Alternatives to the Conservative Narrative  
Richard Healey, November 24, 2012

Narrative, framing, ideology

_Narrative_ is a buzzword that seems to have replaced _framing_ in political discourse, as in the oft-repeated injunction, “progressives need a narrative.” I find it more logical to think in terms of ideology and worldview, as articulated in particular by Stuart Hall, but for this brief paper _narrative_ shall be the topic.

One problem with the term, however, is that it has two distinct, significantly different meanings. The first meaning is story-telling. Workshops on narrative emphasize the elements of a good story, including plot, characters, challenge and resolution. Fair enough. The second meaning pushes us deeper. It is about a core set of ideas – big ideas – that lie behind what political groupings say and advocate. Awkward as the term is, let’s define _meta-narrative_ as the set of big ideas that a political party or social movement is or at least could be guided by. For this paper _narrative_ will refer only to story telling. These two meanings can be combined, in creating a “progressive narrative” that would be in fact many well-crafted and well-told stories, based on a core set of ideas — a meta-narrative.

The dominant narrative

For several decades, corporate-conservatives have dominated political discourse. Put schematically, their narratives have been based on four interlocking big ideas:  
1) government is inefficient and wasteful; it’s intervention in society should be minimized except for the necessary and appropriate functions of military defense and defense of market and property.  
2) the free market is inherently efficient; competition and choice provide the appropriate and in some sense natural way to judge and reward the winners in social and economic arenas.  
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) race matters: some groups are “takers,” whose dependence on government hurts them, as it wastes the resources generated by more productive groups. This dependency and its consequences are reflected in the need for measures of social control over such groups. (Of course “race” is often encoded; these same forces argue that we are in a post-racial society, that it doesn’t really matter, even while they send out signals that use race to undermine support for government.)
These four ideas function together to create a powerful idea of how to understand society. They are tightly linked, or rather, articulated together, as Stuart Hall says, to create something more than the sum of their individual parts. The election was marked by an explicit narrative about the government taking money from white people – who earned it by market competition, by their hard work and discipline – and giving it to undeserving people who allowed themselves to be dependent on government handouts. Note in particular the connection between the usual conception of individualism and race, as analyzed by John Powell and others, pushed to an extreme by the Right.

The following diagram is an attempt to illustrate the idea of this linkage:

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Individualism
   /
  /  
Race
   
Anti-government
       
Pro-market
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The first three ideas, individualism, the Market, and a limited role for government, have deep roots in American history. In the late 1940s and 1950s, after the Depression, they had less hold on many Americans — until race was added. The Southern Strategy, law and order, welfare queens and the horrors of public housing – race was and is the cultural and political driver that brought the three other themes into a new coherence and political resonance. And this kind of use of race has roots that are even deeper in US history.

These four themes are articulated together to form a meta-narrative that grounds and permeates corporative-conservative narratives. They appear together in every policy debate and election season over the last 40 years. It is this powerful and coherent meta-narrative that has dominated political discourse in this country – in part because of the lack of any coherent alternative to it. Until recently, it was hard to find in popular discourse a critique of this meta-narrative and in particular of the ideology of the free market. Starting in the 1940s, liberals and subsequently progressives retreated from such a critique, as they found themselves denounced as socialists and communists for even hinting at it, as were civil rights activists when they made links between racism and economic exploitation.

I want to say something about what some of the elements of a left meta-narrative might be. First, I want to note that we are on the tricky ground of ideology here, and we need to avoid the temptation to simply invert each element of the Right’s meta-narrative, whatever that might be. For example, putting community (or society) in opposition to individual would not negate the underlying problems or racial premises of individualism. If the Right is ideologically “anti-government,” (whatever the many contradictions to that stance, e.g. corporate subsidies and profitable regulations,
such as intellectual property rights), the left doesn’t need to be “pro-government.” Separating economy from government is useful for the Right, ideologically, but not for us, and in any case it is more accurate to grasp how deeply interconnected and mutually defining government and market are. And there is nothing magical about the number four; in fact I have left out critical features of conservative ideology, such as gender and nationalism-patriotism-militarism.

Elements of an alternative meta-narrative

For the purposes of this brief document, I want to suggest four elements that could be part of a progressive counter-narrative, in parallel and in critique of the four elements of the Right’s meta-narrative. Any meta-narrative has to include a conception of the role of government, the role of the market, individualism, and race.

In place of hyper-individualism, our starting point might be acknowledging that each of us is constituted by multiple identities and relationships, situated differently in racial, gender, class and other socially constructed categories, and by our histories. There is no category with normative or universal priority, no standard of the rational, abstracted white male by each all are measured.

As opposed to treating the State and the economy as separate, they are intertwined and reciprocally constituted. Both governmental and corporate power reach deeply into people’s lives. We want democratic control over concentrated power, in governmental or corporate form. Power is ambiguous, it can be used in many ways: we should be suspicious of it wherever it is or can be concentrated. At the same time, we want to make use of government and the economy to promote the common good all for people. In a country where gated communities and prisons proliferate, where mass incarceration, the criminalization of immigrants, and inequality go hand in hand, the notion of the common good has to be understood in terms of equity and situatedness, not abstractions. The same is true for the previous suggestion about democratic control over power – for differently situated people to have the capacity, the time and resources, to participate fully in democratic forums.

Following my earlier comment about avoiding simple inversions, our stance should be neither pro-government nor anti-market. The power of government and the economy will always be contested terrain and it will always be a doubled-edge sword, able to promote humane goals and also able to subordinate people and keep them in their place. I would suggest our stance should be correspondingly two-sided:

• use government and the market to advance our social, economic, and political goals.
• limit and check the power of government and corporations. We want a society that promotes people’s autonomy, their capacity for self and mutual development, and in Dick Flack’s phrase, their ability to “make history.”

Race has been and is the driving force of the corporate-conservative meta-narrative. What is our cultural and political driver? The moments when I have seen something come close to being such a driver were during the Black Liberation Movement, the
Women’s Liberation Movement, and the Gay Liberation Movement. When I read the Combahee River Manifesto, I feel some of what those movements represented: the possibility of transformation – for those oppressed, and for all people. These liberation movements did not usually speak in the terms of faith or religion. But I think that these movements and others around the world spoke to people in moral terms: they were rooted in faith, in spirituality, in a belief in the hope, the necessity and the possibility of human transformation and liberation.

My suggestion for a powerful driver for the progressive narrative is this kind of faith. This isn't “faith” as an abstraction or necessarily religion. It is faith as an affirmation of the human capacity and need for a deeper meaning and possibilities for our lives. More practically, faith and spirituality are constructed and function on the terrain of ideology. Faith, religion, and spirituality are intertwined in this country with the dominant narrative, with race and hyper-individualism, and they can be in tension and opposition to it.

These four themes can be put into the same form as the Right’s meta-narrative:

Race is not explicit in this diagram; each of the terms needs to be set in the context of our racialized society. That is, an understanding of race needs to run through each of the four themes. However, at this point this is just a diagram with four ideas and connecting lines. The ideas in themselves don’t yet form a meta-narrative, but they suggest the kind of thinking that is necessary before we can generate progressive narratives that cohere together and that lay out big ideas about the role of government, the role of the market, the individual, and racial justice.