

Organising vs. Activism

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Trump's election changed everything and woke up a lot of people. Now it's time to organise strategically, to get going. What that means is that we have to have clear goals – such as power. We need to take power and we have to have a strategy to get there. The beauty of Columbia is that it's a good example of strategic organising, of knowing where you want to go. The goal was always to politicise the campus in order to build the larger anti-war and radical movement. The tactics involved demonstrations. Even the issues were, in a sense, tactical issues, because of that broader goal. For those of us who had become radicalised, our goal was always to build the movement. So that's what we did, and we worked hard for years to do that. I learned that from the Red Diaper babies. They were the ones who started it. I was just this kid from New Jersey – I didn't know anything. I crossed the river and the first people I met were the coolest people around. They were organising, and how had they learned it? They grew up in families of labor organisers, socialists, communists. They knew that you need to organise. That was the whole base-building phenomenon that I was exposed to too, and it was the Red Diaper babies who taught us, taught the rest of us. Those old geysers, those of us who have survived – we have to teach organising. So that's what I'm doing.

No successful movement is spontaneous. It always takes structure and strategy. That's what we tried to do fifty years ago – provide that leadership element.

Mass movements are inherently chaotic. They involve lots of people. Sometimes they win. The mass movement helped end the war in Vietnam – that movement I'm very proud to have been a part of. But it's chaotic, and it doesn't necessarily lead to power because it's not structured. In fact, very few mass movements have actually taken power. So the problem is not to avoid the mass movement – we need mass movements to push the structured movement. There is a connection between the mass movement, which is chaotic and big and noisy, and the structured movement for power. Organising does take leadership, but at a certain point people catch up. That's what exactly happened fifty years ago. But there still has to be some structure.

Again, the goal was radicalisation of as many people as possible. Politicising the campus and getting more people for our movement. And that's what we set out to do, and that's what we did. Issues are important, of course. Stopping the gym is important. But after that what's even more important is the movement that we built, to keep

going. So the institutional connection between Columbia and IDA was eventually stopped. Fifty years later has that stopped Columbia or any other universities research for our current wars? Probably not. It was an issue that we used at the time in order to politicise and to wake people up.

Probably what we were expressing was the moral imperative to act. We had to do something – we couldn't stand by. The clear reference was to Germany. 1965 was only twenty years after the end of World War II. All of us had grown up in the shadow of World War II, so we had this moral imperative, and we also had the example of the Civil Rights movement, where what individuals did, in concert with other people, made a difference. So we had this necessity to add. And I believe the moment is the same right now.

I've spent the last fifty years trying to find that same momentum-driven movement. I've done all kinds of stuff, been involved in all kinds of issues, but it hasn't appeared until November 2016, when suddenly, out of the blue, unexpectedly, that moment came. The trick is to both build the momentum-driven movement and to build a more structured movement that has the goal of power. Engler and Engler in *This Is An Uprising* talk about how momentum-driven movements can win, but they rarely go for power. We want to both want to win our goals of issues, like, for example, stopping the extraction of fossil fuels. That would be a typical goal of our momentum-driven movement. But we also want to go for power. So we need a hybrid. We need to figure out how to unite a momentum-driven mass movement with a more structured movement for power which is, in fact, the Democratic Party. There is no alternative.

A feasible goal, which would be a lot better than what we have right now, is something like social democracy. The issue of social democracy is taming capital. So there has to be some kind of Marxist analysis, because it was Marx who taught the rest of us that capital is what runs our world. But there is that contradiction between capital and labor. How that manifests itself today. It may not be the industrial workforce, especially if there is not much of an industrial workforce. But it may be the 99% who are not benefiting from the destruction of the planet.

I like the approach that Naomi Klein takes in *This Changes Everything*. In that book she says the crisis we're in now is created by capital and capitalism, and that we have to control it. That's the social democratic view. That's ideological. It's different from saying we need to reclaim our spirituality – that's another form of ideology. But that particular ideology of social democracy seems to be a reasonable goal, because if you look around the world, which societies are the most humane? I would say it's probably something like northern European social democracy.

There's an interesting interplay between momentum and strategy. We were riding a wave, but there was turbulence, there was chaos and unexpected reactions, there were crowds that we never anticipated. Whoever anticipated a thousand people in

five buildings? Whoever anticipated thousands outside? Even the police bust and the way it happened – we didn't anticipate that.

There's an interesting definition of organising. "Organising is an active leadership in order to enable a constituency in order to achieve power to make changes in the face of uncertainty." I got this from Marshall Ganz, who's a brilliant organiser – he teaches at Harvard. He came through the Civil Rights movement, SNCC and the south. He came through the Farm Workers' movement. He was the director of organising. He came through political organising in California with Tom Hayden. He came through Obama organising. And he has this fabulous definition that really encompasses it. It's an act of leadership to enable a constituency to achieve the power to make the changes needed in the face of uncertainty.

So you have momentum, you have strategy. There's an interplay and there are goals. You get near the goals but then things happen. More people come, too few people come. The police overreact, the administration overreacts, they under-react. You never know what's going to happen. Strategy has to be constantly refigured and constantly recalibrated and constantly reimagined, in a sense. It's kind of an improvisation that has to happen. There was that moment in the wave of Columbia when all we were doing was improvising. But that's an act of leadership.

There's a certain tragic element in Columbia, to the success of April '68. The tragic element was those of us most involved in leadership in SDS came to the conclusion that what was essentially a tactic – which was the militancy – was actually a strategy. It was *not* a strategy. Militancy is a tactic that may work occasionally if you're lucky. But to raise it to a level of, "Now we're going to fight cops in Chicago!" – that's ridiculous! That's not a strategy. We made a classic error of substituting a tactic for figuring out what our long-term goals are and figuring out the tactics to get to those goals. We had done that quite successfully from about '63 before I got there, all the way to '68. But we raised a tactic of militancy to the level of a strategy. It can't possibly be a strategy. A strategy might have been to build the anti-imperialist movement – and that would take a lot of planning. For example, by the end of 1969, SDS nationally was dead, a lot through our own actions. We should have stayed on campuses and organised more and more people to understand imperialism. Maybe we would have had just enough people in the '80s, during the next war in Central America, to have stopped that one.

Part of the error I made after Columbia was to believe that my expression, my self-expression, is somehow itself strategic, that it will build the movement. So the self-expression took bizarre forms like bombs and revolutionary posing, things like that. But that is not necessarily strategic. It's got some basic fundamental flaws, such as, for example, it's kind of narcissistic to believe that my self-expression will appeal to other people. That's part of the error of not understanding that the tactic of militancy only works at a certain moment, but it does not become itself a strategy. That, to me, is the

essence of the difference between activism and organising. Strategic organising may involve self-expression. Sometimes. But what's more important is figuring out what the goals are and what the steps are to get to those goals. How to build the movement. Self-expression alone doesn't get there. So I draw a distinction between activism on the one hand, which is primarily self-expression, and strategic organising. It's kind of like the difference between standing on a street corner with the sign or organising a meeting to build an organisation which then figures out how to gain power.

When we were talking about revolution fifty years ago, we actually postulated that that would be involved with power. Somehow, though, that got lost – the power element, the real power element. I've come to the conclusion that the left is fundamentally allergic to power. Power is ugly. It forces other people to do stuff they may not want to do. Maybe it's even undemocratic. Power! Governmental power, police forces, violence, war – and that stuff. Plus you have to play politics to get the power to change governmental policy, and politics is nasty and there is lots of compromise. So the left prefers to be on the outside and prefers to be ideologically pure. I know I wanted to be pure when I was a revolutionary. I've never had a taste of power. I've never even come close to power. And perhaps, subconsciously, that was on purpose. The seizure of power by the looney right wing, not just the right wing but fundamentally morally corrupt and perverted people like the President of the United States – these people are now in power. The truth of the matter is that if we don't get power, they will. They have. So now we have to figure out how to get power, and that's going to take strategy.

We need organising. Part of organising is strategy. What's the goal? How do we get there? What we can learn from Columbia is that the left is capable of strategy. There was a strategy of Columbia. The mass movement overwhelmed that, but we should have figured it out for the long haul. Well, we're not dead yet, so let's just go for power. That's what I'm doing now. I'm trying to figure out how to teach new organisers how to be leaders, how to develop strategy and how to carry that out. That has led me now to be involved both in the mass movement and in the movement to transform the Democratic Party. My role is teaching young organisers. That's what I do.

Since 2003, when the Weatherman movie came out, I've taken on the role of advocating for organising. The problem is nobody knows what that is. It's just a word. I learned it from the Red Diaper babies. Build the base. Strategise. Figure out what your goals are. What are the tactics to get to the goals? Our generation at Columbia was lucky that we had these young people to teach us. The movement we were building was contiguous in time with the labor movement and the Civil Rights movement. Today people don't have that, so the word "organising" could mean anything. It could mean renting a hall for a meeting. That's organising, right? But it's not what I mean by organising. What I mean by organising is figuring out how to build

the movement and what the goals of that movement are and what the useful steps are to get to those goals. It's almost like a military thing. The idea of organising, strategy, tactics. But it's all been lost!

I'm still alive, our generation is still alive, so to the extent that we join with young people, we can teach something. And that's what I do. It's not easy, because a lot of times people don't want to listen to old people. Old people are ugly, they're stupid. If we weren't as stupid as we are, we wouldn't be in this terrible situation.

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