The Power - and Limits - of Social Movements

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Dissidents not only have to be willing to tell the truth about the delusions of the dominant culture, but make sure we don't fall into delusions of our own.

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In mainstream politics in the United States, everyone agrees on one thing: We're number one. We're special. We're America. We're on top, where we deserve to be.

In dissident politics in the United States, we have long argued that this quest for economic and military dominance can't be squared with basic moral and political principles. We're on top, but it's unjust and unsustainable.

Whether or not the United States has ever had a legitimate claim to that top spot -- or whether there should be spots on top for any nation(s) -- the days of uncontested dominance are over: Our economy is in permanent decline and our military power continues to fade. We are still the wealthiest society in history, but we are no longer the dynamic heart of the global economy. Our military is still able to destroy at will, but the wars of the past decade have demonstrated the limits of that barbarism.

How should the U.S. public react to this shift? One approach would be to acknowledge that predatory corporate capitalism based on greed and First World imperialism based on violence have produced obscene levels of inequality, both within societies and between societies, that are inconsistent with those basic moral and political principles. Our task is to reshape systems and institutions before it's too late.

That kind of critical self-reflection also leads to the conclusion that our society not only fails on the criterion of social justice but also is ecologically unsustainable. We are a profligate, consumption-mad society, in a world in which unsustainable living arrangements are the norm in the developed world and spreading quickly in the developing world. We can't predict the time frame for collapse if we continue on this trajectory, but we can be reasonably certain that without major changes in our relationship to the larger living world the ecosphere will at some point (likely within decades) be unable to support large-scale human life as we know it.

These crises, if honestly acknowledged and squarely faced, would test our capacity to analyze and adapt -- there's no guarantee that enough time remains to prevent catastrophe. Without such honesty, there is no hope of a decent future.

So, the bad news is that we're in trouble.

The worse news is that the mainstream political culture cannot face this reality.

Dissident political organizing must take into account the fact that contemporary America is deeply delusional. Our collective life is shaped by a propaganda-driven political system that ignores and evades. Political leaders -- from the reactionary right of the Republican Party to the liberal left of the Democratic Party -- are not interested in creating new

systems to face these challenges but instead are mired in trivial debates about how to duct-tape together the existing social, economic, and political systems to allow us to live in our delusions a bit longer.

In addition to critiquing the delusions of the dominant culture, we dissidents have to make sure we don't absorb those same delusions. We have to be honest not only about the promise of social movements but their limits. My fear is that many -- maybe even most -- people who identify with progressive/left/radical politics are in denial about the depth of the crises and, therefore, prone to misjudge the potential of traditional social movements. Those of us who define ourselves by our commitment to social justice and ecological sustainability -- those who want to make the world a better place -- have to be careful to avoid delusions of our own. Here's how this often plays out:

A dissident speaker offers a critique of some aspect of the dominant culture's political, economic, or social systems. The task of taking on those systems seems overwhelming, and someone in the audience asks, "Is there any hope that we can change things?" The speaker acknowledges the difficulty of the task, but points out that social movements in the past have faced great challenges, lost many battles along the way, and persevered to make the world a better place. In the United States, the speaker often cites the civil rights movement as an example: Courageous people organizing over centuries to challenge the deeply entrenched white supremacy that defined the country, ending first slavery and then formal American apartheid. The speaker reminds the audience that the work of popular movements remains incomplete and that we owe it to generations past and future -- and to ourselves -- to press on.

I'm familiar with that exchange because I've both been in those audiences and also been the speaker offering that analysis. It's an honest response -- historically accurate and morally defensible -- but these days I'm less comfortable with that stock answer. Yes, we must remember the promise of social movements, inspired by past successes. But we also need to be clear about their limits in the present and future.

Let's push the example of the civil rights movement a bit:

When Martin Luther King, Jr. stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in the 1963 March on Washington, he spoke of "a dream deeply rooted in the American dream." He argued that "the architects of our republic" had signed "a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir," which guaranteed "the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." For black Americans, that note "has come back marked insufficient funds," King said. "We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. So we have come to cash this check -- a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice."

In 1963, King was speaking in a world that promised endless bounty, and his claim was that black people had a right to their fair share of that bounty; the metaphor of checks and banks was not only metaphorical. He spoke of political liberty, but the assumption was that with the "riches of freedom" would come, if not actual riches, certainly a more equitable share of the country's wealth. White America didn't particularly like letting black -- or indigenous, Latino, Asian -- people into the winner's circle, but once it became impossible to maintain apartheid-by-law, white folks gave a bit of ground. White society grudgingly gave that ground in the middle of a post-World War II boom that promised endless expansion. The fight for racial justice took place on a relatively stable platform of U.S. global political power and economic growth.

The same context applies to other social movements of that period fighting for workers' rights, women's rights, lesbian/gay rights, ecological awareness. Moving into the 1990s, it also applies to the global justice movement that focused on the economic imperialism of the First World, and even to the anti-war movement of the early 2000s.

There were, of course, ups and downs in these decades. The U.S. debacle in Southeast Asia led to doubts about U.S. power and methods, but those were washed away by the demise of the Soviet Union and the American "victory" in the Cold War at the end of the 1980s. There were economic recessions, but they didn't disturb a widely shared belief that the economy, over the long haul, would grow indefinitely. There was a brief period of concern in the 1970s about

environmental limits, but when predictions of short-term disaster proved imprecise, most people quit worrying.

Most of the dissident political analysis and organizing of the past half century also has gone forward with an assumption of economic growth and ecological stability. The goal of much of this organizing was to make that stable, growing world a fairer place with a more just distribution of power and resources. I believe that even many of those fighting against U.S. domination of the world expected -- and wanted -- to live in a world in which the United States remained if not central and obscenely wealthy, at least important and comfortable.

To borrow a phrase from songwriter John Gorka, that is the old future, and the old future's gone -- dead and gone, never to return. While the dominant culture may indulge its delusions of endless bounty, that's not how the cards are falling. What does that mean for political dissidents? With so many variables and contingencies, any attempt at specific prediction can't be taken seriously. But we have to do our best to anticipate what is coming so that we can organize as effectively as possible.

The key shift: We will be organizing in a period of contraction, not expansion. There will be less of a lot of things we have come to take for granted (energy and natural resources) and more of other things we've been hiding under the rug for a long time (toxic residue and environmental disruption).

That less/more reality in the physical world will no doubt have an effect on our political/economic/social worlds. It may well be that the liberal tolerance that has been hard-won by subordinated groups will evaporate rather quickly with intensified competition to acquire energy resources and avoid toxic disruptions. A willingness to share power and wealth during times of abundance doesn't automatically endure in times of scarcity. Scapegoating, a time-honored tactic, is especially useful during hard times.

My concerns about this are exacerbated by two trends in contemporary society: a diminished capacity for empathy and a dwindling connection to the natural world.

On empathy: Capitalism defines human beings as primarily greedy, self-interested animals designed to maximize their own position, especially in the acquisition of material goods and status. That instinct obviously is part of our nature, but -- just as obviously -- that is not all there is to human nature; given the long evolutionary history of humans in band-level societies defined by solidarity and cooperation, we should assume the greedy instincts probably are not primary. Yet in capitalism that sociopathic instinct is rewarded and reinforced. With each generation that lives in such a system, our capacity for empathy is undermined. This is not an argument against individuality or for complete subordination to the collective, but merely recognition of one of the ugliest aspects of capitalism -- the belief that we can ignore the fate of others and still make a decent world.

On nature: In a high-energy/high-technology society that is increasingly mass-mediated, with each generation we grow more alienated from the larger living world. Just as capitalism undermines our connections to each other, industrial society undermines our connections to other species and the ecosystems on which we depend. The industrial world is a dead world, and our immersion in that world makes it harder for us to see what is dying. This is not an argument against all technology or human's use of our creative capacity to change our environment, but merely recognition of one of the scariest aspects of modernity -- the belief that we can ignore the living world and still live in the world.

There is nothing terribly new in these warnings. Let's go back to the civil rights movement and another of King's memorable speeches, "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence," delivered on April 4, 1967, at Riverside Church in New York City. In his critique of the U.S. attack on Vietnam and the larger forces behind that attack, King said: "I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights, are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism,

extreme materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.”

Ask yourself, where do we stand on the struggle to move from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society? What about our obsession with machines and computers? The culture’s worship of profit motives and property rights? How much progress have the past four decades of progress brought?

None of this is a call to abandon organizing or sink into the paralysis of despair. It’s simply a suggestion that we deal with reality. Is the sky falling? Of course not, because the sky doesn’t fall -- that’s the wrong metaphor. Better to ask, is the sky darkening?

What is my program for organizing in a world beneath a darkened sky? I have no program, only some observations and tentative conclusions, maybe nothing more than gut instincts.

First, we should focus on creating more actual physical spaces and real human networks based on progressive/left/radical values, putting as much energy as needed to anchor and solidify them, even if it takes time away from issue-oriented campaigns. As we work on specific policy issues, let’s organize with an eye toward building not coalitions but communities. In hard times, coalitions evaporate, but communities have a shot at surviving.

Second, whatever projects we pursue, there should be a component that connects people to the non-human world and includes physical work in that world. We need not disconnect completely from our abstract analytical work and computers, but every project should give us a chance to do physical work with others, outdoors as much as possible.

Those first two instincts have led me to redirect a considerable amount of my time, energy, and money to a progressive community center we are building in Austin, TX, 5604 Manor, http://www.5604manor.org/. There is important and exciting organizing and advocacy work going on there, but just as important is the community-building activity as we renovate the building, clean up the back yard, plant gardens, and get to know each other across lines of age, race, and language.

These instincts are captured in the first stanza of William Stafford’s poem, “A Ritual to Read to Each Other”:

If you don’t know the kind of person I am

and I don’t know the kind of person you are

a pattern that others made may prevail in the world

and following the wrong god home we may miss our star.

My third instinct may seem obvious: We need to tell all the truths that we know and feel. My sense is that this is our most difficult task, to speak honestly of the darkening sky. In the dominant culture, such talk is most often ignored -- people either refuse to listen, laugh it off, or deride it as defeatist. Even in dissident circles, attempts to discuss these subjects bluntly often lead people to disengage or demand that I only speak in a positive manner.

But every day there are more people -- though still a small minority -- who want to face what is coming, even though such a reckoning deepens our grief. Our task is to speak aloud what others may feel but may be afraid to voice. Perhaps the most radical act today is to speak the truth about a darkening sky and remain committed to organizing, knowing there is no guarantee we can endure, let alone prevail.

This spirit is captured in the last stanza of Stafford’s poem:
For it is important that awake people be awake,

or a breaking line may discourage them back to sleep;

the signals we give -- yes, no, or maybe --

should be clear: the darkness around us is deep.

The potential power of social movements at this moment in history flows from this commitment to speaking the truth -- not truth to power, which is too invested in its delusions to listen -- but truth to each other.

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