Building Social Movement Infrastructure

The Problem of Fragmentation

Infrastructure in politics is analogous to physical infrastructure: sewer and power lines have to be connected together in order to accomplish their goals. For a more organic analogy, think about the circulation system, or musculoskeletal system, which requires connective tissue. The first problem facing progressives with regard to infrastructure is that the pieces are not connected.

There are lots of coalitions on the progressive side, but how deeply connected are they? We see more fragmentation than integration. Fragmentation means that groups work in relative isolation, or with a single-issue approach, or with a go-it-alone, turf mentality. It refers to the way groups treat issue or election campaigns as ends in themselves, with no real connections across and between issues; no sense of a broader agenda that could supplant the corporate-conservative agenda that dominates state and national politics. Single-issue and tactical approaches offer some immediate advantages but they are not adequate to the challenges facing us today.

The second problem for progressives is that concepts like infrastructure and framing are applied more often to short-term campaigns, such as winning the 2004 and the 2006 elections. In 2004 America Coming Together was significant because major players from the major progressive sectors — labor, women, civil rights, GLBT, environment, etc.— actually did work together. But ACT didn’t last a year past the 2004 election, in part because relationships were weak and goals were too short-term. For our purposes we want to think about infrastructure and framing in terms of long-term strategic goals = about economic, social and racial justice, about building real democracy and equality in this country and around the world. We locate both infrastructure and framing within an analysis of power – how we build power, how we use it, and what we use power for.

Much of the recent efforts to build progressive infrastructure appears to have assumed that we can shift the result of 40 years of conservative organizing by electing a Democrat as chief executive. Even now that we have a Democrat in the White House, we still are tempted to pour most of our energies into this kind of singular, short-term goal. The result is that we tend to reduce the complex questions about what is needed to build, sustain and negotiate a flexible movement infrastructure to questions about electoral and campaign coordination. Likewise, important questions about our values and beliefs, and about our vision for a new direction for our country get redirected into the mechanics of how to frame messages for the next campaign.

Another flaw in recent approaches to building infrastructure is the insufficient attention being give to race and the struggle for racial justice, which, we argue, is integral to all social and economic justice struggles. Most major social movements have had to deal with race, overtly or indirectly. We would argue that history teaches us the following: no movement for progressive social change in the U.S. can succeed without integrating racial justice issues with economic and social justice. No infrastructure, or blueprint or roadmap can succeed without real and meaningful participation from communities and leaders of color. As we look around us at attempts to build infrastructure that aggregates progressive power, we are deeply concerned that the voices, experiences and leadership from communities of color are lacking.

With these critiques in mind, how do we refocus progressive efforts to create infrastructure toward a bolder, deeper and more long-term approach to movement-building? First, we should be clearer about what we are building infrastructure for. It is not an end in itself. Nor are base-building or framing and message development. We build infrastructure in service of a movement for fundamental and lasting social change. We build infrastructure as part of a strategy for power that requires us to link immediate campaign and electoral work to intermediate goals around shifting the political agenda through coordinated work in multiple arenas as well as long-term goals of...
transforming our nation's ideas and aspirations for a more equal, just and democratic society.

Once we are clear about what we are building an infrastructure for, we need to talk about what it would look like and how it would function. Again, the infrastructure is in service of a strategy, not a “thing-in-itself.” A movement needs a way of developing unity around broadly shared goals, and it needs different kinds of groups that have different kinds of strengths. A movement needs bottom-up leaders who can relate, as equals, to national leaders and who can grapple with important intellectual and policy resources. Movements need networks and alliances that are flexible, not rigid, in which roles, divisions of labor, approaches, tactics and strategies are regularly negotiated. To the extent that an infrastructure can provide the ongoing connections and relationships that hold these networks together, that infrastructure must be flexible, not rigid. Negotiating the division of labor and complementary roles is critical. Each kind of group brings different strengths to the movement. But we cannot aggregate those strengths without ways of coordinating each group's efforts around common goals and shared, overarching beliefs or worldview.

To summarize, three elements are needed to make a progressive infrastructure work — toward building a multi-racial, multi-sector movement that can achieve major advances for economic and racial justice. They are:

- Deep relationships that connect people beyond the campaign of the moment;
- Shared worldview (values, beliefs, assumptions) and vision;
- Coordinated long-term strategy with a focus of building power and recognizing the different roles that are needed in that strategy.

Infrastructure for Governing Power

The Grassroots Policy Project’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 most visible arenas where decisions are made: legislatures, courts, and government agencies; 2) political infrastructure, or networks of interests and constituencies 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 the power to shape political meaning through manipulation of beliefs, popular culture, media, history, myths, etc. power relations, this is the least visible All three faces work together: we have power in the first face when we are able to win campaigns and get people elected and appointed. In order to gain power in the first face, we need organization (2nd face) and compelling ideas that tap people's deepest aspirations and that expand their sense of what is possible so that they get involved in social action. We need the power of ideas in order to hold together our networks and infrastructure, and we need the infrastructure to help put our ideas out into the public discourse on a footing where they compete with mainstream and conservative ideas. And to complete the circle, we need to be active in immediate campaigns to connect with people, to build organizations, and to struggle around worldview.

The rise of the Right has been well-documented; here, we will focus briefly on the conservative movement’s strategy and goals. We deliberately use the term corporate-conservative infrastructure, instead of the right-wing infrastructure, to indicate the relationship between seemingly disparate interests: libertarians, cultural conservatives and the religious right, free-market conservatives and pro-corporate conservatives. It is not simply a conservative movement. The term infrastructure emphasizes a deeply connected network of organizations and individuals. While there are significant differences among the component parts, these differences do not prevent them from functioning together to achieve common goals. The corporate-conservative infrastructure has distinct components that make unlikely allies: major corporations, conservative religious groups, conservative policy groups, small business associations, and so on. Yet they function together at a high level, oriented and held together by their long-term goals and shared worldview. The most important of their goals, the one that provides the source of the political discipline that keeps groups committed to the larger effort, is governing power.

While they struggle around their differences, corporate-conservatives keep their eyes on the bigger prize: hegemonic control of governing institutions. Here are some key characteristics of the Corporate-conservative infrastructure:

- It has a set of strategic goals that go beyond the immediate goals of any constituent part. Those strategic goals provide direction to its activities and worldview. At the highest level, its goal is political power, or as we term it, governing power.

- The strategic goals are defined primarily by the political core of the infrastructure: major corporations and their many supporting institutions (trade associations,
media, etc). The corporate agenda is lower taxes, no
government regulation restricting business interests,
support of corporate globalization, privatization, and
no government support or protection for unions. That
agenda has been winning in all three branches of
government for more than 20 years.

I The corporate-conservative infrastructure does long-
term planning to put their issues on the political
agenda. They started working on the privatization of
Social Security in the 1960s and 1970s.

I It has many parts, elements, constituencies and
organizations. These parts are held together by many
types of connections, including worldview, coordinat-
ed political strategies, and overlapping relationships.
With regard to worldview, different constituencies are
able to unite around a broad set of themes: rugged
individualism, market fundamentalism and a sense of
the natural order, a limited role for government, and a
sense of nationalism.

I There are many differences and tensions between the
various parts of the corporate-conservative infrastruc-
ture. The connecting elements, in particular the pur-
suit of power, continue so far to hold it together. Even
with the Right’s setbacks in 2008 --- the financial crisis
and the election of President Obama --- corporate-
conservative forces were able to regroup and regain
power in the 2010 mid-term elections.

Governing power is more than winning elections. It
encompasses winning elected office at all levels, in large
numbers, appointing officials and judges, and having an
energized and mobilized base at the ready to bring pres-
sure to bear from without. It means running and winning
based on issues of deep concern to core constituencies,
and being able to pass legislation promoting those issues.

**Developing a progressive infrastructure**

In current usage, infrastructure seems to mean specific
organizations, such as think-tanks, or organizations on
the ground to contact people and get out the vote, or
media strategies that include better access to mainstream
media as well as support for alternative media. Useful
as any one organization might be, we suggest that it is
more important to focus on the connections between
the pieces, not just a piece. A single organization isn’t
infrastructure, just as a *value* in isolation isn’t meaningful.
A think tank becomes part of an infrastructure when it is
linked organically to mass organizations, to media, and so
on. A value becomes meaningful when it is linked organi-
cally to themes, images, and beliefs, i.e. a worldview.

A powerful progressive infrastructure should be
more than a collection of organizations; it needs to be an
integrated, coordinated and strategically oriented network
of different kinds of social change groups, representing
diverse constituencies and issues. Think tanks, policy and
research groups, training and education institutes and
other intermediaries, and progressive funders should be
integrated into this infrastructure. In addition, a political
infrastructure has a strategic function. Just as the highway
infrastructure functions to get vehicles from one point to
another, the kind of political infrastructure we are discuss-
functions to promote a long-term political agenda and
attain governing power.

Developing a progressive political infrastructure is
challenging. It involves groups working closely together in
ways that go beyond their mission as usually understood.
It means organizations struggle together to find ways to
embrace issues and tactics that do not appear to be in
their immediate interests. When partners in a coalition
take up each other’s issues, it creates some tension for
each organization. Bringing leaders together to develop a
shared commitment for bigger goals, beyond those of any
one organization, has been a key to sustaining relation-
ships in the midst of these tensions.

Collaborative relationships among groups and leaders
who play different yet complementary roles are essential,
as are relationships that make use of a division of labor
and of differences. The progressive movement is still riven
by tensions around race, identity and ethnicity. Creating
infrastructure that is truly multi-racial and diverse in terms
of class and gender means being able to negotiate across
differences and develop shared agendas and priorities. It
does not, however, mean negating, or glossing over those
differences. At the same time, not every organization can
or should play the same role; some will take the lead on
questions of racial justice, others on gender justice or on
economic issues.

This is where a conscious effort has to be made at see-
ing such differences as part of a division of labor, sustained
and held together by underlying understandings about
worldview and long-term goals. If a group does not have
an explicit agenda about racial justice, as for example a
union, how does it form relations with racial justice organi-
ization; bring representatives of those organizations to its
meetings, promote joint actions, and so on. Infrastructure
provides a means for developing work based on a shared
sense of the kinds of roles that different kinds of groups
can play toward advancing a longer-term agenda. Some
groups should focus more on short-term, 1st face campaign work while others do deeper base-building and political development. These groups should work in concert with each other, so that short-term efforts build support for longer-term commitments to social change.

**Disciplined, Coordinated Political Strategy**

Perhaps the most important function of a political infrastructure is to provide a disciplined and coordinated political strategy aimed at building a movement capable of exercising governing power. Why will environmental organizations become part of a progressive infrastructure that promotes labor rights and immigrant justice, especially if it could have short-term costs for them? Why should community organizations working on the effects of the foreclosure crisis make common cause with groups working on criminal justice reform? The answer is because they believe that only by fighting for a progressive agenda and a worldview that includes their core perspectives and beliefs, as part of a strategy for governing power, can they achieve their own long-term goals.

This is crucial because there will be tensions and fights among the organizations involved. While working for a long-term vision, organizations have to be able to carry out tactical campaigns that may reveal differences among progressive allies. There are inherent tensions between short-term campaign and electoral needs on the one hand, and the imperatives of long-term relationship-building and strategy and worldview development, on the other. There has to be room in the progressive infrastructure for groups to take an independent stance when necessary.

A coordinated political strategy enables progressives to engage two major challenges:

1. **The need to win immediate victories is balanced with building power in the long-term.** This is what we call the 51%-30% understanding. Typically people think about winning in terms of doing whatever is necessary to get 51% of the vote. However, progressive organizations also need to put resources into building a base of, say, 30% of the population. That base, if it existed, would be the committed core, the constituencies acting on the basis of a progressive worldview, promoting a progressive agenda. Building that base is absolutely crucial to the long-run strategy, though it can seem like a distraction from the campaign point of view: “We already have those people,” or “We’re just preaching to the choir.” However, progressives don’t “have” those people. Those people include people of color, immigrants, women, union members and other working people. These are constituencies that progressives come to during election season, that is very different than forming a political consciousness and committed base. This is another important place to note that a “color-blind” politics isn’t not really such a pragmatic approach; dealing with race is crucial to getting both the 51% and the 30%.

2. **The need for an inside-outside electoral strategy.** The Democratic Party poses one of the perennial strategic dilemmas for progressives. There is nowhere else to go, but too often the Party doesn’t deliver. One approach that can work is what is called an inside-outside strategy. The inside part of the strategy is working with the Democratic Party rank and file, Democrats in office, supporting Democrats in electoral races, and developing candidates for office. The outside part of the strategy is less familiar. It means developing an independent activist base, say the 30% from #1 above, which understands that it is about developing political power for its principles, not for politicians. The outside strategy means having an independent base and organizations that can criticize Democrats in elective office, from Democratic governors who pledge no new taxes to Democratic presidents who promote free trade bills. It means developing a division of labor in the progressive infrastructure so that some parts of it can support a primary challenge to a sitting Democrat.

Conservatives have been experts at an inside-outside strategy with the Republican Party. Recently, we have seen the Tea Party push the Republican Party farther to the right using an effective outside strategy.

**Inter-dependent and Independent Roles Within a Movement**

Each sector of the progressive social change world — the labor movement, the environmental movement, the women’s and reproductive rights movement, the GLBT movement, civil rights, immigrants rights, the community organizing sector, and so on — has pursued its own mission and its own electoral and legislative agenda. The deeper goals of the progressive sectors are by and large not even on the political agenda. This isn’t only a problem of the fragmentation between the sectors. Each sector is itself relatively weak; each needs to develop a strong base of people who are organized, committed, and able to play an independent political role.

The challenge for most organizations is that they need to win immediate victories on their own issues and...
they have no larger framework to think about anything more than that. Their own mission is limited to one area of politics and they don’t go beyond those constraints. Many organizations would not put their resources into building progressive infrastructure, even if they were convinced of the underlying argument. Yet such organizations are faced with a conservative opposition that does have a long-term strategy based on working in all three faces of power, to achieve governing power. At the same time, most progressive organizations know that their own fates are tied to the state of the larger political terrain, of worldview, and on the outcome of electoral politics. Their members are part of our larger society and they are necessarily affected by the shifts in worldview over the past decades.

To achieve its goals, each sector needs to pursue a two-pronged strategy. The first prong is the independent role; the second is the independent role. The interdependent aspect of the strategy suggests that:

1. A progressive social change sector can achieve its long-term goals only if major parts of the sector are integrated into a progressive infrastructure. The crucial function of the progressive infrastructure is to sustain the network of active, individuals and mass-based organizations necessary to create a powerful movement capable of exercising governing power. It promotes a progressive agenda encompassing the fundamental demands of each sector, as a programmatic basis for moving toward governing power.

2. Every progressive sector needs to be part of a process to develop and promote a relatively coherent and consistent progressive worldview. A progressive worldview challenges and provides an alternative to the conservative worldview. This alternative worldview can articulate beliefs and hopes that would tend support reproductive rights, and labor rights, and civil rights. It functions to hold together the disparate parts of the progressive infrastructure. It helps make sense of the elements of the progressive agenda.

This approach to strategy is a break with tradition; it also is one that many groups are perhaps stumbling upon in the wake of the financial crisis, Wall Street’s continued recklessness, the attacks on public sector unions, the gross unfairness of tax policies and the intensifying fiscal crises that most state and local governments face. Schematically, it entails at the least three interconnected efforts:

1) taking worldview seriously: articulating a progressive worldview that embraces fundamental themes about gender, race, economic security, and the environ-

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2) building a progressive infrastructure across sectors, at every level of organization.

3) building a more coherent, political consciousness base within each sector.

The deep interdependence and connections suggested here will be achieved only over years of efforts. A key question is how organizations can align their current work to this strategy, given they agree with it? What happens if other organizations and sectors choose not to be part of such an effort; is this a case of the prisoners’ dilemma, where it is a liability to act cooperatively if others don’t? We believe that the prisoners’ dilemma is a better fit with the current fragmented situation. We will return below to the other prong of our suggested strategy, the independent role, as a way for organizations to improve their chances for short-term success and at the same time begin testing out relationships premised on the interdependent approach.

The independent role in strategy is a modification of what we have suggested above:

1) Every organization needs to locate its work in the framework of building power, not only of winning short-term demands and campaigns.

2) Every organization needs to work on articulating a progressive worldview among its own constituencies. It needs a communications strategy that frames issues and campaigns within the context of a progressive worldview.

3) Progressive organizations need to put resources into building a mass, organized, grassroots base that is active and politically independent. By politically independent we mean a base that is brought together by a progressive worldview and a commitment to a set of long-term goals for our society, not as part of or subservient to a political party.

Issues of race, gender, sexuality and inequality are at the heart of the ideological conflicts in our society today. An organization that wants to engage questions of worldview cannot avoid these questions. That doesn’t mean that every trade union recasts itself as a reproductive rights or racial justice organization, and plays a leading role in the next legislative struggle on abortion or affirmative action. It does mean holding educational sessions discussions among leaders, staff and grassroots membership about these struggles; it can include bringing representatives of from women’s and civil rights groups to board and membership meetings. It can engage in strategic planning that is premised on an engagement with conservative world-
view and infrastructure.

In order to build an infrastructure, progressives must not only talk about these and other differences, but also must negotiate ways to work together in spite of these differences, so that they do not get in each other’s way and undermine each other’s efforts.

Developing shared strategy is one way of exploring these differences and negotiating ways of working together to accommodate those differences. We find that worldview sessions, workshops and activities can provide groups with opportunities to talk about what they believe and how they convey those beliefs. These events can create an environment in which people can talk openly about their differences while working together to lift up commonalities. It helps different kinds of groups engage in shared analysis that can reinforce a commitment to work together in coalition.

The two-pronged strategy discussed in this essay is addressed to all sectors of the progressive movement, and specifically to progressives who are seeking ways to re-orient their work toward developing and working on a broad progressive agenda that includes reproductive justice. More ways are needed to encourage other sectors to take up reproductive rights, as part of building a larger progressive infrastructure, capable of exercising governing power.