

GRASSROOTS POLICY PROJECT

Using Worldview to Build Power

The Grassroots Policy Project works on strategies for transformational social change; we see the concept of worldview as a critical piece of such a strategy. The basic challenge is to aggregate power through immediate victories, progressive worldview and infrastructure — to provide shared, coordinated strategy and roles, and shared beliefs to build greater unity and promote collective goals and aspirations. We argue that building strong infrastructure and a progressive worldview go hand in hand: shared elements of worldview help glue together component parts of the infrastructure, and the infrastructure provides the means to link worldview to real human beings. The struggle around worldview must operate at two levels simultaneously:

- The social or public level, where discourses are shaped and agendas are set — progressives need to more deliberately put forward an alternative that can compete with the corporate-conservative worldview;
- The personal and grassroots level where people are engaged in analysis, action and reflection. At this level, of political consciousness, progressive groups can expand people's understandings of political and social issues and help them gain a sense of themselves as political actors.

Worldview and Power

GPP's approach to movement strategy rests on a framework called the three faces of power. The three faces are: 1) direct political involvement, in the visible, political arenas where decisions are made: legislatures, courts, and government agencies; 2) infrastructure, or networks of interests and constituencies in civil society that are able to shape and constrain what gets onto the political agenda and what is kept off of it; and 3) worldview, which refers to shaping meaning and behavior through beliefs, popular culture, media, history, myths, etc. (In other countries, many people would talk about ideology in similar ways to our use of the term worldview. The term ideology has implications in the United States that distort what we think is important, so we generally avoid that term). "The three faces of power" is an analytic framework; any manifesta-

tion of political power has elements of all three.

One of the most insidious ways that worldview can work is to keep people from engaging in a critical, structural analysis of power relations — it naturalizes relationships of power and subordination and categories of race and gender, and contributes to a sense of political powerlessness. Worldview can make it seem simply common sense that government is inefficient, politicians are not to be trusted, or that people are naturally competitive.

Worldview and Political Consciousness

We can define worldview as the collections of beliefs, norms, value systems, popular wisdom, folkways and traditions that people draw upon to help them make sense of the world around them. For example, The American Dream — this is the land of opportunity and anyone can make it if they try — is a cornerstone of worldview in the United States, though it is important to note that not everyone believes in it. Worldview beliefs are often linked to unexamined assumptions about human nature, identity, gender, race, class and sexuality and family. Common sense sayings, popular songs, television, films and other forms of art, oral traditions, stories and histories, along with group and national identities all contribute to the making and remaking of a collective worldview. While each of us as individuals has our own collection of values and beliefs, reinforced by our own experiences and personal choices, most of the frames of reference and social meanings we draw upon are socially derived. This socially derived worldview helps both individuals and social groups define and understand our social responsibilities, rights and wrongs, the role of institutions, including government, and the relationship of individuals to social institutions.

The Dominant Worldview. While there are many competing elements at any given time, we can identify a col-

lection of ideas that is dominant. This does not happen by accident. For decades (or longer) conservatives have promoted beliefs and themes in ways that push the dominant worldview toward the right. It is no wonder that the current collection of beliefs that shape political meaning in our society is so skewed to the right. Corporate-conservative forces have invested in the struggle for dominance on the terrain of worldview, while progressives have shied away from this arena. Nonetheless, the dominant worldview is not fixed or static. Nor is it consistent and without contradictions. For example, populist themes about the perils of unfettered corporate power are very common today. They exist alongside equally popular disdain for proposals that would use government as a vehicle to rein in corporate power and protect the public's interests.

Social change activists have had many successes in using progressive ideas and shifting worldview around race and civil rights, gender, sexuality, poverty, workers' rights, the environment, human sexuality and much more. It is important to remember that worldview is always being contested — even if there is no organized effort around worldview by progressive organizations, at the grassroots level individuals and groups are always generating resistance and alternatives to the dominant worldview (though not usually using these terms).

Political Consciousness. So far, we have focused on aspects of worldview as it affects social and political contexts. We need also to bring this to the personal level and consider the ways in which worldview relates to individual consciousness. We use the term political consciousness to refer to a person's overall awareness of social, political and institutional arrangements and power relations in society. People usually have ideas, theories and intuitions about how power works at the social, economic and political levels. This usually includes an incorporation of popular commonsense and more formal belief systems, which people grapple with actively, both on their own and in dialogue with others. Like the dominant worldview, most people's political consciousness is inconsistent, with contradictory elements.

Many things shape people's political consciousness: life experiences, daily interactions at work, school and in the community, their isolation from or connection to other people and organizations, their involvement with com-

munity groups and congregations, their encounters with government institutions like social service agencies or school boards, and with private institutions, like banks and corporations.

The prevailing ideas, beliefs and commonsense that come together as part of the dominant worldview act to constrain a person's degree of awareness about power relations and structural oppression. In this way, worldview is very much related to political consciousness. In order for people to see beyond a conventional explanation of 'the way things are,' they need critical capacities to analyze a social problem or issue within a broader framework. It is that critical stance toward worldview that enables people to see different possibilities for how we organize social and political activities in society.

Contending Worldviews

We have noted earlier that corporate-conservative forces have actively struggled to gain control over the terms of the debate while progressives have almost failed to acknowledge worldview as an arena of struggle. The roots of this failure are complex; for this document suffice it to point to the anti-ideological tradition of trade unions, of anti-communism in scaring liberals away from any systemic analysis, and the post '60s injunction "organizers leave their ideology at the door." Faced with almost no organized opposition at the level of worldview, it is not surprising that the corporate-conservative infrastructure has moved the dominant worldview and what is on the political agenda to the right over the past 40 or 50 years.

The Corporate-Conservative Worldview

Conservatives appeal to many of the same values that we do: equality, fairness, democracy, good government, family and community. Consider how conservatives give these values meaning, by embedding them into a larger worldview narrative. They take a theme like 'freedom' and link it to individualism, the market and limited government. In this narrative, freedom is understood in terms of an individual's right to do what they want, as long as they do not harm others, free from government interference.

Corporate-conservative politics come together around a shared set of themes and values, and they use these

themes and values consistently in their frames. What we call the corporate-conservative worldview has several themes at its core. We would pay particular attention to the following five interconnected themes:

- Rugged individualism. The individualism we are talking about here is the heroic, rugged, go-it-alone individualism of popular myth, the “lift yourself up by your own bootstraps” individualism that is popularized in stories about the American Dream.

- Limited role for government. Anti-government themes and images are used to cast suspicion upon all government efforts at addressing social, economic or environmental needs. Government is inefficient, and wasteful — unless its purpose is to maintain social and economic order or to advance U.S. ‘interests’ through the military or police.

- Competition and the market (or ‘market fundamentalism’). As an aspect of social relations, competition is seen as a natural force that separates out the winners from the losers. We each are free to make choices about what is best for ourselves. If someone is a loser in our economy, then they only have themselves to blame.

- Racism. The social construction of race and its use in subordinating people of color in all spheres of life is co-existent with the history of this continent and the United States.

- Sexism and homophobia. Although in various ways these themes have an equally long history, they have played an especially important role for conservatives in the past 30 years.

These themes are much more powerful when they are knit together. Undermining government as a force for social or economic equality is a critical task for corporate-conservatives. Rugged individualism is linked to a notion of democracy in which government is limited to those activities that enable free men (and sometimes women) to pursue their personal interests — we leave the governing to specialists and insist that those who govern stay out of our personal lives, protect individual space, enable the market to function as freely as possible and, above all, to protect private property. The belief, that whenever the government regulates the market, it hurts most of us because it hampers the natural workings of the market, undermines every hard-earned right won by organized

labor. Most critically, the attack on government by the Right has been fueled by their use of race, by linking race and government programs over and over again.

Progressive Worldview

The notion of worldview has been gaining some currency among progressives, in part because of the recognition that conservatives have consciously and consistently worked on this terrain for decades and this has been crucial to their electoral and legislative success. Progressives generally have reacted by focusing on values and framing. This is a step forward, but the use of values and frames is not sufficient to displace the corporate-conservative hold on the dominant worldview.

To reframe and reclaim freedom, we have to do more than say we value freedom. We have to break the Right’s association of freedom with the dominant worldview — this is what Stuart Hall refers to as breaking the ‘chain of meanings.’ Only then can we reclaim freedom, by connecting it with the social nature of self-hood and fulfillment. Freedom is linked to our inter-dependence and shared destinies. It can encompass the freedom to participate fully in creating the conditions of our daily lives, as participants in a vibrant civil society. It can be linked to having access to the resources that make such participation possible for all of us — health and wellbeing, education, good jobs, personal autonomy, access to common resources, including culture and art, and more. As we learned from the civil rights movement, we must associate freedom with the notion that one person’s freedom is diminished as long as others are not free.

To borrow a phrase from another field, you can only fight a paradigm with another paradigm, not with some facts. We need to be clearer about our alternative to the corporate-conservative worldview. The good news is we don’t have to invent the elements of a progressive worldview — which wouldn’t be effective, anyway. We have numerous traditions, belief systems and values to draw upon: from U.S. history, popular beliefs, art and literature, from social movement struggles past and present, from the diverse cultural traditions that exist in our society, from our faith and values and from our own personal experiences as organizers, family members, workers, community activists, and more.

The bad news is that there isn't clarity, much less agreement among progressive organizations, about critical aspects of worldview. Take, for example, the role of government. Conservatives know that they want government to support corporations in the US and around the world; they believe that democracy and the "free market" should be mutually reinforcing; they want government to distance itself from unions and in fact undermine them in every possible way. Or take the value equality. Conservatives are clear about equality as linked to individualism and competition — equality of opportunity (with an assumption of an even playing field.) What do progressives believe about the role of government, or about equality, or the relationship between corporate power and democracy? Those worldview issues are central to what we would like to see on the political agenda in 10 or 20 years.

In GPP's work on worldview, we have been helping groups learn about worldview and what it means to operate on the terrain of worldview. We often start with dialogues with familiar themes and values that people want to reclaim, and their own deeply held values. We incorporate these into critical analysis of current power relations and the ideas that support the status quo. People notice how these power relations and ideas do not reflect their own values. We find that people enjoy talking about the themes and values that they would like to see reflected more in the public discourse. Once we get to this point with a group, our challenge is to suggest ways to rethink, recombine and add to those themes, toward defining an alternative worldview. This requires a willingness to experiment, to test out new themes and narratives, with themselves, with other members, with allies, with friends, family and neighbors, at forums with elected officials, etc.

In place of the corporate-conservative core themes, we need our own mutually-reinforcing themes, using them together in all forms of communication and organizing. The groups we have worked with have generated many overlapping lists of themes, such as consistent or authentic democracy, solidarity, equality, race and gender justice and women's autonomy. In place of conservative appeals to fear, isolation and scarcity, we need to lift up stories and experiences of connectedness, mutuality and shared abundance. This is a critical first step, but as noted above, there is a great deal of work to be done beyond this step to develop an alternative worldview.

Worldview and Infrastructure

There is an old saying; "ideas become powerful when they grip the minds of the masses." Ideas (and worldview concepts) must be connected to action. Otherwise, they remain abstractions. We emphasize using worldview to inform action, and vice versa. The groups we work with exist to pursue issues and problems through different kinds of activities — direct action, lobbying, accountability sessions, electoral engagement, etc. Worldview can help them turn these activities into more deliberate strategies for expanding political possibilities. It can offer ways of linking issues and moving constituencies beyond their immediate concerns, toward embracing other issues. It becomes the way of moving beyond issues, to clarity about what we are fighting for, more broadly. It can become the basis for holding public officials accountable — not to a narrow set of issues but to underlying principles and values. Worldview-informed action in turn further develops members' political consciousness; it allows for deeper reflection upon the actions, so that groups are constantly testing things out and readjusting their strategies.

We use the term "political infrastructure" to try to translate this into a strategic concept. A political infrastructure is a coherent network of organizations that functions to achieve goals that go beyond the immediate interests of the member organizations. We want to underline two characteristics of infrastructure: 1) the interconnections between the organizations, and 2) the infrastructure has a function, the interconnections make it possible to carry out the functions. The corporate-conservative infrastructure has distinct components, which make unlikely allies: major corporations, conservative religious groups, conservative policy groups, small business associations, libertarians, and so on. Yet they function together at a high level, oriented and held together by their long-term goals and shared worldview. While they struggle around their differences, corporate-conservatives keep their eyes on the bigger prize: hegemonic control of governing institutions.

Progressives need to develop deeper working relationships and a common strategy around broadly shared goals. We need to connect different kinds of groups that have different kinds of strengths. For example, racial justice needs to be a core, shared goal. But there will be organizations, say a trade union or an environment group, that should be part of a progressive infrastructure that

aren't explicitly committed to a racial justice agenda. But they can incorporate themes around racial justice in their communications, bring leaders on racial justice issues to their conferences and meetings, and in general help their members see the connections between racial justice and their own explicit interests and goals.

Similarly, a progressive infrastructure needs advocacy groups and base-building – the former more focused on shifting (public) worldview, the latter more on developing political consciousness with their base and showing the lived reality of an alternative worldview. In order to build and sustain a powerful infrastructure, we need more and more people, masses of people, who are committed to a shared vision of social change. History also teaches us that no movement can succeed without integrating racial justice issues with economic and social justice. Exploring shared worldview is one key way in which diverse groups can come together, find points of unity, negotiate a shared strategy and division of labor and lay the groundwork for developing a progressive agenda.

Summary

Conservatives have been very serious about building their power — to govern, to dominate the political agenda and to shape the ideological context in which issues and agendas are contested. Progressives have not had this clarity of purpose, nor have we grasped the importance of harnessing the power of ideas. We are hesitant to define a progressive agenda, let alone a progressive worldview. And only recently have some progressives begun to say that they are aiming for the power to govern as a prerequisite for sustained, fundamental change. If we cannot name transformational social change goals, then we will not aim for them and we certainly will not achieve them. In this paper, we have sketched the role of worldview and of shifting political consciousness in a strategy for transformational social change. ■