

Rachel's Environment & Health News

#459 - A High-wage, Low Waste Future -- Part 2: How Progressive People Might Unite

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Last week we saw why a new democratic politics is needed. Now, with our rose-colored glasses still removed, let's look at our ability to create such a thing.[1]

1. We are endlessly divided into thousands of groups and single-issue factions. Our organizations are seldom coordinated. When they are, the coordination is typically single-issue, on-again-off-again, and more on paper than real.

Our lack of coordination stems from weakness, not from our ability to go it alone and win. Most progressive activists and groups are stretched so thin and have so few resources that they can't take time to coordinate with others, or even to think about what such coordination might look like and do for them.

The failure to coordinate weakens us still further. Inside the progressive community, opportunities for mutual gain are routinely lost. Outside the progressive community, the image of a hodgepodge of single-issue groups does not inspire wider support. Among other unhappy effects: while people care about many different issues like racial justice and the environment and worker rights and a peaceable foreign policy, single-issue organizations appeal to very narrow constituencies, or, within individuals, to only parts of their identity--usually neglecting (often completely omitting) the spiritual, healing, and redemptive parts of life.

2. Progressives lack a comprehensive, inclusive, positive vision of how the country should be run. With some justice, we are perceived as having more grievances than ideas, and the ideas we do have are seen as a laundry list, not as elements of a common constructive vision, much less a vision accessible to ordinary people. Ask the average American, or even a self-identified progressive, what progressives stand for and you will get no answer or so many different answers that it amounts to the same thing. This lack of a common positive vision further weakens progressive appeals. (So-called "conservatives" are good at this. They have a vision--however fraudulent and mean-spirited--that gives their followers a way to think about the world: lower taxes, less regulation, hymns to a "simpler" America without so many dark-skinned people, punishment of the weaker groups in society, the God-given right to cut down every last tree and fill every wetland, and so forth. The need for a rival comprehensive view among those who value truth and reason and equality is URGENT even though a commitment to truth, reason and equality complicates the construction of such a vision).

When do progressive organizations flourish?

Progressive organizations thrive when they put forth practical programs of action that benefit their members or potential members, AND solve problems in the broader society (even solving problems for capitalists, on whose well-being the rest of the society unfortunately depends). Practical programs that benefit members AND benefit the larger society earn the political respect and social prestige needed to promote their own interests as those of the general public and to secure support for their own organization.

Take the case of unions in the postwar period. For decades, unions were very popular institutions, and much more powerful than at present. Why? Most fundamentally because they delivered benefits (increased wages, grievance procedures, etc.) that were of immediate importance to members and which also helped stabilize demand and mass markets after the catastrophe of the Great Depression, a feat that the owners of capital couldn't accomplish on their own. With demand stabilized, investment in mass production industries followed. This investment raised productivity, which lowered the real costs of consumer goods for everyone. By doing something for their members that also clearly helped the broader society, unions gained respect.

Or take the great modern civil rights movements of African-Americans and women. At a time when American society

was far more deeply racist and sexist than it is today, these movements ignited massive popular support for two reasons: because of the clarity of the injustices against which they spoke, and because remedying those injustices would bring enormous benefits to the society as a whole: the liberation of great productive energies that had been stifled by racist or sexist patterns in the economy and private life. These movements promised not only justice for their members but a better and more rewarding life for nearly everyone.

(Make no mistake. The labor movement and civil rights struggles were first and finally about simple justice and respect--demands that stood on their own. These movements were fiercely resisted and they succeeded by using an essential tactic--disruptive protest--to overcome such resistance. Nevertheless, political success requires that demands must be framed in ways that connect their satisfaction to the satisfaction of broader, and inevitably more mundane, social interests. However narrow their core issues may be, successful movements usually serve as agents of a broader and more universally appealing social goal.)

The big problem facing progressives today is that the old mass-mobilizing projects have run out of steam, but we can't agree on new ones.

Progressive organizations today don't often (if ever) mobilize their members to action. Let's face it. Members of progressive organizations don't DO much. (Grass-roots environmentalists are an exception to this because they are often fighting to maintain their neighborhoods, their health, and their children's future against some immediate, serious threat.) Progressives mail in their checks, but the programs of most progressive organizations don't inspire their membership to take action.

If this is so, why don't organizations change their programs to make a broader and stronger appeal?

Two reasons: (1) recent conditions have made it difficult for progressives to reach agreement; and (2) most progressives have stopped looking for really good projects--they have given up on trying to achieve mass appeal.

Where do mass movements come from?

They appear to spring up spontaneously, but this is deceptive. Mass movements are created by activists who lay the groundwork for years. Sometimes the long road of hard work can be reduced by an event that grabs the attention of a large number of people. The anti-war movement of the 1960s was an example.

An essential component of EVERY movement is solidarity among its members. Sometimes this solidarity is "organic"--created by common race or ethnic background, common neighborhood or friends, common conditions of work. Sometimes it is created by shared ideology--a shared view of the world and one's place in it, which allows people to bridge their differences and work together.

Most often solidarity is supplied by both "organic" forces and by some general theory, usually elevating the organic to a universal status. For example, for generations working-class solidarity was fueled by (a) the fact of a distinctly working-class life marked by people living near each other, common employment, inter-marriage, shared restrictions on mobility, and by (b) the view that workers had shared interests as a class which also happened to be the true universal interests of society.

Today, however, those "organic" solidarities have been weakened, and there is no agreement on what the "universal interests" of society might be. Until recently, where working-class solidarity didn't exist, there was at least a civic culture rooted in fairly stable face-to-face communities, relatively stable jobs (located near the home), and an array of local public goods (schools, libraries), civic

associations (churches, trade unions, PTAs, Kiwanis Clubs), sources of information (many local newspapers, even a little labor press) and many semi-public meeting places (sports leagues, taverns).

Such institutions permitted people to practice the arts of democracy -- to talk to neighbors about common concerns, promote and defend arguments, listen, learn, think, and, to some degree, develop the self-confidence and common perspectives of democratic citizens.

Local politics, rather than national, remained a key determinant of local well-being, so local political culture had real meaning and had direct influence on the quality of life.

But this world is now mostly gone. Today, most people commute several hours to work. They work in relatively small organizations that are far more mixed (if no more satisfying) than those of old, and that often blur the lines between managerial and non-supervisory personnel. When people get home from work, they don't talk much to their neighbors, and aren't much involved in local community life. Shopping and watching TV are their principal leisure activities, usually pursued alone. The quality of their local neighborhood life seems to be--largely is-- decided somewhere else.

The physical basis of solidarity is gone, and so is the basis for a shared ideology. No one progressive concern --whether race or class or gender or the environment --can be elevated to the level of general interest. Progressives deal with this problem by making lists and assuring each other of their sincerity about believing in each of these concerns. But ideology is not about making lists. It is about giving enough people enough of a common view of things that they are willing to work with people different from themselves. In this sense, progressives sorely lack a common ideology.

So, with the physical basis of solidarity gone, and with no issues grabbing the attention of a mass audience, modern progressives find themselves in a unique position. There is no obvious basis for solidarity; no common view of what is universally important --no common ideology --and there is no external force (Great Depression, Vietnam War) creating popular mobilization. What to do?

To solve these problems, progressives will need to look squarely at their own fragmentation and CONSTRUCT ORGANIZATIONS AND PROJECTS DESIGNED TO OVERCOME IT.

What kinds of organizations? What sorts of projects? Those with some hope of appealing to a majority, or at least a large plurality. Progressives have nearly given up trying to appeal to a majority --they seem to have settled for a dignified life on the edges of society, or a life of elite "good works." They seem to have made a decision not to really reach for governance.

Instead, progressives have retreated into denouncing all exercises of public power ("government is hopeless") or into liberalism--the belief that power cannot be exercised by ordinary people ("leave it to the experts").

Despite this gloomy assessment, the present moment is bursting with opportunity for progressive programs --a subject to which we will turn next week.

--Peter Montague

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[1] These ideas originated with Joel Rogers at University of Wisconsin, and Joshua Cohen at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). This week we have lifted large sections from an unpublished paper by Joel Rogers, titled "How Divided

Progressives Might Unite" but we have modified its language, so don't blame Rogers for our debased version of his ideas.

Descriptor terms: strategies; environmental movement; vision; mass movements; social change; civic culture; solidarity; ideology;