

Social Movements Need an Infrastructure to Succeed

By **Chip Berlet**
Senior Analyst
Political Research Associates

The political Right currently runs the country. That's very annoying, but pretending it isn't true is foolhardy. What is really annoying is that in the late 1970s some of us were giving speeches and writing articles explaining that rightists intended to take over the country. It wasn't hard to figure that out, since at the same time right-wing ideologists and strategists were also giving speeches and writing articles describing in elaborate detail how they planned to do it. Well, they did it.

The U.S. Human Rights Network observes, "human rights are protected through building social movements." Now we have a practical demonstration that human rights can be undermined through building backlash counter-movements. Central to the conservative plan was understanding that social movements pull political movements toward them, not the other way around. Social movements are often involved in politics, but they step beyond the limits of the electoral and legislative system to use other means ranging from demonstrations to civil disobedience and beyond.

Conservative strategists studied how the labor movement had yanked the Roosevelt administration into crafting a social safety net in the 1930s. They studied how the civil rights movement had whacked the Democratic Party in the north into pulling away from the segregationist demands of the southern Democratic Party "Dixiecrats." So conservatives decided to build a right-wing social movement to pull the Republican Party to the right. It worked.

Starting in the 1970s, many sociologists rejected the idea that activists were engaged in irrational collective behavior, but began studying social movements as collections of people with complaints who develop a plan to make the larger society respond to their needs. What does it take to build a strong social movement? With a tip of the intellectual hat to Goffman, Zald, McCarthy, Meyer, Gamson, Snow, McAdam, Benford, Klandermans, Johnston, Ewick, Silbey, Polletta, and a marching band of other academics, these are the basic building blocks of a successful social movement:

- ✓ A discontented group of politicized persons who share the perception that they have common grievances they want society to address
- ✓ A powerful and lucid ideological vision linked to strategies and tactics that have some reasonable chance of success
- ✓ The recruitment of people into the movement through pre-existing social, political, and cultural networks
- ✓ A core group of trusted strategic leaders and local activists who effectively mobilize, organize, educate, and communicate with the politicized mass base
- ✓ The efficient mobilization of resources that are available, or can be developed, to assist the movement to meet its goals
- ✓ An institutional infrastructure integrating political coordination, research and policy think tanks, training centers, conferences, and alternative media
- ✓ Political opportunities in the larger social and political scene that can be exploited by movement leaders and activists
- ✓ The skillful framing of ideas and slogans for multiple audiences such as leaders, members, potential recruits, policymakers, and the general public
- ✓ An attractive movement culture that creates a sense of community through mass rituals, celebrations, music, drama, poetry, art, and narrative stories about past victories, current struggles, and future successes
- ✓ The ability of recruits to craft a coherent and functional identity as a movement participant

Since the 1970s, the political right has invested more than \$2 billion in building an institutional infrastructure. Liberal and left foundations actually hand out more money per year than their conservative counterparts and there is some funding of training and inside-the-beltway policy work. A few funders have shifted more support to alternative media and conferences, but the most underfunded area on the Left is progressive research and policy think tanks and groups monitoring the political Right. I'm not talking about think tanks that are closely tied to the Democratic Party, but independent research and policy organizations whose central goal is building a strong progressive movement for human rights, social equality, economic fairness, a healthy environment, and peace.

Since I work at a progressive think tank, Political Research Associates, this claim is obviously self-serving, but that doesn't make it inaccurate. Studies by the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy have reached similar conclusions. I talked with folks at several other research groups that study the political Right (those that haven't gone under in recent years) and it seems we all have research tasks we would like to pursue, and research, monitoring, or training projects for which we have unsuccessfully sought funds.

Here is just one example. The Center for New Community has a Building Democracy initiative designed to counter "racism and other forms of bigotry through strategic research, community organizing, education and training. Its work to develop an anti-racist youth culture; its collaboration with human, civil, and immigrant rights organizations in response to anti-immigrant activity; and its release of nationally recognized research reports mark its recent advances to address these realities." The Center would like to expand this work. It lacks the funds. In a similar way, more staff and resources could be put to good use at other groups such as the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute, Americans United for Separation of Church and State, and Political Research Associates.

Want a concrete example? Among the earliest progressive researchers who wrote books and articles about the rise of the political Right were Sara Diamond, Russ Bellant, and Fred Clarkson. For a time Diamond wrote an excellent column about the political right for *Z Magazine*. In the long run, however, none of these three fine researchers and journalists could make a living doing what they did best. Compare them to Ann Coulter, Dinesh D'Souza, and the swarm of right-wing ideologues plucked fresh from college and generously financed with stipends, grants, and fellowships from conservative foundations.

Investigative reporter Bill Berkowitz has managed to continue to write about the political right, as have I, and there is a new crop of writers including Michelle Goldberg, Max Blumenthal, Esther Kaplan, Jeff Sharlett, and others. But there still is no long-term consistent funding for progressive research on the many sectors of the U.S. political Right.

Most liberal and left foundations will tell you up front that they don't fund research, conferences, or media. That's exactly what the political Right funded to help build the infrastructure of their successful social movement. The staff of many progressive foundations privately will admit that they are well aware of this scenario, but they are not able to get foundation priorities and guidelines shifted to respond to the strategic challenge by the conservative infrastructure.

The progressive movement for social change is being fed head first into a gigantic, well-funded, right-wing, ideological sausage-making machine, while foundations that consider themselves progressive are dispensing band-aids. If we figured out how to stop the machine, we wouldn't need the band-aids.

= = =

To build a movement for progressive social change, we need to reach across boundaries and build coalitions based on mutual respect and accountability. Ideally, we will engage in cross-sector work. Under the banner of a broad global human rights movement, these are just some of the various issues and sectors we need to support:

Issues & Sectors



Methods & Infrastructure of Collaborative Social Movements

International Social Movement Organizing

National Organizing		
Community Based Organizing	Individual Political Acts	State & Regional Organizing
Direct Service	Strategy Development	Issue Advocacy
Movement Philanthropy & Donors	Intellectuals and Scholars	Visual and Performing Arts
Legal Advocacy & Defense	Think Tanks & Watch Groups	Conferences & Retreats
Training and Technical Assistance	Applied Research and Analysis	Leadership Development
Networking & Coalition Building	Collaborative Electoral & Legislative Work	Media and Publishing

Outreach to External Groups

General Public	Membership Groups	Electoral & Legislative	Corporate Media
Alternative Media & Corporate Media	Speakers Invited to Address Meetings	National & State Political Party Builders	Obtaining News Coverage
Leaflets & Flyers	Information Placed in Newsletters	Congressional Membership Organizations	Op-Eds
Rallies & Events	Tabling at Meetings & Conferences	Political Coalitions & Networks	Letters to the Editor