The Three Faces of Power

Richard Healey and Sandra Hinson

THE THREE FACES OF POWER
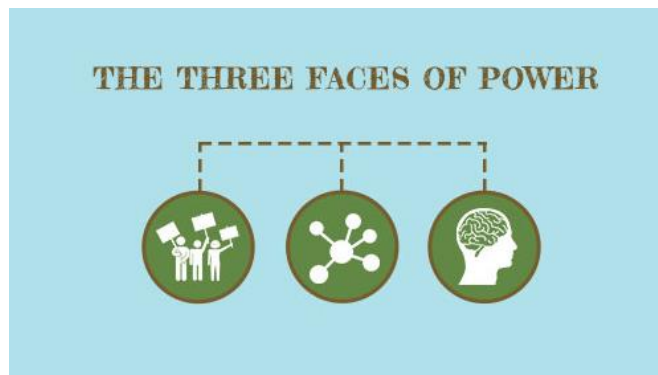
GRASSROOTS
POLICY PROJECT

"Power is the ability to achieve a purpose. Whether or not it is good or bad depends upon the purpose."

—Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
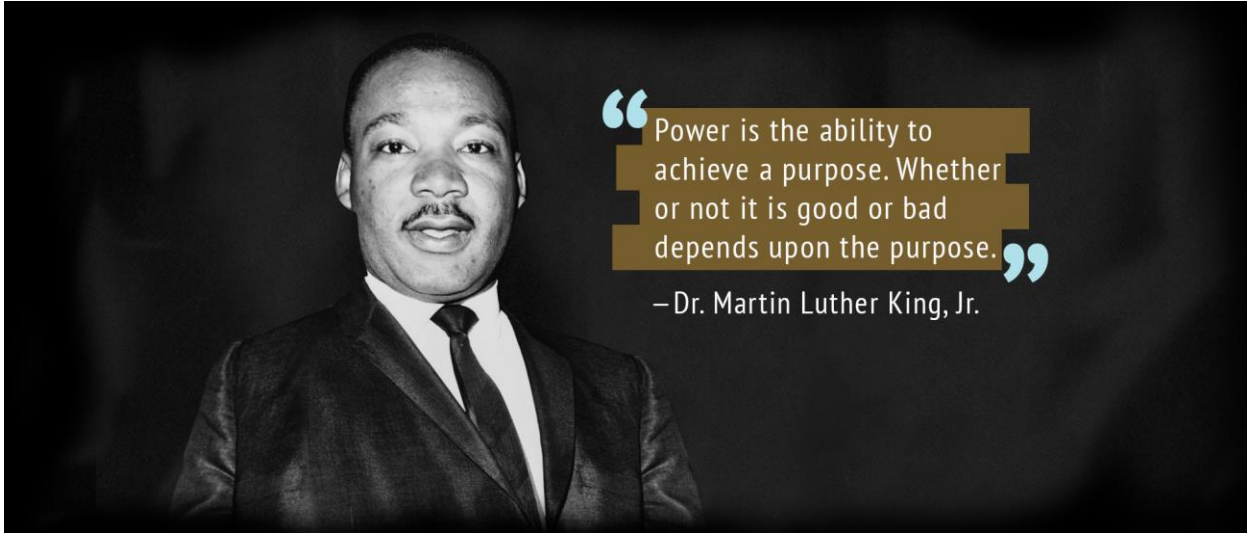
INTRODUCTION

We find ourselves in a moment when most Federal agencies and offices are controlled by reactionary-right conservatives, forcing us to defend vulnerable communities and resist bad initiatives. At first blush, it looks like we have very little room to advance a more proactive agenda that has the potential to shift power relations and transform our political and economic systems. But we argue that we have opportunities to model a different politics and to provide strategic leadership on issues of racial, economic and environmental justice even as we resist reactionary federal action. With attention to building and strengthening movement infrastructure and winning the battle of ideas, we can do more than resist. We can lay the groundwork for a larger-scale transformation of power relations in our society, and, in so doing, build an inclusive democracy.

The word *power* is derived from the Latin word *potere*, which means "to be able." This basic definition focuses on power as the potential to shape our lives and the world around us. While there are many definitions of this word, power as "capacity" to do things to "achieve a purpose" is a good starting point. We are especially interested in understanding power as a way of describing a set of relationships between and among people, taking place within an historical context and through social structures.

Here are a couple of examples of the way in which power-as-capacity is structured through relationships and positions in society. Teachers structurally have power with respect to students — it comes with the position. And students also have some kinds of power. Employers have enormous power: to hire and fire employees, to use their capital without regard to the desires of the employees, etc. And workers have power — they can go on strike, slow down the pace of work, and disrupt the economy. No one employer or employee may do any of these things, but they have the ability to do them, even if they don't use it. Capacity isn't always exercised, or overt, but that doesn't mean it doesn't exist.

Structural power comes from the relationships that social groups have with each other, and

because of their structural position in society. As the second example suggests, class is a structural relationship and the kinds of power that owners and workers have is shaped by and through this relationship. Race also is a key variable in structuring power relationships in our society in ways that create and maintain racial hierarchies and race-based disparities which have accumulated over the past five centuries. Similarly, power relations correspond with the ways in which gender roles are constructed. Power relations based on gender permeate our institutions to the extent that, even when individuals try to behave differently, the social structures tend to perpetuate inequality.

FACES OF POWER

Power is multi-dimensional. Teasing out the different expressions of power is useful for analytic purposes, and for shaping organizing strategies that will transform current power relations. As we examine these faces of power, we also want to avoid treating them as separate categories. We want to emphasize that they are dynamic and interrelated; seperable but not separate.

In brief, the three faces of power are:

1) Organizing people and resources for direct political involvement in visible decision-making arenas;

2) Building durable, long-term political infrastructure: networks of organizations that are aligned around shared goals, who can shape political agendas;

3) Making meaning on the terrain of ideology and worldview;

What follows is our in-depth analysis of these three faces, and how we can use them to build a more powerful and sustained popular-democratic alliance of diverse constituencies and sectors.

1) Organizing people and resources for direct political action, with clear targets, such as lawmakers, legislatures, corporate boards and CEOs, Wall Street, and sometimes, through the courts. These are the most visible decision-making arenas. 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.* Over the past 40 years, most of the campaigns, organizing, and electoral work of social movements have been focused on this first face of power. Over the last several years, we have seen movement groups become more 'multi-dimensional' in their approaches (how and why this has happened is worthy of its own essay).

THE THREE FACES OF POWER

1. The Power of Organizing

2) Building infrastructure and shaping the political agenda.

Movement-building work requires intentionality and time and resources, it doesn't just happen and it isn't easy. To get at this intentional and hard work, we prefer to use the term 'infrastructure-building.' In a period of time when lots of people are mobilized, we need infrastructure that can channel individuals and groups into sustained, long-term political engagement toward building collective power.

Most social movement groups have some experience with working in coalitions with other groups, and sometimes across sectors (labor, community, faith-based, advocacy, issue-based, etc). But until recently, the standard Alinsky approach has been "no permanent friends, no permanent enemies." In the last few years, more organizations have understood that organizing organizations into durable and deep alliances is a requisite for accruing the power we need to get beyond reactive fights. It is necessary if we want to set the agenda instead of reacting to the corporate-conservative agenda. Another related element in building infrastructure is leadership development. In order for organizations to function within a larger infrastructure, their leaders have to be developed more as movement leaders, not just organizational or issue leaders.

Over the past 45 years, corporations have been able to advance their interests through alliances with other conservative groups, working together through loosely coordinated and overlapping networks of organizations operating at the 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. And while they are not always completely in sync politically, the disparate parts of this infrastructure are motivated by a shared goal of enlarging and maintaining the power to govern: shaping political agendas and moving the country farther to the right.

THE THREE FACES OF POWER

**2. The Power of Political Infrastructure-Building**
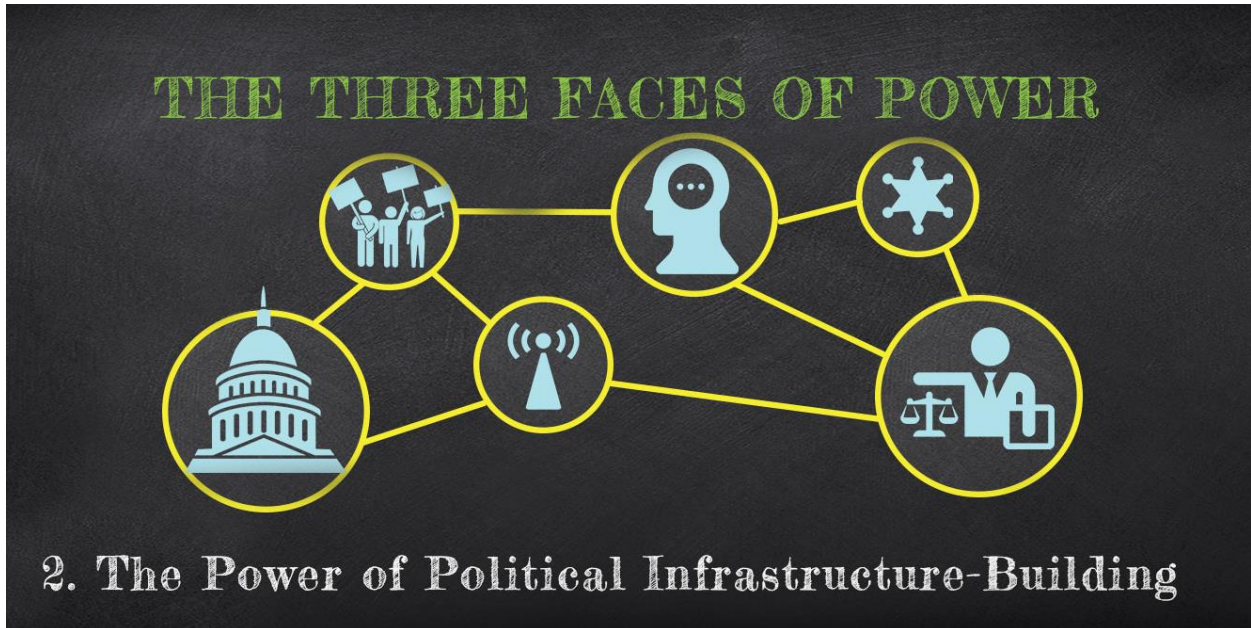
We don't have anything comparable to the corporate-conservative infrastructure. But we do have elements and fragments that we can knit together. More organizations today are thinking about long-term alliances with other progressive organizations, not just ad hoc coalitions.

3) Ideology and worldview: shaping meaning

The third face is about the power to shape people's conscious and unconscious understandings of the world, of what is politically possible, and of their own place in the world. This kind of power operates in the arena of worldview, where myths, stereotypes and values from our cultures and histories converge, and sometimes diverge. Those who control meaning-making institutions have this kind of power: religious institutions, educational institutions, the media, television, mass consumer culture, popular ideas about government, major political parties, and so on. The ability to shape how people understand and think about race and identity, about family and gender, about the economy and the market, and about the government – is a dimension of power that conservatives have harnessed much better than we have.

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." Ideologies and worldviews are always being contested, especially in politics. Still, a core set of beliefs about our society are *culturally dominant. For example, most of us are familiar with the "American Dream": this is the land of opportunity; if you work hard, you can get ahead. People are individually responsible for their own economic and social fate, which justifies the inequality around us. At the same time, a large percentage of the population dislikes big corporations and Wall Street, and isn't sure that the American Dream has meaning any more. As we've just seen in the Presidential election, these sentiments can hue to the right, in a reactionary and nativist populism where anger at the top 1% gets channeled toward an 'other' that exists nearer to the bottom of the socioeconomic scale. And the American Dream formula, just like so much in our society, is racially coded as 'white.'*

THE THREE FACES OF POWER

3. The Power of Narrative, Worldview and Ideology
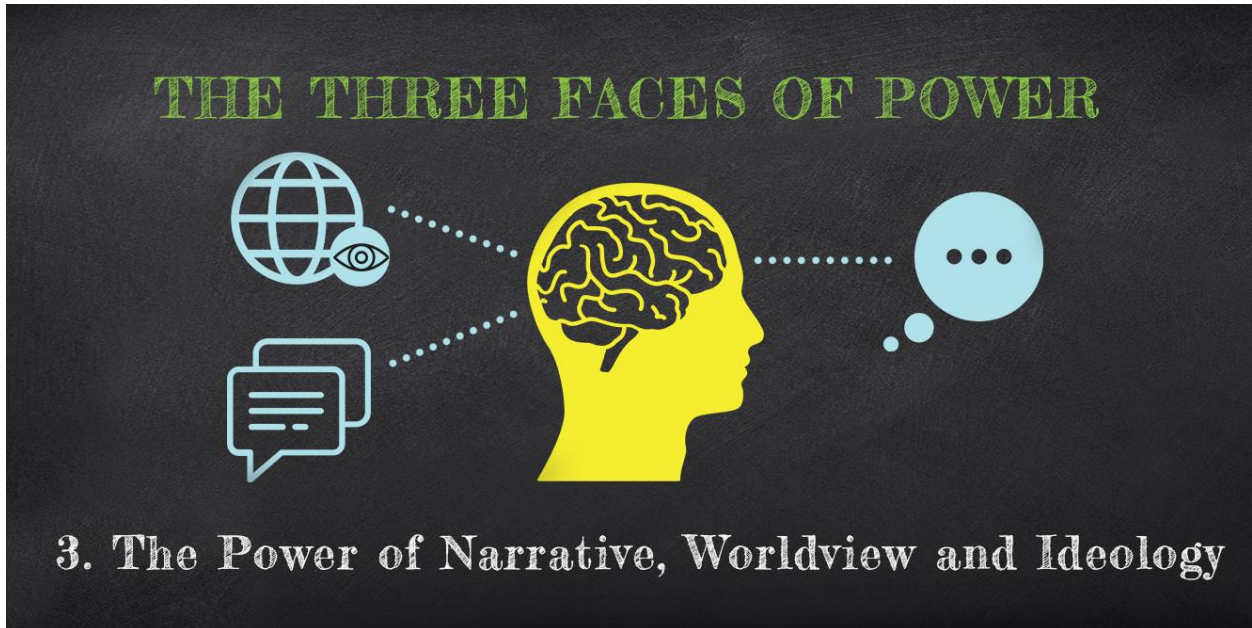
The Right uses a mix of neoliberalism, libertarianism, and right-wing populism to give meaning to social and political issues. Each of these has its own perspectives, but they share a core set of overarching themes:

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, as well as the conservative 'natural order' with regard to nationalism, race, gender and sexuality.

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) a heavy emphasis on hyper-individualism. This works because people value individuals. The problem is that their version of individualism assumes that the individual is self-constituted. So instead of a society where every individual is part of a greater whole, hyper-individualism reflects Margaret Thatcher's maxim that "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 core themes have been invoked together in essentially every policy fight and national election for the past 45 years. These four ideas function together to create a coherent overarching or 'meta' narrative' to understand our society, within which they can construct varied and more specific narratives. These themes 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 an Administration that willingly exploits 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.

The following diagram illustrates the idea of this linkage:
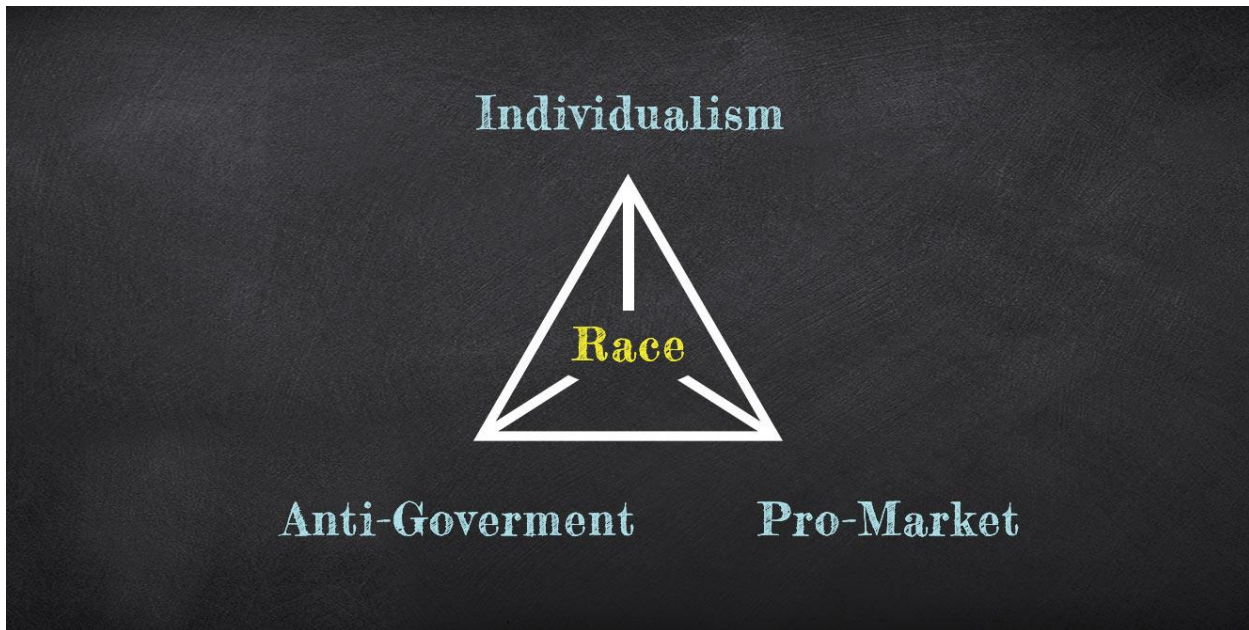
The articulation of these themes reinforces a neoliberal ideology, with a particular American emphasis on race. The Right has been successful in disseminating these ideas, to the point where many people take them to be commonsense. It has been intentional in the use of race to stigmatize government, to justify mass incarceration, and the dramatic underfunding of 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 Lopéz uses the term *strategic racism* to capture the intentional use of race to stigmatize government, taxes, and so on.

Worldview and narratives often are the key to gaining and maintaining peoples' consent to the status quo. Alongside of consent, however, there are coercive forces at work. Throughout US history, coercion and the threat of state-sanctioned violence has played a key role in maintaining a racial hierarchy — from slavery to Jim Crow; from ghettoization to the War on Drugs and the criminalization of black and brown communities and youth of color today. And it is a cornerstone of our morally bankrupt immigration system, which blatantly targets immigrants of color. Force teams up with ideology, in this case, ideologies of racial and cultural superiority. The terrain of worldview is where the ideas about the contours of "legitimate" uses of force and coercion gets negotiated.

SUMMARY

Aligned corporate conservative forces have focused on building their capacity to govern society, and to keep us on the defensive as we struggle to expand democratic rights and shared prosperity. They have built a powerful infrastructure that aligns their first face issue fights with a long-term agenda for governing power. They have taken the power of ideas very seriously, and they dominate the ideological terrain. The threat of coercion also lurks within the first and second faces of power, most often cloaked in appeals to 'law and order' and safety and security, which are legitimated and/or contested through the third face.

The main take-away for progressives is that as a movement, we need to invest much more in the 2nd and 3rd faces of power. Individual organizations each would have to make an assessment of the appropriate roles and strategic allocation of resources among these faces of power. There is no abstract formula that would parse that out for any one group.

The power we seek to build requires democratic people's institutions — new formations as well as stronger existing ones — such as unions, faith-based groups, community organizing, racial justice organizers and leaders and the kinds of networks and alliances that can align their interests and develop a shared strategy for transforming society. 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 us hopeful in what otherwise feels like a hopeless time.