

GRASSROOTS POLICY PROJECT

Power and Social Change

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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

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. However, power also has to do with “control, influence or authority over others.” (Webster’s Dictionary).

We use the word power as a way of describing a set of relationships between and among people, taking place within an historical context and through given social structures. Consider the relationship between employers and workers. In a society in which most of us (over 60 percent) do not have power over the pace and content of our work, or the power to organize and direct production, class distinctions continue to play an integral role in defining and perpetuating unequal power relations. Likewise, the historic role of race and of racism in shaping all aspects of society is a critical factor in understanding current, unequal power relations in all spheres of life—economic, political and social. 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.

Power-over and power-with. Traditionally, power is thought of in terms of *power-over*. An employer has power over employees because she can fire them. The employer has even more control if jobs are scarce and workers are forced to compete for them. In housing, landlords, lenders and realtors have power because they control who gets housing. Some collective approaches to shifting power in relation to jobs and housing include organizing workers into unions, organizing tenants and creating housing

co-ops. These are examples of people coming together to shift control over resources by exercising *power-with* instead of power over. *Power-with* emphasizes inter-dependence and collective action among community members, constituencies and workers as a way of shifting and expanding power for the good of the whole, rather than the benefit of the few.

The Three Faces of Power

The 3 faces of power are: 1) direct political involvement; 2) organizational infrastructure; and 3) ideology and worldview.

The 1st face of power: direct political involvement in visible decision-making

People often think of power in society as shaping the results of political decision-making: policies, laws, rulings and decisions made by public officials, legislators, and members of the executive and judicial branches of government. Electing public officials is part of the 1st face of power. The political parties, PACs, lobbyists, and major contributors are dealing with this arena much of the time. Progressive groups are attempting to exercise power in the 1st face when they lobby for bills or fight against bad laws, register voters, hold accountability sessions with public officials, and are involved in activities connected with day-to-day politics.

Gaining access to the arenas where decisions are made is very important. However, it can be all consuming. It can keep us focused on the short-term, on this election and this legislative session and this immediate, visible struggle. It can divide and fragment us into disparate issue groups, each reacting to the immediate challenges in its issue area. Even multi-issue groups fragment their work, as it is often an effective way to organize in the short run, and it isn’t so obvious what the down-side is.

A popular myth about the way power works in a democracy is that the rules are fair and that the playing field is more or less level. It overlooks all the unacknowledged rules

that tend to reinforce the structures of power that shape our society; this means that many groups in society have little or no access at all. To better understand how power operates to keep so many people out of the game, we need to look at power's other faces.

The 2nd Face of Power: building infrastructure, and shaping the political agenda

The formal political arena is not the only game in town. The power to shape what gets on the political agenda or what is kept off, is another, less visible face of power. Behind-the-scenes forces are at work to determine who gets a seat at the decision-making tables and whose issues get addressed. Keeping things off of the agenda is one way that the powerful can avoid serious challenges to their power.

Just how do these behind-the-scenes forces exercise their power to shape and constrain the political agenda? They usually do it through organized networks. Corporations, trade unions, think tanks, universities, media, religious groups and other organizations try to influence what is on the political agenda. They exercise the power to shape the agenda not as isolated organizations, but as part of a network or political infrastructure. 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, with implicit or explicit goals that go beyond the immediate interests of the member organizations.

Political infrastructure

The American Heritage Dictionary defines *infrastructure* as the underlying foundation for a system. It is telling that the example they use is the conservative infrastructure in this country. We would argue that it is actually a corporate *and* conservative infrastructure, given the centrality of corporations in this network. The corporate-conservative infrastructure consists of a loosely coordinated and overlapping network of organizations operating at national, state and local levels. Some of the more prominent organizations include the US Chamber of Commerce, the National Association of Manufacturers, the Christian Coalition and conservative denominations; the anti-abortion groups, the NRA; think-tanks such as the Heritage Foundation, and much of the Republican Party.

The corporate-conservative infrastructure has exercised power to shift the political agenda to the right for decades. They nurture new issues and develop them to the point where they can be brought into the political arena. They try to keep other issues off the agenda, such as single payer health insurance or labor law reform.

While there are thousands of liberal and progressive organizations and coalitions and networks, it is harder to identify something we could call a progressive infrastructure. The potential is there: the trade unions, liberal denominations and religious groups, thousands of groups organizing at the state and local level, national issue organizations such as the Sierra Club, NOW, People for the American Way, and so on. But this infrastructure, to the extent it is one, is much less cohesive, less coordinated, and less powerful than the corporate-conservative infrastructure. That difference helps explain why the political agenda has shifted to the right, and it helps explain what happens at election time.

A powerful progressive infrastructure would be more than a collection of organizations; it would be an integrated, coordinated and strategically oriented network of different kinds of social change groups, representing diverse constituencies and issues that can impact state, regional and national politics. We would argue that core strategic goals should include shifting the power relations between trade unions and corporations, which entails a corresponding shift in the corporate domination of government. Think tanks, policy and research groups, training and education institutes and other 'intermediaries' should be integrated into this infrastructure.

The 3rd Face: shaping meaning

Public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it nothing can succeed. Consequently he who moulds public sentiment, goes deeper than he who enacts statutes or pronounces decisions.

Abraham Lincoln

Dominant power relations are maintained through the power to shape people's understanding of the world and their own self-interests. This is the 3rd face of power. It operates in the arena of worldview, culture, myths, stereotypes and values. It is exercised in part through control of the institutions that shape and create meaning: religious institutions, the media, television, mass consumer culture,

popular ideas about government and about workers and bosses, etc. It operates through people's daily life routines: having to work every day in positions with little autonomy, going to schools and religious institutions that discourage critical and independent thinking — these are unquestioned, naturalized habits, that profoundly shape how we interact in the world.

At any point in time, there are competing and contradictory elements in our culture and worldview, along with a few more central and widely shared elements. Who doesn't know about 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.)

To build power at all levels, we need to challenge the dominant worldview and frame our issues to reflect our broader goals for social change. Corporate interests, conservatives and powerful elites are very good at manipulating images and themes from popular culture, history, tradition, and religion, to support their agendas. Ideas or solutions that fall outside of the norm can be kept off the agenda when they are labeled extremist or radical. When progressive ways of framing social problems get ignored long enough, people stop thinking about them, or decide that nothing can be done to change things. Part of our challenge is to help our members reclaim and redefine problems and issues, to help make sense of all those other feelings and understandings—the ones that don't fit into the American Dream—so that we can pose alternatives to what is on the political agenda.

Powerlessness

If we look at the 3rd face of power, which is used to keep people from seeing themselves as agents of change, or to even believe that change is possible, then we see that non-action and non-participation are important problems. Non-participation breeds a greater sense of powerlessness, making participation by oppressed groups even less likely.

Status quo power relations are reinforced by the fact that most of us experience powerlessness as part of everyday life. For most working people and historically oppressed groups, the experience of being shut out of decision-making processes gets internalized and understood as the *natural state* of things, and the powerless develop a culture of silence. In spite of the historical imbalance of power in this country and corporate power over decision-making, agenda setting and meaning, we have a rich history of resistance. Social change groups organizing in diverse communities and workplaces can give people a

place to act together, reflect on their actions, engage in collective analysis, and challenge the 2nd and 3rd faces of power with new ideas and experiences. When they are combined, critical thinking and political action can break through the culture of silence.

Worldview

We all have conceptions and images of our place in our family, our workplace and community, and in political and civic life. We have beliefs about responsibilities, rights and wrongs, and the role of institutions, including government, in our society. These beliefs are linked to assumptions about race, class, gender and sexuality. And while we each have our own collection of such values and beliefs, which are reinforced by our own experiences, we absorb meanings, frames of reference and ideologies from our social world, which shape our understandings in mostly unconscious ways. These socially-generated beliefs about the world are what we call *worldview*. Many different ideas and belief systems in our society compete for attention. Despite these competing worldviews, there is a set of beliefs and conceptions about the world that we can identify as the *dominant worldview*.

Themes

Themes are the basic elements of worldview. Themes are expressed through myths, stereotypes, images, stories and commonsense sayings. They contain assumptions about the world and about human nature, and they explain existing social relationships, such as who has power and why, what the proper roles are for women and men, and what a family is supposed to look like.

Ideology

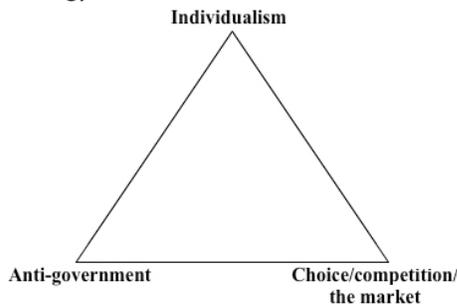
Conservatives have been very successful at building power on the terrain of worldview. They do so by using a set of fundamental themes in a consistent way across all of their issues and across the organizations that are part of their infrastructure. When a worldview has this kind of coherent, consistent quality, it becomes what can be called an *ideology*. Note that we don't give the word ideology any negative meaning, only that it is a more consistent version of worldview.

Conservative ideology is conveyed through key themes that are linked together, and used consistently, over, and over. For many decades the corporate-conservative infrastructure has promoted three themes that are central to everything they do:

- I individualism: you have to make it on your own, pull yourself up by your own bootstraps.

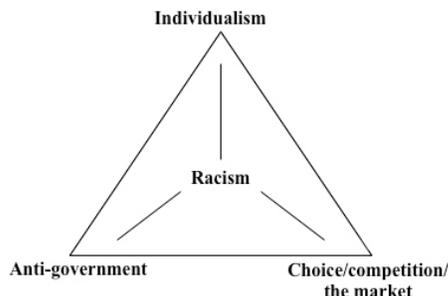
- I competition, choice and the market: with the assumption always of a level playing field, competition sorts out the winners and the losers; it is the most efficient way to improve things. When we choose between “competing” products, we can get the best product (including politicians?).
- I anti-government: government is inefficient, wasteful, and intrusive. That government which governs least governs best. (Of course, conservatives approve of government when it comes to the military, social control, and supporting big business.)

We call these three themes the iron triangle of conservative ideology:



These three elements are linked together; they reinforce each other and give a new and more reactionary political meaning to each theme when they are linked together. Conservatives were using these themes in the 1940s and 50s to relatively little effect (compared to today). This changed in the 1960s. The civil rights movement overturned legal segregation and returned voting rights to African Americans in the South. African Americans and others began mobilizing against the southern Dixiecrats, who responded by taking their racist politics into the Republican Party. By 1970 the Republican Party adopted the “southern strategy,” of using explicit and barely veiled racism to win over the white South and more generally, as much of the white population as they could.

As this strategy proved to be effective, the corporate-conservative infrastructure made race its fourth key ideological theme, giving new meaning and impact to their fundamental themes of individualism, anti-government, and competition. The iron triangle becomes:



It is this new factor of racism that has been key in the growing dominance of conservative ideology over the past 30 years. The basic ideological message is: If you are a hard-working, law-abiding citizen (understood to be white and male), you should have a grievance with the liberal bureaucrats in the government who create ineffective and wasteful programs that give your money to people who don't deserve it (probably a woman, most likely Black or of color).

This message oversimplifies what really happens—as always, in real life the politics and experience of race, class, gender, orientation, immigrant status, etc., all interact in complex ways. For example, at about the same time that the southern strategy was adopted, the Christian Right was beginning to make inroads into the mainstream political arena. They led the backlash against women's rights and legalization of abortion, and linked women's issues with a homophobic analysis. New ideological themes about the role of women bolstered a 'pro-life' agenda, which was linked to larger themes about homosexuality, moral decay and reclaiming family values. These were linked to the corporate-conservative triad of themes: individualism, anti-government, and the market.

Incorporating cultural conservatism into the dominant corporate-conservative ideology was no easy feat. For example, one might think that the key existing theme of “choice,” as in market choice, would be a stumbling block for the anti-choice movement. This seeming contradiction was trumped by a shared attack on “big government” and its interference in ordinary people's lives. The reactionary right argued that the federal government was giving “special rights” and privileges to “those people,” while normal families were getting left behind.

Progressive Strategy

We are using the word *progressive* to describe the left-liberal side of the political spectrum. We find it a useful term to encompass the elements that we think are needed to form a progressive infrastructure comparable in power and cohesiveness to the corporate-conservative infrastructure. We could call it the democratic-social justice-egalitarian infrastructure, but that is even more cumbersome than “corporate-conservative infrastructure.”

One reason that the progressive infrastructure is weak is because our movements and organizations have been oriented toward short-term struggles in the 1st face of power; until recently there has not been almost any attention paid to putting resources into developing a deep infrastructure and worldview. There are very good reasons to be engaged in immediate struggles, and extraordinary victories have been won. Nonetheless, progressives

haven't developed enough of a movement infrastructure or a shared ideology. As a result, we spend most of our time fighting defensive battles over specific issues, reacting on an ideological terrain defined by the Right, unable to communicate a big, compelling picture of what we are for—because we don't have one.

We are suggesting that progressive organizations and movements need to shift resources into the 2nd and 3rd faces of power, and shift from primarily short-term strategies, to linking short-term struggles to long-term strategies. When progressives talk about values, we need to embed them in a consistent set of themes. Otherwise, people may miss our core messages—they may understand our values about *family* or *community* or *fairness* within a conservative frame of reference and reinforces that conservative frame. After all, the conservative frames are generally the dominant ones. This is one of many reasons why building power in the 3rd face must become a top priority for progressives. We have great issues and ideas, but we have little control over the context in which people hear and understand those issues and ideas.

Progressive Ideology: We have argued that the conservative worldview rests on a triad of themes that are linked together to give meaning to issues—anti-government, rugged individualism, competition (the free market)—on which conservatives hang a reactionary social agenda. In place of the iron triangle of the corporate-conservative infrastructure, we need our own inter-related themes, such as democracy, solidarity, and equality, on which to develop a liberatory social agenda. We need to develop a deeper vision of consistent democracy as a central goal for progressives, in opposition to the conservative goal of corporate domination and democracy-as-consumer choice.

Progressive agenda. Instead of discrete issue campaigns or issues as being simply an expression of organized power, a progressive agenda is a cohesive program and analysis, with the elements of a progressive ideology integrated into it. The ANC's Freedom Charter (<http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/charter.html>) is an example of a progressive agenda. Developing a progressive agenda for larger segments of the progressive network is a political process involving shared political analysis, developing elements of a shared progressive ideology, and strategic goals about democracy, the role of government and of corporations, etc.

Progressive infrastructure. Like the corporate-conservative infrastructure, a progressive infrastructure will not be monolithic; there will be gaps, contradictions and

struggles within it. To develop a progressive infrastructure, organizations could begin to discuss long-term strategic goals, and share their work on a progressive ideology and agenda. Note that agreeing on a progressive agenda doesn't mean that any one organization is engaged in immediate struggles around all the elements of the agenda, or even that it is formally adopted.

One way to move towards a real infrastructure is by deepening existing coalitions. Typically organizations in a coalition participate to the extent that the coalition takes up an issue they are concerned with. One way to deepen the coalition is to involve the members at the base of the organizations more directly. Imagine meetings attended by grassroots members of unions, community groups, social justice organizations, and churches. Further imagine that these meetings become the places where coalition agendas and priorities are set, in a democratic way. The coalition could provide a way for an organization to be able to work on its immediate issues and also participate in other struggles (by both the leaders and members at the base).

One other critical example of progressive infrastructure is bringing in new groups of people, based on a progressive agenda that offers people who are currently left out of the political arena significant reasons to participate. However, it is unfortunately easy to imagine new efforts at creating a progressive infrastructure being led primarily by white men, due to the continuing legacy of racial and gender oppression. We think that every effort has to be made along the way to ensure leadership and full participation by people of color and women, including from organizations from those communities.

In summary: If progressives work primarily in the arena of "direct political involvement," our work will continue to be reactive—the agenda continues to be set by conservatives. To shift the agenda in our direction, we need a clear sense of our political goals, and we must devote time and resources to building power through infrastructure and ideas. With a denser and multi-level infrastructure, we can bring together disparate efforts and issues, leverage our power and move from disconnected issues to broader agendas. With more attention to the role of ideas and ideology in shaping political discourse, in helping people see new possibilities and in linking specific issues to a broader agenda, progressives can shift the terms of the political debate in this country.

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