

also to refer to a far larger “we”: the project of society itself.

A central argument of this book is that the larger social world (i.e., society) must always be our starting place and our touchstone. We have to meet people where they are at. The other side of this coin is that underdog groups have to vigilantly resist the tendency of insularity and self-enclosure. There are many factors that contribute to political groups constructing barriers between themselves and society (patterns that I explore at length in the first part of this book). One important contributing factor that has emerged in the United States over just the past few decades is the construction of a new category called *activism*. You read that right.

Over the years, people have constantly introduced me to others as an “activist.” And let me tell you what a *buzzkill* dropping that label can be! Of course *some* people are glad to meet a real live activist, or a “fellow activist.” Such sympathetic or curious persons have asked me countless times over the years *how I became an activist*. The question of how individuals *as individuals* become *activists*, fascinating as it may seem, carries equally fascinating assumptions about *activism* itself. It tends to imply a voluntary and self-selecting enterprise, an extracurricular activity, a realm of subculture, and a generic differentiating label; that an *activist* is a *particular kind of person*. When people refer to me as an activist, I have taken to correcting them: “I dislike the label activist,” I politely explain, “It lets everyone else off the hook!”

The label *activist* marks a content-less distinction between the active social change participant and the society. It gets in the way, while adding zero value. Moreover, people haven’t always used this word as they do today. Indeed, until half a century ago, people didn’t use it at all. *Activism* is a surprisingly new word and a new social category. It is tempting to look back at past movements like the abolitionists, suffragettes, or union movement and think of the participants as *activists*, but the words *activism* and *activist* did not even exist during the time of these movements. The word first appeared about a century ago. It had an entirely different meaning for its first couple of decades.¹⁴ With (at least elements of) its current meaning, the term only really started to enter into the English lexicon in the 1960s. It hit a plateau at a relatively low level in the 1970s, and then it resumed its ascent in the 1980s and 1990s.

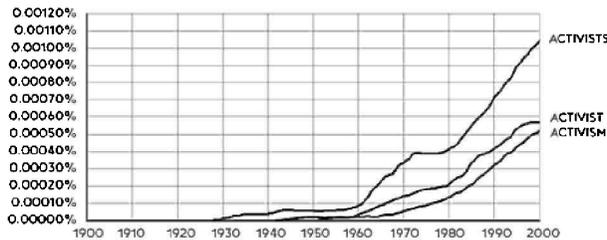


Figure 1: Google Ngram Viewer search of “activists, activist, activism” 1900-2000.¹⁵

So what? Weren’t there other words that were more or less equivalent? Isn’t *activism* just a relatively new label that describes old phenomena? While this is true to an extent—i.e., some characteristics of what is today called *activism* were certainly present in collective action that predated the existence of the word—there is a great deal of evidence that suggests the word *activism* also carries important new meanings that were absent in earlier manifestations of collective action. I believe many of these new meanings are

detrimental.

Labels are certainly not new to collective political action, but classifications like *abolitionist*, *populist*, *suffragette*, *unionist*, or *socialist* all referenced specific contents. These labels were often polarizing, but each polarization constituted its own contest of meaning in the popular imagination. *Activist*, on the other hand, is an apparently “content-less” label that now traverses political issues and social movements. Negative general stereotypes about *activists* deter popular support for particular political projects and can even negatively impact people’s opinions about a given political issue once it has been associated with generic “activists.”¹⁶ The *activist strawman* repels many people, cognitively blocking their entry into collective action.

Yet some are attracted to activism as such. Privy to a particular constellation of shared radical meanings and reference points, many activists take pride in activism partly because of their willingness to do something that is unpopular; some come to see their own marginalization as a badge of honor, as they carve out a radical oppositional niche identity. My own story provides texture to this “temptation”—this social pattern—which I had to develop a conscious awareness about in order to not succumb to it.

The likeminded clustering of activists fits into a broader trend in advanced capitalist nations: individual self-selection into values-homogenous communities, especially apparent within the expanded middle class of post-WWII American society.¹⁷ Thus, it is a relatively recent phenomenon, partly the result of tectonic cultural shifts in patterns of identity and social organization over the past half-century (atop major structural and economic shifts). In broad strokes, society has become more individualistic and self-expressive,¹⁸ as civic involvement has declined.¹⁹ With this backdrop, it is as if activism has morphed into a specific identity that centers on a hobby—something akin to being a skier or a “theater person”—rather than a civic or political responsibility that necessarily traverses groups and interests. In a society that is self-selecting into ever more specific micro-aggregations, it makes sense that activism itself could become one such little niche; that *activism* would become its own particular community of interest, which self-selecting individual activists join. The problem is that, when it comes to challenging entrenched power, we need more than little niches and self-selectors. We need much larger swaths of society to get involved.

A fledgling movement that attempts to attract only individuals as individuals, one at a time, will never grow fast enough to effect big systemic change. Powerful political challengers have never built their operations entirely from scratch, but rather by means of politicizing, activating, and aligning existing social blocs and institutions. Participation in the civil rights movement, for example, was hardly an individual matter; it tended to arise in relation to already established membership in communities and institutions—especially membership in black churches, historically black colleges, and chapters of the NAACP. This is the basic “formula” for how movements gain the kind of leverage they need to contend politically. In the 1980s Ralph Reed and other leaders of the emergent so-called Christian right studied the civil rights movement and emulated components of its approach, as they organized whole congregations and denominations—far more effective than waiting for individual self-selectors to join a movement because they happened to see a flyer. In this way, conservative congregations, especially in white suburban areas, became a major base of power that has been profoundly important for establishing and maintaining the hegemony of a conservative alignment (of Wall Street and social conservatives, in

broad strokes) for the last few decades. The right seems to have learned more lessons of political strategy from the civil rights movement than the left has. While some important left campaigns did engage progressive religious congregations (e.g., the Central America solidarity movement), overall the left did not do anything comparable in the 1980s that was remotely at this scale. Instead the liberal left professionalized, producing a plethora of single-issue non-profit organizations (501-c3s), whose memberships were, by and large, passive—useful mostly for donations—if the organizations even had members at all, let alone local chapters that met face to face.²⁰ At the same time, the radical left dramatically imploded and contracted. Many movement veterans were understandably traumatized by the repression and intensity of the 1960s and 70s. The active remnant narrated a common radical constellation of shared meanings and reference points. Newcomers would then orient themselves toward the center of the radical constellation, learning the radical lingo, which was profoundly out of touch with the language, worldview, and social practice of most Americans. Over time, this alienation and marginality vis-à-vis American society became deeply internalized in the practices and psychology of many radicals.

Both the liberal professionalization track and the radical alienation track are part of the story of the relatively recent invention and emergence of *activism* as a label and social category.²¹ Idealistic social justice-oriented young people today tend to take for granted that activism as such has always existed—that it is the category they must step into in order to take collective action. Not understanding the history and structures that constructed activism, most “activists” do not question how this construction might constrain their actions and options.

When activists enter a special cultural space where activism takes place among likeminded activists, what happens is that some of the most idealistic and collectively minded young people in society remove themselves voluntarily from the institutions and social networks that they were organically positioned to influence and contest. While most activists may not fully extricate themselves from “non-activist” spheres of their lives (e.g., family, workplace, etc.), still the framework that activism occupies a special space unto itself—that it is an activity disembedded from the day-to-day lives, cultural spaces, and workplaces of most people in society—encourages activists to check their activism at the door when entering “non-activist” spheres. Alternatively, they may proudly and defiantly wear their activism on their sleeve, but more as self-expressive fashion that distinguishes them from the group—and likely inoculates others against taking them seriously—than as part of a genuine attempt at strategic political engagement.

The spheres of everyday life are certainly not easy to engage politically, let alone to organize into a political force. There are plenty of legitimate and understandable reasons why many social justice-oriented people gravitate towards spaces where we feel more understood, and why we choose the path of least resistance in other spheres of our lives. However, the slow work of contesting and transforming such messy everyday spaces is the *essence* of grassroots political organizing. When we do not contest the cultures, beliefs, symbols, narratives, and common sense of—and from within—the existing institutions and social networks that we are part of, we also walk away from the resources and latent power embedded within them. This is not a winning trajectory. In exchange for our own shabby little activist clubhouse, we give away the farm. We let our opponents have everything.

Should we then abandon the “activist” label? A better question would be: Is there any compelling reason to persist in using a label that inoculates so many people against us and

our messages? If this word effectively functions as a cognitive roadblock that prevents most people from considering anything we do or say, while also excusing sympathizers (who don't consider themselves "activists") from joining us, then inertia is not a good enough reason to hold onto such a disadvantageous label.

Just abandoning the label will only get us so far, though. It is much more important that we break out of the contained cultural niche that the label has prescribed; that we also abandon a make-believe world of activism in favor of strategically engaging in the terrain of politics. Our work is not to build from scratch a special sphere that houses our socially enlightened identities (and delusions). Our work is, rather, to contribute to the politicization of presently de-politicized everyday spaces; to weave politics and collective action into the fabric of society.²²

A caveat is important here. The category of activism is a product of social, political, structural, cultural, and linguistic processes. It's not the activists' own original invention. The critique of the category is not about hippie-punching. It is all too easy to parrot negative stereotypes about "activists" and "protesters" and to attribute blame only to the aspiring change agents for what they fail to accomplish. This principle extends beyond just the category of activism. It extends to social movements generally, in relation to their milieus. It is hardly fair to place all the blame for internal movement problems upon the movements themselves. Movements must be conceptualized in relation to the societies they spring from. If a society lacks social movements that are strong enough and strategic enough to function as drivers of meaningful political change, then culpability and responsibility for that lack is shared to some extent across the society. How absurd would it be to only scrutinize those who are visibly attempting remedial collective action when so much of the problem often has to do with those groups and members of society who make no such attempt, or who get in the way? Challenger movements are not conjured out of thin air. They emerge organically within larger social realms, in relation to and in tension with status quo structures, cultures, norms, and policies. Changes and developments in the larger social realm shape the character and content of emerging challenger movements. The same is true for the constraints that movements face, including constraints internal to movements' cultures. Social movements are not fully autonomous subjective actors, neatly separable from the status quo they challenge. If a certain strategic error or pitfall is found to be recurring within challenger movements of a particular era, then we may be able to reasonably theorize a relationship between the common error and larger sociological patterns. To understand social movements' internal challenges, we also have to study the broader social, economic, and political context in which they are situated.

On the other hand, because progressive social movements occupy such a unique symbolic place in the larger public imagination, and because they have played such an indispensable role in effecting historic progressive changes, it behooves us to focus a significant portion of our attention on their internal dynamics, in order to make the movements of our time as effective as possible, both as catalyzing symbols and as instruments of change. This is why I dedicate so much effort in this book to examining the interior of political challenger movements. It is not about blame. It is not about posturing. It is certainly not about making them more pure. The purpose of such an examination is to gain clearer understandings of our constraints, external and internal, structural, cultural, and even psychological, so that we might better navigate them.

Ultimately, it's about taking responsibility for our future. Frederick Douglass famously

BEYOND THE LOW PLATEAU

Understanding the imperative to build and to wield political power does not in itself magically award us with any. The basis of an underdog challenger’s political strength is “people power.” Fundamentally, we need more people engaging in aligned political action. After decades of deteriorating progressive infrastructure in the United States, a central task is to rebuild our forces. Growth and expansion have to be chief preoccupations. This chapter gives attention to the level of organization and mobilization—mostly at the local level—introducing conceptual frameworks, micro-dynamics, and specific techniques that may be useful to inform grassroots organizers as they design and carry out their political operations, whether these be at a local, state, or national scale.

“An organization which claims to be working for the needs of a community... must work to provide that community with a position of strength from which to make its voice heard.”

—Kwame Ture (formerly known as Stokely Carmichael)¹³⁹

Growth trajectory

Brazilian educator Paulo Freire asked, “What can we do now in order to be able to do tomorrow what we are unable to do today?”¹⁴⁰ Here Freire is implicitly acknowledging that every political challenger is to some degree presently lacking the capacity needed to accomplish its long-term goals; if it were not lacking this capacity, it would hardly be a political *challenger*. Rather than treat such a disadvantageous present situation as if it were static or eternal, however, Freire implores us to think in terms of a *trajectory*. If we are presently too feeble a force to win the fight today, *what can we do today* so that tomorrow we will be a little stronger, and the day after that, a little stronger still?

Before we can wield power for change, we need to build and align that power. The addition of the word *align* is necessary here because it is not only a matter of *building* our own power from scratch. Certainly we do need to build some of our own explicitly progressive political organizations, but constructing a political force is just as much about aligning with existing groups and institutions.

To think about where we are now and where we want our trajectory to take us, picture a tug of war, in which one side seems to be winning handily. But when a few key actors switch sides, it suddenly shifts the balance of forces and momentum. In a case of a regime and its challenger, the old regime may suddenly find itself weakened, perhaps beyond recovery, while a challenger alignment finds itself potent, its strength ascending, the “tug of war” moving in its direction. Now, let’s complicate our binary metaphor. The problem with the idea of an actor “switching sides” in a tug of war is that such a complete defection from one pole to its opposite is unusual in the real world. While such dramatic conversions are not unheard of, they are quite rare and we cannot rely on such dramatic individual conversions. The good news is this: to win politically you don’t have to win over your most ardent opponents.

The “spectrum of allies” graphic below provides an instructive map of our spectral “tug of war.”¹⁴¹

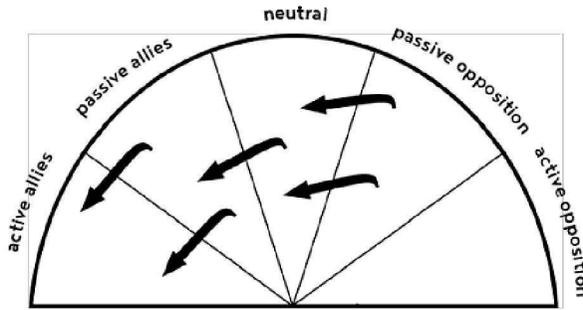


Figure 1: the spectrum of allies

Shifting the spectrum of allies is about moving people and groups—leaders, influentials, social bases, institutions, polity members, new and hitherto unmobilized actors, etc.—over just one notch closer to your position. Groups working on specific campaigns can use the above “spectrum of allies” as a strategy tool, by identifying (and then writing into the “pie slices”) specific social bases, institutions, and leaders that could potentially shift the balance of power. Perhaps the most crucial category shift is the pulling of *passive allies* into the *active allies* category, as this brings an influx of volunteers and resources, substantially increasing the alignment’s immediate capacity for collective action. For example, when pre-movement civil rights leaders and their small nascent organizations pulled (i.e., activated) black churches, students, barber shops, etc. from the *passive allies* to the *active allies* category, suddenly all of the pre-existing infrastructure, resources, and social capacity of those constituencies and institutions went to work for civil rights, dramatically boosting the burgeoning movement’s capacity and reach. Probably the next most important shift is in winning over *neutrals*, thereby pulling them into the *passive allies* category. The Freedom Rides were designed precisely with this in mind. SNCC leaders knew that many students in the north were sympathetic but inactive (i.e., they were *passive allies*). By creating a way for hundreds of these students to become actively involved—by riding in integrated buses to segregated southern states, and then lending a hand to voter registration drives—they not only increased the civil rights movement’s capacity by bringing in more active participants, they also caught the attention of the families, friends, and broader social networks of those northern students, thereby pulling many thousands of people—including many “politically connected” people—from the *neutral* to the *passive allies* category.

If an emerging movement or alignment succeeds in effecting important shifts in these categories (*passive allies* → *active allies*; *neutral* → *passive allies*), it may be approaching a tipping point, where *passive opponents* start losing their conviction—they are “neutralized”—and the *active opposition* eventually loses its base of support. If challengers can keep up their spectrum-shifting trajectory—if they can weather countermoves, counter-attacks, and perhaps repression—their opponents will eventually find themselves isolated and thus weakened to the point of defeat or capitulation.

Of course none of this is easy. There are many obstacles—structural, cultural, social, and psychological—that tend to prevent individuals and institutions from aligning with and adding their energy to a collective effort or challenger movement. Overcoming these obstacles usually takes good planning, hard work, and savvy—and success is still never assured. But however hopeless the present situation may seem, we have to always remind

ourselves that our success ultimately depends on a growth trajectory. Progressives will not—we *cannot*—make the kinds of changes we envision with only a small active force. There is a danger of getting stuck on a “low plateau”—where our capacity is limited to that of a small number of “usual suspects.” We might even become *comfortable* on this plateau, where all the faces are familiar, and everyone thinks more or less like us. But we have to figure out how to climb higher.

Kinetic and potential force

Let us imagine that a grassroots challenger force like Occupy Wall Street effectively contests cultural meanings and prevailing narratives on a national scale in the United States. This should not be difficult to imagine, as it is a partial description of what actually happened. Following such a symbolic victory, what comes next? Will plutocratic forces simply concede just because challengers have succeeded in debunking their self-legitimizing narratives? Of course not. Here we see an important asymmetry between elites and challengers in hegemonic contests. When forces defending the status quo win a contest over popular ideology—over meanings, understandings, narratives, and common sense—what they then *ask* of the masses is usually simple: “Don’t do anything—go about your lives.” Status quo forces are like salesmen selling inertia. You do not have to take any novel action; they would prefer it if you did not. The quintessential example of this was in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks when President George W. Bush called on Americans to “go out and shop.”

Political challengers, on the other hand, do not typically have a whole state apparatus at their disposal to carry out their will. Challengers must win a hegemonic contest over meanings—a significant feat unto itself—and they *also* have to breathe life-force into their vision—to arm their vision with “people power”—if they are to change structures, policies, and power relations. For this, challengers have to win more than docility, deference, or uncommitted support from people. They need a sufficiently large base of people to engage in costly collective action if they are to build and wield the institutional power it will take to win meaningful victories. It is incumbent upon the leadership of a challenger movement to provide structures and “on-ramps” that can scale up this broad engagement. In other words, leaders have to provide newcomers with *things to do* that actually add to the capacity of the burgeoning collective force.

Thus the nascent challenger mobilization that succeeds in momentarily captivating popular attention is a threat to the power establishment not for its *kinetic force*, but for its *potential force*. Its kinetic force—the typically small groups that are visibly taking public action at the outset—may very well be a smoke-and-mirrors performance, much smaller in reality than how it appears under the fleeting magnification of the mass media, at least in the early stages of mobilization. This was certainly the case with Occupy Wall Street, as the popular attention that we generated far outpaced the numbers that we actually mobilized in the streets. In this play, a handful of audacious actors hits upon a novel tactic, savvy messaging, a ripe target, and a good measure of luck. Striking a popularly resonant chord, they capture a critical sense of momentum. While it may serve such actors to publicly inflate the momentum they have initially generated, it is indispensable that they privately assess the limits of their capacity at that moment and that they chart a path to expanding their political operation. Relative to the existing power establishment, their

operation poses a potential threat not for what it can accomplish on its own, but for how it *might* catalyze aligned action by hitherto fragmented social blocs and institutions—how it might mobilize a critical mass of society. In a word, its *potential force*. These previously disparate forces are the ingredients which, when combined skillfully under ripe conditions, can produce an aligned collective power capable of mounting a viable challenge to the entrenched power of elites. The assembling of such a popular alignment—and, then, the alignment’s achievements—is the essential conceptual structure of what we might call an aspiring hegemonic operation.

This activation of potential energy is an essential task of *political organizing*. To *organize*, in the political sense, is not to organize an event, a protest, or even an occupation. It is not just to create an autonomous project. Political organizing may very well involve all of the above activities, but its essence is not itself these activities—all of which can be carried out without necessarily building or being accountable to a substantial social base. *Organizing*, in the political sense, is to organize a social bloc into a political force. It is to name, frame, and narrate the trajectory of a group; to articulate its goals, grievances and targets; to move it into strategic collective action; to inspire other social forces to align in a common direction; and to leverage this force for political ends. Organizing is not a call to action for the already radicalized usual suspects. Organizing entails starting with what already is and engaging with people as they are—not trying to build something pure from scratch. It is not a matter of creating a liberated space that perfectly reflects one’s utopian vision. Organizing is a mess, not a refuge.

In different epochs and different contexts different organizational forms have emerged to become predominant, depending both on conditions and on the task at hand. Small-scale community organizations, for example, might emerge on an *ad hoc* basis to redress local grievances, or pre-existing institutions (e.g., religious congregations) might lend their capacity for the same. Labor unions and political parties are among the most important historical forms of people-powered organizations we have observed over the past century and a half. However, with the decline of organized labor in the United States over the past four decades, working people have also lost our foothold within political parties, and it follows that we’ve lost significant leverage in relation to the state.¹⁴² Part of our historical task right now is to either revitalize the old forms or invent new forms—or likely to find some hybrid—in order to reconstitute the political power we so desperately need.

Whatever the form, *organizing* is important because it puts us on a trajectory towards greater collective power. Given the left’s current dearth of power, relative to the formidable power of our opponents, there is realistically no chance of us effecting the changes we imagine, if we do not organize and align larger social bases into political forces. To be clear, there are important contemporary campaigns in the United States that have been able to mobilize and organize enough grassroots pressure to win meaningful victories in recent years. The right for same-sex couples to marry anywhere in the nation was just won while I was writing this chapter—through an impressive campaign that mobilized the support of millions over the course of the past decade (and built on decades of earlier grassroots efforts). Many more contemporary campaigns have won important concessions and may be on the verge of bigger victories—from immigration reform to Black Lives Matter.

Occupy Wall Street, importantly, signaled the potential for a broad alignment focused on economic inequality and a rigged political system that serves the “one percent.” After a

few weeks—but before a few months—into Occupy’s novel intervention in the fall of 2011, the amorphous mobilization was recognized by a substantial cross-section of the progressive left “establishment” (e.g., longer-standing institutions including labor unions, community organizations, national organizations, and other membership organizations), as having *de facto* provided the potential for such an alignment. Remarkably, this occurred despite Occupy’s ambivalence and self-denial about its own leadership. OWS was widely, if ephemerally, seen as having succeeded where others had failed in articulating a counter-hegemonic public narrative that named an underlying crisis and aligned a hitherto fractured political left. Individuals and groups sensed a major shift in political potential, and many clamored to get involved or to align with the nascent movement. What followed this accomplishment was remarkable. In my two decades of grassroots organizing work, I have never seen such overwhelming deference coming from so many established organizations as during those several weeks in the fall of 2011. Experienced organizers and leaders from a range of notable organizations were asking us how they could best mobilize their members and channel their resources to support the effort.

Occupy succeeded initially in providing opportunities for more people to take action, but we ultimately fell short in providing opportunities at a big enough scale. The first call to action was for *individuals* to join Occupy in Zuccotti Park, and then for people to set up similarly styled occupations in cities across the nation. This was a strategic *ask* at a particular stage in OWS’s development.¹⁴³ It proved to be effective in attracting self-selecting individuals who we might consider “usual suspects” or “low-hanging fruit”—folks who were waiting for something like this; who were ready to go without too much persuasion. The activation of these usual suspects nonetheless served OWS in its beginning phase. Importantly, it set up new Occupy organizers in other cities to have their efforts become local focal points, by joining—and projecting themselves as part of—a new dynamic national force and story. Some of these local manifestations of Occupy proceeded to invent locally resonant *asks* for constituencies within their reach. The anti-foreclosure campaigns of Occupy Atlanta and Occupy Minnesota are two of the strongest examples. These campaigns succeeded in aligning local social forces to successfully halt many home foreclosures and evictions, and then to change some laws and bank policies.

Yet Occupy failed to cross a critical threshold in overall organizational capacity, at a national level. It was ultimately unable—and to a remarkable extent *unwilling*—to develop the level of strategy and organization that could have provided strategic and scalable asks not just for self-selecting individuals, but also for existing groups and institutions on a nationally coordinated level. An important part of Occupy’s problem was that, after its initial success, it tried to continue to grow primarily by way of individual self-selection. Its core attempted to be the whole movement itself, instead of seeing itself as a catalyzing symbol and “special agent” in the service of a far larger unification. Rather than helping to facilitate the activation of existing groups, social blocs, and institutions (e.g., labor unions, religious congregations, identity groups, etc.) into aligned collective action—an opportunity that was available to OWS to a remarkable extent—it too often attempted to build everything from scratch. To join the movement, one had to come to the park. When natural allies used the frames of “occupy” and “the 99%” to provide action opportunities for their already constituted social bases, they were often denounced as “co-opters.” Many of us worked tirelessly to counter this tendency, but we were ultimately unable to stop some of the most self-isolating tendencies from speaking for the movement and repelling

the very social forces that we needed to set into motion.

For reasons I have already discussed in earlier chapters, we ultimately lost the initiative. And many of the organizations, some with large constituencies, that had deferred to OWS and our cumbersome processes came to see us as incapable of charting a strategic course to take advantage of the political moment we had initiated. Occupy failed to develop “legs” that could carry forward the vision of the new unification. Trying to keep its *kinetic* force moving (e.g., maintaining the physical occupation of parks), Occupy inadequately engaged the broader *potential* force that it was positioned to activate. It quickly reached its natural plateau, and then unraveled.

Core and base

Of course, high-momentum “movement moments” like Occupy Wall Street are the exception to the norm. Usually, social change groups and organizations have to muster much more meager operations with less energy and attention swirling around them. In these long lulls it is easy to grow accustomed to a low level of capacity, and to neglect to really think strategically about how we might organize in order to grow, in order to win. Instead, we may chug along doing what we can with the little “army we have.” The crises we seek to remedy may seem so pressing that we feel morally compelled to throw everything we’ve got at them—even if we know it will not be enough to actually change the outcome. The thing is, it takes more time at the outset to bring in new people and to orient them to tasks. It’s faster, in the short-term, to just have the individuals who already know how to design a flyer, write a press release, or plan the logistics of a protest, to do so. However, if we neglect to prioritize bringing in new folks, orienting them, and developing their skills and leadership, we will tend to stay perpetually at a low operating capacity.

It is easy to become habituated to working in small, low-capacity groups. The ragtag features of such groups may start to feel familiar, even affirming of our values, as if being small and under-resourced were a sign that we are legitimately “grassroots.” Such a dynamic, combined with the force of habit, often causes us to think too statically about the size and trajectory of our groups and movements. There is a tendency among people who are very active in social movements to grow too comfortable with ourselves; to look at ourselves and think that *this is it*, that *we are the movement*, that we know all the players. When we think we know all the players, as well as how to talk to them (i.e., to ourselves), then we can become lax in our attempts to reach a broader public or a target constituency. Unconsciously, we compose our flyers, calls-to-action, Tweets, and Facebook posts with *people like us* in mind—folks who are not only already on-board with our values and goals, but who are also acculturated to the idiosyncrasies of our movement spaces and privy to our jargon. This tendency limits our efforts to recruit, activate, or forge alliances with additional players. Again, if we think about a movement only in terms of its kinetic energy—i.e., that which is already in motion—we will look around at the actors currently on the stage and think that it is up to us alone to somehow accomplish large-scale political goals (e.g., transforming the economic system, challenging structural racism, or ending wars). This would require magic. We cannot realize a bold political vision with only our current numbers mobilized. For this we must build a larger social force. Again, we have to activate greater potential energy.

A central task of a challenger movement’s leadership *core* is to take responsibility for

building up the movement's capacity by activating and facilitating the participation of larger numbers of people. A core has to provide opportunities for everyday people to take meaningful action that is aligned with the aims and strategies of the larger movement. We have to set others up to play helpful ongoing roles that they can sustain. We have to accommodate multiple levels of participation. And we must activate existing social networks and institutions, rather than only building the movement one individual recruit at a time. This facilitative role requires a leadership core to conceptualize itself as such and to understand the nature of its relationship to a broader movement or political alignment.

Core essentially refers to the most active change agents; those individuals who, through whatever combination of circumstance, socio-economic status, experience, effort, biography, and choices, make a social movement or political project a primary commitment.¹⁴⁴ Having a critical number of such committed folks is indispensable to a movement's success. However, a serious impediment to building bigger and broader movements is the tendency among such uniquely positioned individuals to act as if we alone might somehow achieve our ambitious political visions (a variation on the story of the righteous few). Sure, we may be able to have some impact. But if we are talking about posing a potent challenge to entrenched power structures, then we who comprise the dedicated core (a.k.a. the "usual suspects") have to look far past ourselves. If the next iteration of an Occupy-like movement is to succeed politically, it will need to effectively tap hundreds of thousands of people who are willing to give *something*. Millions of such folks are already "out there," but organizers need to attract them and give them some direction and clear ways to participate. If a leadership core cannot effectively activate the next tier of potential movement participants, it will certainly fail to move the broader society. These potential participants are not even the whole base, but rather the *start of the base* needed to challenge entrenched systems of power and privilege. Therefore, the interplay between these tiers of movement participants is of critical importance. If there is an impassable chasm between the core and the potential base, then there can be no popular progressive alignment, and therefore little-to-no capacity for effective political intervention (at least at a national level).

If the kinds of progressive changes we imagine are ever to be realized, it will be through the active participation of large numbers of "ordinary Americans": teachers, nurses, factory workers, artists, service workers, students, religious communities, civic organizations, unions, military servicemembers and veterans, and allies within the existing power establishment. These participants come as they are, and as such we have to welcome them. They give what they are willing to give, and organizers have to affirm the smallest contributions (while also constructing "ladders of engagement" for those who are eager to do more). Social movements that wish to attract everyday folks cannot afford to have a high bar for entry. If we are to build a popular movement, we must accommodate a continuum of levels of involvement, as well as levels of political analysis. Many problems and challenges inevitably accompany such endeavors. But, relative to our current dearth of organized popular power, these would be good problems to have.

Asking people for their time

In his book *Making History: The American Left and the American Mind*, sociologist Richard Flacks discusses how "the left then comes up against a fundamental and profound

dilemma. It calls on people to make their history, but finds people making their own lives.”¹⁴⁵ People have important social, familial, and professional commitments, not to mention their passions—hobbies, sports, the arts, etc. Thus, a near-constant feature of grassroots organizing is the challenge of getting people to *prioritize* putting time and effort into a collective effort. This can be a big challenge even when people are very sympathetic to the cause.

But if it is generally difficult to get people to devote their limited free time to collective political action, that does not mean that the *manner* in which we approach people has no bearing on our chances of success. One of the most important ingredients to successful mobilization of a person is their belief in the potential utility of the effort. If you are asking me to spend my Saturday at a rally, is the rally likely to make a difference? If you are asking me to spend my Tuesday evening in an office making phone calls, is this tedious undertaking likely to bear any fruit? Do you have a strategy that guides the activities that you are asking me to spend hours of my life doing? In other words, is any of this likely to make a positive difference? If so, how are you making that clear to me? Because it’s one thing to take time away from my family and my busy schedule if I think we can make an impact; it’s another thing entirely if we’re just shouting at the wind together.

To mobilize beyond the dedicated “usual suspects” we have to articulate not only the reasons *why* an issue is *important*, but also *how* our plan of action is *strategic*—how we have a believable chance of making a difference. The dedicated core of a social change group may get confused about this distinction—because this core may be composed of individuals who will do the work no matter the apparent results (of course hoping that eventually more people will join). I remember leading a strategy workshop for members of a local social justice organization in Boston. In one of the exercises, participants paired up for a two-person role-play in which one partner attempted to convince the other to attend an upcoming rally that was part of an issue campaign they had been working on. The person being “pitched” had specific instructions about their character: they were playing the part of someone who was sympathetic to the cause; they already understood and cared about the issue; they had even participated in related actions in the past. However, they were skeptical about the *effectiveness* of this particular action. Would it make any difference? In other words, they were willing to give their valuable time *if* they could be convinced that the action was part of a larger strategy that had a chance of achieving a political goal—but their instructions in the role-play were to start out with measured skepticism concerning this question of effectiveness. The partners (in the pairs) who were instructed to make the persuasive pitch, on the other hand, essentially had to play themselves: core participants in a campaign they were already active with in real life.

I was fascinated by what ensued. Only a few of the “pitchers” said anything at all about how the action would be effective in a strategic or tactical sense. Disregarding their clear instructions—in a manner that seemed unconscious rather than rebellious—the large majority instead tried to convince the other person of the importance of the issue itself, even though they were explicitly told that the person already agreed with them. Instructed to explain the action’s *strategic* utility, they could only explain it in *moral* terms. Is this not a central problem of the dedicated core of today’s left? We ask people to join our group, campaign, or action because “they should care about this important issue.” Millions of Americans already think the issues are important. Often the problem is not that they do not care. The problem may be that they don’t think our actions are effective. And they may be

right!

The point here is not that we should replace a moral narrative about our issues with an “inside baseball” conversation about strategy and tactics. Indeed, I can often be found arguing the opposite. However, the rhetorical tools that can win broad sympathy in a public-facing symbolic contest aren’t necessarily the same tools needed for persuading individuals to get involved—to give their time—in particular efforts at the local level. We must also be careful to not draw the wrong lessons from those rare and rejuvenating “movement moments” when volunteers seem to be coming out of the woodwork in answer to our moral appeals on an issue; part of the explanation for such rapid influx is that the sense of momentum itself makes it seem more likely that the collective effort could have an impact, and thus be worth joining. Such may be the intuitive judgment—more than the conscious calculation—of new movement participants in these moments. However you slice it, such momentum tends to fade quickly when the moral narrative proceeds without a story about *how* the effort will succeed politically, or absent a believable impression that there exists a leadership with a good plan.

If people see no believable path forward, why should they join our costly adventure? Too often we mistake people’s resignation for apathy. In the workshop in Boston, it seemed that many participants really could not grasp the basic concept that a person could (1) care about an issue but (2) refrain from joining a particular action because (3) they don’t see the action’s *efficacy*. Take a moment to appreciate the practicality of refraining from joining an action that seems doomed to failure. Is fighting an advantaged opponent without any hope or plan for winning really fighting? If the cause is just, then perhaps fighting with no hope of winning is morally superior to not fighting. However, if taking a righteous stand will only achieve itself, most people will prioritize other things in their lives (e.g., a hobby, or quality time with loved ones). Social justice efforts that rely only on moral suasion—without offering any sense of a believable path to victory—will tend to mobilize only “true believers,” martyrs, and saints. Morality must always shape our mobilizing narratives, but we also have to paint a believable picture of what winning will look like. We have to punctuate our struggle with glimpses of victory and credibly foreshadow how we will achieve our big-picture vision in the long term.¹⁴⁶

To be fair, it is often very difficult for grassroots groups to accomplish such a thing. And that’s one reason why we also have to always be on the lookout for new openings and opportunities. Whether we’re talking about a local, regional, or national scale, long-haul organizers know that unanticipated events can quickly and dramatically shift the political landscape. From economic downturns to the blunders of powerful politicians—or even the unexpected successes of our own actions—unforeseen factors can suddenly open up new possibilities for challenger movements. When the landscape dramatically shifts and people can intuit potential political openings, the thick fog of popular resignation can evaporate in an instant—and challenger movements may suddenly find themselves inundated with new volunteers and institutions clamoring to join the burgeoning effort. Within such moments and between them, it takes work to plug newcomers into tasks and roles that build our political force.

Plugging people in

In early 2003, during the lead-up to the US military invasion and occupation of Iraq,

something big started happening in cities and towns across the United States. Only a year and a half after the 9/11 attacks, the Bush Administration seemed to have spent most of its political capital and was now shamelessly milking the tragedy to lead the nation into an unrelated war of aggression. The lead-up to the invasion provided circumstances that encouraged a lot of people to act on their dispositions to try to stop an unpopular war before it started. People who were generally hesitant or disinclined to participate in street protests did so anyway, hoping that a large showing might make a difference at a critical moment. We certainly did turn out in big numbers. The global antiwar demonstrations on February 15, 2003 marked the largest coordinated protest in world history.

In January of the same year, a small group of folks in my hometown of Lancaster, Pennsylvania advertised for a public meeting to plan for local antiwar action. I had left Lancaster County several years before this, and had been deeply involved in social movements and grassroots organizing in big cities since then. But the idea of bringing the organizing skills I had acquired back home had been growing on me. Frankly, I had little desire to leave the life I had made for myself in radical circles rooted in bigger cities. I had by then built close friendships from my work in social movements, especially in the global justice movement. However, I was becoming increasingly critical of the insularity I saw in the radical left. In clustering into likeminded subcultural enclaves, surrounding ourselves only with each other, we were effectively abandoning areas like Lancaster County—and really most of the state of Pennsylvania between Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. I would often hear liberals jokingly label most of the state “Pennsylvucky,” inferring that it was as backward as their idea of Southern Appalachia. Somewhere along the way these areas, once organized by the labor movement, seemed to have been conceded to the right. How would we ever contest the politics of such areas if we gave up on engaging them? Having grown up in rural PA, I started to feel a special burden.

To test the waters, I moved to Philadelphia and started spending time in Lancaster (a distance of about 90 minutes by train or car). I started spending more and more time in Lancaster in the months leading up to the Iraq War, and soon I was involved in helping to mobilize people in the area against the Bush Administration’s march to war. To our surprise, the public meeting that we organized drew more than 200 people. I was thrilled to see so many folks come together in this politically conservative area.

We decided that we should start meeting regularly to build something together. While a meeting of over 200 people was inspiring, we would have to structure the next one differently if we were to harness the energy and skills of those in attendance. I volunteered to co-facilitate a follow-up meeting in which we formed working groups to focus on specific tasks and projects. I had prior experience with the working group model, and it seemed a good fit for getting so many people active quickly. The meetings and working groups continued and became the Lancaster Coalition for Peace & Justice (LCPJ), which continued strong for the next decade, growing into a 500-member organization (and also affiliating with the national coalition, United for Peace and Justice).

I was excited to help build the LCPJ. No such organization had existed in Lancaster County when I was fumbling through my own politicization process several years before. Now I was helping to build a vehicle that people in the area could plug into, and that could perhaps help to shift local culture and politics. When I had been contemplating my return to Lancaster, I knew that I was interested in building some kind of vehicle that could facilitate progressive collective action, but I didn’t have a clear vision about what it would

look like. The Bush Administration's march to war in Iraq deeply troubled a lot of people in the area and provided the catalyst for us to organize on the basis of our shared opposition.

It can be quite challenging to get people to take the first step of getting involved in collective political action. Every once in a long while, though, extraordinary circumstances—like the lead-up to the Iraq War—encourage larger numbers of people to take this step all at once. In such situations, organizers may have a hard time just keeping up with the inflow of volunteer energy. But a little bit of effort can go a long way in providing opportunities to new participants, as was our experience in Lancaster. Plugging in new volunteers and getting them to stick around—in a way that adds capacity to a collective effort—is at least as challenging as initially getting folks in the door. In Lancaster we suddenly found ourselves with an abundance of new volunteers. The first wave of leadership in the LCPJ was mostly made up of people who already had important commitments in their lives. A few individuals in particular had taken on a great deal of new responsibilities with the LCPJ. As the organization transitioned to a longer-term existence, many of these individuals were unable to sustain the level of sacrifice that the LCPJ seemed to demand of them. For the most part these folks, while still supportive of the LCPJ, dropped off as active participants.

Over time, I noticed a pattern: those who took on more manageable (but still meaningful) ongoing tasks mostly stayed active, continuing to attend to the same roles or tasks that they originally committed to (e.g., our treasurer, archivist, and graphic designers). Social movement scholars Pamela Oliver and Gerald Marwell shed some light on this pattern:

...a lot of the technological knowledge about mobilizing volunteer time is about organizing and dividing labor and structuring events and jobs so that people can be invited to participate in well-defined and limited ways... A technology often used in the charitable sector but only occasionally used in social movements involves creating long-term jobs that involve only a few hours a week such as calling for Jewish charities for three hours every Tuesday night or being on call for the rape crisis center three nights a month. Many people who are unwilling to make the major short-term open-ended commitments that activism entails are quite willing to make a long-term commitment to a well-defined task. They also are aware that failing to keep their commitment will cause a noticeable problem for the event or the organization's mission.¹⁴⁷

Our mixed success in retaining active members corroborated Oliver and Marwell's findings. We started to intentionally structure our operations accordingly. By the end of the LCPJ's first year, recognizing the limitations and challenges of our all-volunteer organization, we decided to hire a part-time coordinator whose primary job was to maintain regular contact with point people from our multiple working groups. A year later, when the coordinator position became vacant, I took the job and began working to "package" task-sets for volunteers. As an organizer, I sat down with volunteers one-on-one to invite them to take point on specific ongoing tasks that fit their availability, skills, and interests. I aimed to design roles that would not be too overwhelming, so that people could more easily sustain their involvement. With this set-up, new volunteers were able to plug in meaningfully, and they weren't just another body to add to the mass. They usually found

ways to take some creative autonomy in the particulars of their roles. It's good to provide opportunities for volunteers to increase their contribution and to step up to take on greater responsibility. Sometimes it makes sense to explicitly ask and encourage them to do so. On the other hand, it's all too easy to unintentionally overburden volunteers. An unsustainable workload sets volunteers up to fail or to flee—they may end up flaking on their tasks or burning out and dropping off entirely. Paying attention to such concerns is part of the work of a leadership core of any organization. Leaders can check in with active volunteers about how they're doing with their workload. Counter-intuitively, it's sometimes even necessary to encourage people to do *less*, in order to set them up to do more in the long term. In my role as coordinator, I would sometimes make this explicit to LCPJ volunteers, saying, "You're doing a really great job. I'd love to see you still involved two or three years from now. So I want to make sure the amount of time and energy you're giving is sustainable for you. If you find that you're doing too much, let's talk about it and figure out how to adjust."

These one-on-one meetings eventually became an important organizing tool for us, and several of us became skilled in leading them. But this wasn't how we started out. In the first few months of the LCPJ, when people would ask me how to get involved, I would just invite them to attend our monthly business meeting. Sometimes those invited would attend and sometimes they wouldn't. When they did, they often didn't come back. Then one day it suddenly struck me how ludicrous it was that our primary recruitment strategy was "come to a meeting." I had noticed for some time the low retention rate of folks who took this initial step. The thing is, all groups develop some level of internal culture that can be alienating or intimidating to newcomers, and this is always on display in a group's meetings. Certainly, this can be mitigated by groups that make a conscious effort to be more welcoming and to refrain from jargon. Yet, the primary purpose of a meeting is to discuss and make decisions about the group's ongoing work and mission, and this is not always conducive to providing an accessible or appealing first impression to newcomers. I decided to start taking time to sit down one-on-one with individuals who expressed interest in the LCPJ. We would meet for coffee for about an hour. First, I would ask them about themselves—their interests, experiences, talents, and skills, and what had gotten them interested in the LCPJ—and then I would tell them about some of the LCPJ's campaigns and projects. Together we would seek to find a good fit for them. I would also identify capacities that the organization was lacking that I thought they might be interested in working on. I encouraged volunteers to find or invent an ongoing role or task that they could sustain. One woman told me that she never ever wanted to come to a meeting, but that she loved to organize rummage sales and that she would do all the work to organize two of them for us annually. She did so, providing the LCPJ with free publicity and several thousand dollars in funding.

For every new role someone would fill, we increased our collective capacity. We found ourselves capable of accomplishing more, including the capacity for campaigns on local issues. This, in turn, increased our visibility, which attracted even more participation. We also developed a story of many moving parts working together as a whole to build and exercise grassroots power. This narrative gave meaning to even mundane tasks—like organizing our bi-monthly mailing—by putting them in the context of a collective purpose and trajectory.

Jose Vasquez recounted to me his similar working philosophy in building the Iraq

Veterans Against the War NYC chapter:

If a person can give two hours a week, awesome, that's two hours a week. There are so many other people who give zero. So you get the person who gives two, and great... You've got to meet people where they are. If they get passionate about it, they'll reprioritize. They'll figure out what the work requires. I think the more important thing is giving people a feeling that there is a mission here; there is work that needs to be done. It's amazing what some people can get done when they feel a sense of purpose and are all facing in the same direction.¹⁴⁸

Narrating an organization's mission like this gives people a sense of meaning, purpose, and personal agency, all of which are important if we want new participants to stay involved in our groups, campaigns, and political projects.

Yet there is something else that is perhaps even more important. If we want to inspire people to stick with social justice organizations for the long haul, then we absolutely must make them feel valued and appreciated. It's really basic. People like to be around people who are nice to them and who make them feel like they *belong*. If we want to compete with the myriad options for people's free time, then we have to treat each other well. We have to be good to each other, to take care of each other, to rise above the social elitism that so often infects our society. This work is ultimately about love. Yes, our world is in crisis, and the work of confronting that crisis can be exhausting, but if we are to attract broader participation, we have got to step out of "crisis mode organizing" and take the time to appreciate each other along the way.

Here again, the concept of a *core* is helpful; those active participants who recognize themselves as part of a core have to take additional responsibility for the group culture and make sure that participants feel valued and supported.

Engaging existing infrastructure

When groups like the LCPJ organize actions or events, they have to do so with limited resources. Groups tend to expend what limited resources they have on reaching out to constituencies that seem more likely to attend their events, which often means outreach to other progressive groups. By default, and to some degree necessity, outreach efforts focus on "harvesting" already existing consciousness and networks rather than "planting new seeds." Let's say a group has a budget to make 300 leaflets for an educational event they are organizing, and five folks have volunteered to distribute the leaflets. It makes good sense, with a short-term goal of getting good turnout to the particular event, to devote such limited outreach resources to posting flyers at places where likeminded people are likely to see them. However, the short-term goal of using limited resources to get good turnout is in tension with the long-term goal of growing a movement by reaching—and providing opportunities for—new people.¹⁴⁹

Moreover, if a given group is focusing predominantly on attracting other progressives to attend an event, this is likely to shape the language they use to promote the event. A flyer written to attract people who are already solidly "with you"—i.e., the "usual suspects"—may look substantially different than one written to attract a broader audience. Similarly, the event itself may look drastically different if it is assumed that everyone present is already in agreement. This is yet another reason why many social movement

groups fall into the insular patterns discussed in previous chapters. We grow too accustomed to talking to each other. We “preach to the choir.” The language we use references commonly held meanings within our progressive or radical groups and networks, and is often alienating or even unintelligible to people who do not share those meanings. Thinking back on the *spectrum of allies* tool outlined earlier in this chapter, our message is aimed only at the far-left “pie slice”—virtually ensuring that we will keep operating at an insufficient capacity.

The problem is not just about where we place flyers and whom we have in mind when we write them. The outreach limitations groups have are real. It may not always be feasible, for example, to distribute flyers to a broader constituency. So we need to think creatively. Posting a flyer—along with posting a Tweet or Facebook event—isn’t really a great way of “planting a seed” to reach new folks anyway. *Seed work* requires reaching people where they are, within the spaces and with the references to which they are accustomed. For example, getting an event listed in a church bulletin by finding an ally in the congregation will likely prove more effective than posting a flyer on the wall, because it will feel more familiar or legitimate to congregation members.

We also need to move beyond just promoting *our own* actions and events. It can be far more effective to *bring the event* to existing cultural spaces and institutions; to classrooms, religious congregations, neighborhood groups, and so on. I can easily spend twenty hours planning and promoting an educational forum at which I will feel pleased if even a few unfamiliar faces turn out. Alternatively, I can spend just two hours preparing to talk to a classroom of high school students, presenting a more in-depth critique on a given issue than many of them will have ever previously encountered. This latter option is part of what is meant by *seed-planting work*. It requires finding and maintaining allies within existing cultural spaces and institutions (e.g., the teacher who invites me to speak to their class).

The thing is, a lot of people may hold beliefs compatible with an organization’s or movement’s goals, but only a small percentage are likely to *act* on those beliefs. And a primary factor for why some people do take action is simply that they encounter opportunities provided by people close to them who are already active. Social proximity to political activity can activate people’s dormant beliefs. Social movement scholars Debra Friedman and Doug McAdam cite such proximity as the single biggest factor for why some people become active in grassroots change efforts, while others do not: “Structural proximity to a movement, rather than any individual disposition, produces activism. Although individuals differ in their dispositions, the opportunities afforded by structural location relative to a movement determine whether they are in a position to act on these dispositions. Empirical support for these positions is unimpeachable...”¹⁵⁰

With this in mind, we can see that a primary role of a grassroots organizer is to provide opportunities that turn people’s favorable dispositions into collective political action. And this is a big reason why I returned to my hometown of Lancaster to organize: because it’s essential that *core* participants (as I have defined *core* throughout this chapter) be embedded in the common social networks and institutions around us. If we perpetually cluster into our own separate spaces—if we surround ourselves only with each other—how many opportunities can we provide for others to get involved? If people join collective action more from proximity to opportunities to become active than from individual dispositions, then we’ve got to get close enough to people (who are not already active) to be able to effectively provide them with such opportunities.¹⁵¹

Along these lines long-time organizer Judith LeBlanc discussed with me how today's movements need to get out there and talk to people:

Talking and making connections and relationships is the core element to grassroots organizing and we don't have a lot of people doing that. We don't have a lot of people who are willing to go door to door. And when they do, the people who do that, it changes them... I believe the single most debilitating constraint [to contemporary social movements] is that people don't have confidence that you can walk into a church or go to a union local and find a receptive ear who would engage with you in thinking through what it would take to involve a local union or a church or a tenant's organization in any given initiative we're taking on—to just sit down and talk.¹⁵²

Engaging with existing networks and institutions also allows the people within them to consider joining a collective effort without feeling that they would have to lose their existing identity in order to do so. They can take action as teachers, as union members, as students, or as members of a religious community. They do not have to become an "activist"—a distinct identity that many people have misgivings about claiming—in order to take action. Instead they can work for social justice as an expression of who they already are, alongside people they already know.

When we're not intentionally engaging "beyond the choir" like this, we tend to become our own exclusive audience. Distinctly progressive or radical groups tend to orient our meetings, forums, cultural events, and demonstrations toward ourselves—what we feel comfortable with—rather than towards the social bases that we need to be engaging, with consideration for what may or may not be relatable to them. Coming together with likeminded people can fill our spirits, feed, and sustain us, but we cannot afford to lose interest in building a broader-based political force. And we can't neglect to engage already existing cultural spaces. Sometimes we become disinterested in or even hostile toward such spaces because we see them as problematic, as they house the values of the dominant culture. But these spaces also house the people. We can't expect people to meet us where we want them to be. We have to meet them where they are, with the language they use, in the spaces they frequent.

And this isn't just about going into such spaces in order to recruit individuals (even if we do that as well). This is also about what is referred to as *bloc recruitment*: growing a movement by activating whole groups of people at a time. One of the biggest organizing lessons from US social movements in the 1960s is that when movements grow quickly in size and capacity it is usually not by building their own separate infrastructure from scratch, but by organizing within existing social networks and institutions until their members identify with the movement. Then the pre-existing infrastructure and resources of those institutions start to go to work for movement ends. The civil rights movement spread like wildfire and dramatically increased its capacity when black churches and traditionally black schools came to identify as part of a movement. Most people did not have to leave their social networks to become part of the movement. Rather, membership in these existing institutions came to imply movement participation. These institutions and networks then used their resources to further movement goals.¹⁵³

Building our own separate infrastructure from scratch is resource-intensive. And resources for such infrastructure are harder to come by because of the small pool of

invested persons. This is not at all to say that specific movement organizations like, in the case of civil rights movement, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) are unimportant. Organizations that are constructed explicitly for political purposes often play crucial and irreplaceable roles. However, such organizations do not bring about sweeping changes by “going it alone.” Organizers and movement organizations are valuable mostly in their role of organizing and mobilizing social blocs and existing institutions, i.e., by facilitating broader participation.

The tendency to build all our own infrastructure from scratch is related to the tendency to attempt to build something that perfectly and purely reflects our alternative values. Organizations are always, to some extent, a reflection of the values of their members and leaders, but we have to keep in check the tendency towards self-righteous purism. We must not seek such a pure reflection of our values that we become disinterested in effectiveness and lose sight of our instrumental goals. When groups and organizations become overly concerned about their “purity,” they cut themselves off from the people they should be working to align with or organize. If such groups seek to grow at all, their recruitment efforts will be impaired by the fact that they are building a righteous, albeit alienating, identity more than a viable vehicle for change.

Radicals cannot afford to focus exclusively on building our own alternative infrastructure to feed an alternative narrative that distinguishes us from others. As discussed previously, those who maintain this tendency confine themselves to living the *story of the righteous few*, in which they perpetually lack the ability to effect the changes that they long for. The necessary numbers elude them and the necessary resources remain in the hands of others. If, on the other hand, we succeed in connecting with others, then there is no *other*. The walls between others and us start to come down. Resources become available and doors open, not magically, but through effective organizing and alignment that is made possible through relationship; through our orientation towards connecting with others and finding common ground.

In Lancaster County another peace and justice organization, the Lancaster Interchurch Peace Witness (LIPW), emerged to organize local Christian congregations as part of a broader effort for peace and justice. Founded in 2004, one year after the founding of the LCPJ, the LIPW provided a complement to the LCPJ. From the start the two organizations worked collaboratively. Yet the LIPW played a particular role that the LCPJ was not as equipped for. As a group of local leaders and members of Christian churches, the LIPW has been able to work for peace and justice by engaging their own church memberships in ways that no organizer or organization would be able to do were they outside of the Christian faith. LIPW provides opportunities to get involved in peace and justice work that participants experience as an expression and extension of their faith. LIPW’s leadership is comprised of people who are active, embedded, and have legitimacy in these particular social networks and institutions. The LIPW leadership strategizes and collaborates together to promote peace and justice within their networks and institutions; to activate already constituted communities—along with their infrastructure and resources—to work for peace and justice in the broader society. They are *insiders* in these communities, genuine and sincere. While some people in their churches disagree with them, they cannot easily dismiss them.

Whether or not we’re aiming to engage with religious communities and institutions as

the LIPW does, we might appreciate the organization’s approach as a model for conceptualizing the relationship between the distinct organizational vehicles we build and the communities and institutions those vehicles engage with. Social movements clearly need to build some of their own goal-oriented organizations, but these organizations have to reach outward, “beyond the choir.” Some of these organizations may cast a wide net, as does the LCPJ, while others, like the LIPW, may go deeper into specific networks and social bases. As they say, different strokes for different folks. But all of our organizations—local and national—must learn to see past themselves in order to do their part to grow a larger political alignment.

Leaderful

In this chapter I have outlined a number of things that successful social justice movements and organizations do: develop a core and a broader base; build a culture and a system of plugging new members into meaningful and capacity-building roles; maintain an outward focus so as to avoid insularity; and engage with existing infrastructure rather than constantly starting from scratch.

None of this is possible without good leaders.

That’s why we have to reject the “leaderless” ideology that we’ve seen in certain contemporary social movements. The anti-authoritarian, hyper-democratic spirit of Occupy Wall Street was, in certain ways, a beautiful thing: a call for greater political participation and more horizontal power relations. It was also, practically speaking, a total pain in the ass. Lacking nuance, this culture too often became self-sabotaging: hostile toward needed skills and resources, and toxic for many who stepped up to take initiative. Occupy’s anti-leadership bent was of course related to the deeper ambivalence about power (and politics) that I discussed in chapters four and five.

However, leaders did arise out of Occupy who came to explicitly value leadership itself. Among the important concepts that many of these leaders learned was the critical difference between saying *none of us is a leader* and *all of us can be leaders*. At first glance these two sentiments may seem like two ways of saying essentially the same thing: both affirm organizing in ways that are more horizontal than vertical; both attempt to equalize participation and to resist social hierarchies. There is a crucial difference, however, between the idea of *no* leaders and the idea of *all—or many—*leaders. If we are part of a group that talks about having no leaders, this phrase can inadvertently make us overly hesitant about stepping up to take initiative. It can create a group culture where individuals are reluctant to be seen as moving something forward—because our peers might see us as “leaders,” which would be a bad thing. Such a culture took hold in many pockets of Occupy.¹⁵⁴

For movements like Occupy Wall Street to scale up, we need a lot more people stepping up to take initiative. The more initiative we each take in our work together—the more political organizing skills we learn and hone—the greater our collective capacity becomes. Building our capacity means increasing what we are capable of achieving together. It means building our *collective power*, which is a central task of a challenger political project.

We need to build a culture where we are all invited to step up—a culture that aspires to shared leadership and a proliferation of leaders. This is not at all to say that horizontal

values should not inform our notions of leadership and what it means to “step up.” Good leadership includes stepping up in ways that also makes space for others to step up; to help others to feel invited, confident and prepared to take initiative. Stepping up can mean actively listening and learning from others. Stepping up can mean taking time to reflect on how different people can be socialized differently around leadership. For reasons that often have a great deal to do with our different socializations because of gender, race, age, economic class, or other aspects of our identities, opportunities, and social positions, some of us may be predisposed to speak confidently and to take on more visible leadership roles, while others are often predisposed to speak less in the group, or to take on less visible roles. For a conscientious leadership, then, stepping up also means recognizing and valuing many different forms of leadership in the group, and addressing social imbalances around who is taking on more visible forms of leadership. It also means looking for leadership potential; for strengths within the group that are latent or potential, waiting for an opportunity to become active. Stepping up can mean providing the right opportunity at the right time to help activate such latent potential in others, rather than assuming that by simply “stepping back” and leaving “more space,” the right people will automatically fill that space, absent intentional leadership development.

However, if we stay in the framework of thinking we should have *no* leaders, why would we be inclined to seek to develop more leadership in our groups and movements? If all leadership is viewed negatively, we may develop a “circular firing squad” group culture, where we tend to cut each other down or we hold back because we are afraid to stick our heads up.

Instead of imagining *leaderless* movements, we have to build *leaderful* ones; movements where we are always encouraging each other to step into our full potential and to shine as individual leaders who are working together collectively for a better world. If we are to climb higher than the low plateau, we need more leaders, and more leaderful movements.

¹³⁹ Stokely Carmichael, “What We Want,” *The New York Review of Books* (1966).

¹⁴⁰ Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope*, 115.

¹⁴¹ This tool was introduced by Martin Oppenheimer and George Lakey in their book, *A Manual for Direct Action* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1965).

¹⁴² When discussing the *decline* of the power of organized labor, it is important to acknowledge the powerful forces arrayed against unions, and it is also important to acknowledge that union members and organizers are still fighting in the trenches today, holding ground and sometimes gaining ground. Though weakened, labor unions remain one of the most powerful institutions in today’s left alignment.

¹⁴³ *Ask* is used here as a noun, which is typical in the vernacular of social justice organizing circles in the United States. An *ask* is an opportunity for a person or group to take some form of aligned action, provided by organizers.

¹⁴⁴ In discussing a *core* I am, for the moment, putting aside the question of *leadership* within that core—and to what extent it is deliberatively structured and held accountable.

¹⁴⁵ Richard Flacks, *Making History: The American Left and the American Mind* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 8.

¹⁴⁶ This is one big reason why electoral campaigns are often much more successful at recruiting and plugging in huge numbers of volunteers than issue-focused campaigns or social movement groups. As a campaign, an electoral race has a clear endpoint and you either win or you lose. And, regardless of the platitudes of some radicals, most people intuitively grasp that elections have important consequences. So much so that many people are willing to give significant time or money to throw down for a candidate that they see as a “lesser evil.” At the time of this writing, as Bernie Sanders has emerged as, arguably, the first major progressive populist presidential candidate in decades, we are