

WRONG ABOUT THE RIGHT

'THE NATION'

by Jean Hardisty & Deepak Bhargava

The now dominant narrative about the right's rise to power holds that conservatives invested huge amounts of money in a number of think tanks over the past thirty years and brilliantly framed their messages in ways that were simple and resonated deeply with much of the American public. By embracing a top-down, hierarchical movement structure and relentless message discipline, the right was able not only to triumph at the ballot box but also to change the very terms of political discussion — demonizing “big government” and celebrating “tax relief,” “personal responsibility” and “free-market capitalism.” This account of conservative strategy has piqued the interest of a growing number of progressive groups, who argue that the left should adopt a similar strategy. And it is currently driving the activities of many major progressive donors.

The difficulty here is that, as an explanation of the right's ascendancy, it is at best incomplete and at worst misleading. What's more, it is not clear that progressives should emulate all of the right's tactics, or that we will succeed by doing so. There are certainly lessons to be learned from the right—but for the most part they are different from those commonly assumed. Here is an alternative view of the insights progressives should take away from three decades of conservative domination.

Secrets of Their Success

1. **Ideological Diversity.** There is no monolithic “conservative” movement but rather a plethora of ideologies successfully harnessed together in a grand coalition. In the 1970s, as the New Right emerged from the discredited old right, a fragile truce was drawn among libertarians, economic conservatives, social conservatives and neoconservatives. Under the leadership of William F. Buckley Jr., editor of the influential *National Review* magazine and host of TV's *Firing Line*, tensions were negotiated and a “fusion politics” emerged that allowed for cooperation across differences. Such a truce is more easily maintained when a movement is winning, as the New Right was under President Ronald Reagan. Now, in George W. Bush's second term, the fault lines are reappearing.

The implication for progressives is that we ought to tolerate a diversity of views and think strategically about how to align them to common purpose rather than seek a homogeneity we falsely ascribe to conservatives. Conservatives also found that it's not always the most mainstream or moderate voices who win. Likewise, progressives with a more radical vision, while working collaboratively in the larger movement, must not let themselves be sidelined.

2. **Ideas, Not Messages.** To the extent that conservatives were serious about ideas — and to be sure they were and are — they started not with “messaging” or “framing,” two strategies currently in vogue among progressives, but rather with inquiry into core beliefs about race, government, family, markets and global economic and military domination. These core beliefs were at first far outside the mainstream of accepted political discourse. But by carefully constructing an ideological blueprint for their movement (despite lack of complete buy-in from every sector), the right has been working for more than twenty-five years with a set of unifying ideological principles to which their strategists and activists return time and again. Support for “family values,” limited government, a strong military, white domination and the primacy of Christianity over other religions, when combined with a will to power, have served the right well.

On the left many intellectual projects are more tactical in nature and avoid asking fundamental questions — not about how we talk but about what we actually believe. For instance, we are at our best when fighting a reactionary policy or

program, such as tax cuts for the wealthy or attacks on voting rights. But progressives are not unified, or even clear, about what we affirmatively want in terms of a role for government, a just economy or rights for individuals and groups.

- 3. Active Listening.** It is often noted that the structure of the conservative movement is hierarchical and that because the leadership has such a high level of control, conservative campaigns have always been well coordinated and executed with great precision. Less often noted is that their masterstroke was not that they went off in a room and decided on a few cornerstone values and then aligned their work and campaigns to speak to those values. Their genius was that they first engaged in a practice of active listening and found a core of resentment among large numbers of Americans — about race, class, gender and sexuality — that could provide the emotional base for a new intellectual paradigm. They did this in the 1970s, at precisely the time when liberals stopped listening, presuming that the reactionary ideas of the old right were so far out of favor that only the most uninformed and backward voters supported them. Today, liberals rely heavily on polling — a shallow kind of listening — or push ideas at the country without deeply engaging with people first.
- 4. The Importance of Recruitment.** Think tanks and their output of ideas, analysis and information are a necessary but not sufficient component of any effective social movement. Conservatives focused on building powerful mass-based institutions that could provide muscle for a conservative agenda, such as the National Rifle Association, the Moral Majority, the American Family Association and, later, Focus on the Family, Concerned Women for America and the Christian Coalition of America. Many of these mass-based organizations were explicitly Christian and played a vital role in recruiting evangelical and fundamentalist Christians to the New Right of the 1980s.

Further, the right's core leadership showed extraordinary creativity in exploiting new technologies. For example, Richard Viguerie pioneered the use of direct mail; Ralph Reed Jr. of the Christian Coalition developed "stealth" methods of campaigning for political office without revealing the candidates' actual right-wing agenda and used churches to mobilize voters. The right's strategists focused not only on ideas and policies but also on organizing a base and developing recruitment techniques to build the base. The contemporary right has always been clear about the importance of recruiting greater numbers to its movement. An examination of right-wing campaigns reveals that, in nearly every case, the opportunity for recruitment plays a central role in their conceptualization and execution. Progressives would make a tragic mistake by neglecting base-building in the current period.

- 5. Electoral Politics as Means, Not End.** The architects of the right's rise to power did not view their project as the election of Republicans to state and federal office. They perceived the Republican Party as a tool to achieve certain ends, rather than as the end in itself; the takeover of the party was important because it would turn the country toward a reactionary agenda. That the takeover occurred is a reflection of the potency of the strategy. This is crucially important because some progressives tend to conflate the project of building a just world with the project of electing Democrats to office. Winning people over is our central task. After all, progressive advances do not always come under Democratic administrations. It was Richard Nixon, after all, who proposed a guaranteed annual income for the poor, while Bill Clinton approved time limits on welfare benefits.

It's also important to remember that the right worked at the federal, state and local levels and used both "inside" and "outside" strategies to influence the realm of political office-holding and the terrain of public opinion. No one aspect of movement-building was emphasized at the expense of others. It is that strength — approaching movement-building as a whole package — that explains much of the right's growth and effectiveness.

- 6. Fearless Politics.** The right has not been afraid to propose extreme positions, knowing they will be pushed back to more moderate ones still well to the right of the status quo. We've seen this in almost every policy fight since 1980. By boldly taking stands that are far outside the mainstream, the right has managed to pull the mainstream to the right, which is why it is now perceived as speaking for the majority. For progressives, meanwhile, timidity, ambiguity and constant compromise have not proved successful strategies; projecting a clear, principled and uncompromising voice of progressive values and policies is not only morally compelling but strategically smart.

Learning From Our Own History

Historically, left and liberal agendas — the New Deal, civil rights laws, the Great Society, women’s advancement — have made progress when mass movements have forced change. To be sure, the ideas of John Maynard Keynes were crucial in legitimizing and pointing the way to a new form of capitalism and FDR was the right leader for the times, but the New Deal wasn’t won by economic experts. It was won by ordinary people who organized to create a sense of crisis and a mandate for change.

While there is no formula for a social movement, we know that successful ones share some things in common. First, people become mobilized around issues they hold dear; at some level they share a powerful vision about what is wrong with society and how it must be improved; and they engage in lots of diverse activities not under any one leader’s direct control. The resulting political motion and its effect lead to a change in attitudes, practices and public policy.

Our current infatuation with the strategies and structures of the right has led some progressives to call for a more streamlined, hierarchical movement, but this is not how we’ve won in the past. Progressive movements have been successful when they have not had a top-down organizational structure. Also, this analysis fails to appreciate the comprehensiveness of the right’s movement-building style. And it does not reflect progressive democratic principles. Consider, for example, the civil rights movement. Despite the popular perception of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.’s singular importance, the movement had many sectors under many leaders, with different ideologies and different priorities—people like Septima Clark, Ella Baker and Bob Moses, all of whom believed in the centrality of developing ordinary people as agents of change rather than in charismatic leadership or coalitions of elites.

The same could be said of the women’s movement and the environmental movement. Progressive movements certainly need a generally agreed-upon critique of society and vision for change, as well as mechanisms for coordination. But letting a thousand flowers bloom can prove a strength, so long as power does not collect around the most “achievable” social change as opposed to the most just social change.

Race and Social Change

A movement must have a dynamic leading edge before its positions become majority positions. Many of the progressive gains in American history were not majority agendas — ending slavery, civil rights, disability rights, AIDS advocacy and farmworker boycotts succeeded as struggles led by minorities. In some cases they were struggles led by people who weren’t even enfranchised. How is that possible?

Often, deeply felt issues raised by groups whose numbers are in the minority have the power to convert, while issues that theoretically should be in everyone’s interest never take hold. A necessary (though not sufficient) condition for an issue to attain broad majoritarian support is vibrant, well-organized submovements. Many of our submovements, such as the women’s, environmental, LGBT and civil rights submovements, are demoralized, underfunded and increasingly influenced by their own more conservative wings. Further, the progressive movement’s tendency to downplay racial issues and concerns consistently blocks our process of building from submovements’ success to an effective broad progressive movement. For instance, even though African-Americans have been the core of progressive politics, it is often African-Americans who have been taken for granted and neglected by the progressive movement, which is too often white dominated and focused on issues of concern to white activists. As long as the movement fails to become more inclusive and democratic, it will continue to limp along without access to the wisdom and insight of the most vital part of its base. Race today is not simply a matter of black and white: Many other groups and movements of immigrants—Latinos, Asian/Pacific Island-Americans, Arab-Americans and Native Americans — must also have a full seat at the table. Conservatives are avidly courting these groups.

When people of color look for allies to advance their issues, there is no reason to assume they will support the larger progressive movement when their issues receive only lip service and they are not widely represented in the movement’s leadership and decision-making structures.

This is not only about “credibility” or “diversity.” It is actually about effectiveness. The whiteness of our leadership has played out, for example, in a tendency to write off large parts of the country — including the South, the Southwest and the High Plains — which has proved politically disastrous. Further, a predominantly white leadership tends to neglect issues like immigrant rights and criminal justice because they are not pressing concerns of the “majority” of voters. The perception that an issue can’t galvanize a wide majority or appeal to at least 51 percent of the electorate can sink the issue in the current climate of poll-driven strategizing. Certainly the progressive movement needs to pursue programs that knit together diverse constituencies, but even very broad issues such as healthcare or the environment will look different when they reflect the concerns of all communities.

The Role of Organizing

Some progressives consider grassroots organizing a remnant of an old style of politics no longer relevant to our media- and money-saturated times. Others think of it as an actual obstacle to the efficient, hierarchical infrastructure they idealize. But conservatives have nurtured their grassroots constituencies in civic institutions, evangelical churches and gun clubs. Organizing is central to any effective strategy for revitalizing the progressive movement.

Organizing, not to be confused with mobilizing, is ultimately what changes people’s minds. Whereas mobilizing is about moving people to take certain actions (voting, lobbying policy-makers, coming out to an event or calling your Congress member on an issue pre-selected by someone else), organizing is about developing the skills, confidence and practice among ordinary people to speak out in their own voice.

What ultimately forces change is human beings seeing fellow human beings act from a place of deep conviction. That moment of recognition can occur only when people who are living with an injustice bring their experience to the public square. Of course, solidarity efforts are crucial to social change. It’s hard to imagine the farmworkers, or the civil rights workers in the South, succeeding if they had failed to rouse broader sympathy throughout the country. But they were able to do this only because they spoke with an authenticity that transcended walls of race and class prejudice. No policy paper or slick message will ever replace the power of organizing.

Major changes in the social order require a leap of “nonconsent” by the governed. That might be millions of people refusing the draft, or thousands boycotting buses in Montgomery, or hundreds “dying in” to protest delays in AIDS research. While the tidal wave of conservative successes at the federal level is obvious, the less-obvious victories progressives have had in recent years are largely attributable to organizing: major new investments in affordable housing through housing trust funds, new money for transit, living- and minimum-wage laws, expansions in health coverage at the state level, more income supports for low-wage workers, education access, driver’s licenses for immigrants and limits on natural resource extraction.

Organizing is, as George W. Bush might say, “hard work” — never more so than in current circumstances. Memories of successful collective struggle are fading fast among a new generation not raised with the 1960s as a backdrop. Market culture has penetrated all spheres of life, and it has reinforced deeply individualistic strains in American society. Also, pervasive economic insecurity, increasing work demands and a shredded safety net have heightened the personal costs involved.

Organizing has always had an uneasy place not only in the broader culture but also in progressive circles. It has frequently been sidelined by expert-driven advocacy or by charismatic figures who lead short-lived protest movements, and today it is at risk of being displaced by a focus on think tanks and communications strategies.

Perhaps more alarming, however, is the relative decline of organizing as a strategy relative to mobilization. The work of many 527 organizations prominent in the Bush and Kerry campaigns of 2004 (America Coming Together and the Media Fund, for example) seemed to be about parachuting into communities and soliciting votes, with little thought about what would be left behind.

For all the difficulties, progressives are engaging in some exciting experimentation with new methods of base-building appropriate to our times. Organized labor is in the throes of a debate about how to rebuild membership. There has been an explosion in community-based “worker centers” and in immigrant community organizations. And in a few states, groups are beginning to work together across issue and constituency lines to develop common long-term strategies. This success is very fragile and tentative, however, and it is still the case that organizing tends not to get the respect, attention or resources it needs from the larger progressive community.

A problem closely related to the neglect of organizing is the failure of many progressive organizations to recruit and encourage leadership from young people, especially young people of color. Young people have political, social and economic perspectives that differ from those of older (usually Baby Boomer) activists, who were shaped by the events of the 1960s and ‘70s. Younger activists, organizers and intellectuals will enrich the movement and take it in new directions, if given the freedom and the power to do so.

Clarifying Basic Principles

While the focus of progressive movement-building is now on creating large organizations “to scale,” yet another of the movement’s greatest challenges is being neglected: We are undecided on the larger principles that underlie our work for social justice. Many people don’t like to do this “big picture” thinking. They prefer results-oriented activism and practical solutions. And they are correct that larger principles must be tied to people’s everyday concerns and identifiable, attainable goals.

But to be successful, mass organizing must be informed by visionary principles as well as nuts-and-bolts techniques. Most bold new policy proposals grow out of the everyday work that activists in submovements do on various issues. These proposals — for example, national health care, full rights and services for immigrants, or replacing the racist criminal justice system — are not the polished, poll-tested, slightly left-of-center ones increasingly attractive to Democratic Party centrists. Indeed, they may seem fringe and far out of the mainstream. But they have their roots in real material conditions.

What we lack are the overarching principles to tie these proposals together. In the 1960s and ‘70s progressives generally agreed that government had a responsibility to defend the weak or temporarily weak, protect individual rights, provide a reasonable standard of living and regulate private enterprise to protect the public from rampant greed and criminal behavior. Battered by the right’s relentless assaults on these core principles, progressive movement activists today do not have a coherent vision. Instead, we are driven by a vague sense of what a better society would look like, a recognition of how times have changed and persistent despair as we fight one defensive battle after another.

It is therefore essential that we address several fundamental questions right now: What is the role and responsibility of government? How can the racial imbalance of our movement’s leadership be corrected? What role should religion play in public life? How should progressives respond to globalization? And what social issues should we identify as “bottom line”? As principles that respond to these questions emerge, we must not allow political expediency to trump creativity. The voices of people of color, and young people and women of all races must be explicitly sought out. Funding may facilitate this discussion, but it will not in itself produce a dynamic vision. Think tanks alone will not develop these principles, and framing and messaging will not substitute for them. The process of drawing out larger principles must be an organic one: a step-by-step process of slowly creating broad consensus.

HERE, WE CAN LEARN FROM THE RIGHT’S SUCCESS WITH ACTIVE LISTENING.

While the challenges we face are considerable, they are not insurmountable. But we must get moving so that when the tide of public opinion turns in our direction, we are not caught flatfooted, with a movement badly in need of reform and lacking the very basics needed to seize the moment and go forward. The right was ready for the backlash of the late 1970s. We must be ready for the coming backlash against the outrages of the past twenty-five years.