Without a larger framework that moves people from specific interests towards a critical analysis of social and power relations, most people who get involved in a single-issue campaign will lose interest after the specific campaign is done. They are less likely to see and feel the connections between their own issues and the struggles of others in their communities and in the larger world.

We have noted that translation is the first task in moving from the academic to the activist sphere. The second task is to shift from analysis to strategy. The three faces framework is a nuanced and layered analysis of how power operates in our society. Activists need more than analysis. They need a way to operationalize a theory of power. They need a theory that suggests ways to build power adequate to their goals and purposes. And they need to do so in terms of their own circumstances, so a theory of power and social change has to be contextualized to different circumstances. ■

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