

Labor Education Service

Erik Peterson

Northeast Minnesota Program Coordinator

228 Cina Hall
University of Minnesota
Duluth, MN 55812
(218) 726-8683 *telephone*
(218) 726-8622 *fax*

It's more than being right: The politics of building progressive power

Erik Peterson

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The question of the past election is "How could so many people vote so clearly against their own self interest?" Great Britain's *Daily Mirror* carried a cover the day after the election graced by a full page photo of President Bush and a banner headline: "How can 59,054,087 people be so dumb?" A virtual internet cottage industry creates "Jesusland" maps and jokes about the inverse relationship between a state's average IQ and who they voted for: the lower the IQ the more likely to be a Red State.

The jokes are funny (sometimes) and I understand their gallows humor. But laughing (or crying) is a long way from explaining what happened, or doing anything to change it. And in the end simply calling people stupid hides more than it helps and it leads us nowhere.

Rather, I would like to suggest that a large number of people voted against their own *economic* self interest, but *not* because they are stupid or misinformed. Rather they had other interests and values they cared about more. Clearly, for many millions of voters, pocketbook issues (as they were understood) took a back seat to other issues. In the end, god, country and family were more important (or more believable) to many voters than the issues raised by the other side, many of which appealed in various ways to enhancing one's individual economic well-being.

This is a tough one for me to swallow, but is it really all that surprising? In the contest of values how do they weigh out? In other realms we would translate wanting more for ourselves as being selfish, and wanting to protect our families, ensure freedom for others, and trying to live a hopeful and deeply grounded faith as noble. People are willing to put their lives on the line to defend freedom, protect their families or stand up for their faith; few people are so motivated for a bigger paycheck, affordable health care, or clean water and air, let alone protecting a wilderness or getting an higher education tax break. That millions of voters understood this as their choice is important. That the conservatives had the power to turn the election by making this appear to be the *only* choice should jolt those of us

who find it repugnant, and it should challenge us to examine seriously how it came about and to come up with a different choice.

This is what I mean by building progressive political power. It's more than just being right, or replicating what the Right has done. Paul Wellstone often used to say: "Politics is not really about money or power games. It is about the improvement of people's lives, the lessening of human suffering, and advancing the cause of peace and justice." Now that is worth fighting for.

For the rest of this talk I want to throw out some ideas on ways we can begin imagining a progressive and humane politics and build the power necessary to enact it. Building progressive power. What do I mean by power? What does progressive mean? And finally, what do I mean by progressive power and how do we begin building it?

What is the problem with power?

I will start with the word "power." Power has become a negative word in many circles. How often have we heard our colleagues (or ourselves) disparage power by scowling "oh, that's just a power play," or "all he wants is power," or "power corrupts." My favorite is: "fight the power" – with what?!

It is with good reason many of us distrust power. We have seen how it corrupts and how it can be used ruthlessly for instrumental purposes. Some of us have seen power abused against ourselves or our loved ones and exercised brutally in abusive families. We have seen the arrogance of power and the destruction left in its wake. We have seen the cold-bloodedness of corporate power that can crush families and communities and destroy the environment. We have seen imperial power wage wars in Iraq, Vietnam, and Central America. The list goes on.

But what we are describing here is not power, *per se*, but the *exercise* of power. At its simplest, power is what gets something accomplished. The root of the word power is the Latin word *posse* — meaning "to be able." Having power, Martin Luther King wrote, "is the ability to achieve a purpose. Whether or not it is good or bad depends on the purpose." Power can be exercised as the imperial power of empire, the legislative power that enacts laws or the judicial power that determines their legality. It can be the community power of parents securing a stoplight near a park or the personal power of meditation, of being a good parent or buying green products and shopping at the co-op. It can be the power of new opportunities that a good education brings, or the power of the civil rights movement demanding equality and justice for all.

Two forms of experiencing power: Personal and social

Power is experienced in two forms: as *personal power* and as *social power*. Both are inter-related; both are critical to building a progressive politics. By personal power I

mean the power of individual choice and action. This is not to say that personal power is not without larger social implications — the personal is political — but unlike social power, personal power is exercised within a more narrowly defined arena: internally as psychology or externally within the scope of choices and relationships made directly by the individual. Personal power is about empowerment and transforms the person. It forms our ground, our identity and our foundation for effective action.

Social power can also be personally transformative, but unlike personal power it is created collectively and shapes our social, economic and political relationships. By social power I mean the power that is exercised with, upon, or on the behalf of others in a larger society.

Historically, social power comes from three sources: organized money, organized people, and organized ideas. Think of powerful leaders who have made a difference (for good or for ill). Their commonality is that they experience and derive their power from mobilizing money and people behind clear ideas. All three are necessary to make social change happen, although not all are necessarily given equal weight: Gandhi is known for the power of organized people; John D. Rockefeller for the power of organized money; and Karl Marx (or Jesus) for the power of organized ideas. Yet all three are essential components of social power. And their common element is the word "organized."

It is social power that I will focus on for the rest of this talk.

Organizing power: Institutional and Movement Power

Social power can be organized and consolidated in two ways: within institutions and within social movements. Progressives often celebrate the power of social movements. One reason might be that movements spark social change and seem more exciting, more democratic and dynamic, leadership more horizontal, and participation more open. By contrast, most institutions often seem dull, laden with bureaucracy, hierarchal, exclusive and meant to protect the status quo. One seems more open to progressive values, the other more conservative.

The impression is accurate on its face. Movements generally are exciting. They are about change (that is, in fact, the goal of every movement — to change something). Movements challenge existing structures of power. They arise in response to injustice (real or perceived).

Institutions are about structure and bureaucracy (however large or small). They are about consolidation and preservation if for no other reason than their own survival. As a result, institutions tend to be more hierarchical, more rule-laden, more inflexible — in a word, more conservative.

But if we are serious about building and sustaining progressive power we need to build both progressive institutions and progressive social movements. Movements give birth and revitalize institutions, and institutions preserve and carry out movement goals. In 1776, we declared certain progressive values to be inalienable rights, which grounded a revolutionary movement in this country. But once that movement overthrew the existing government, the former revolutionists wrote a constitution that created new, stable institutions to realize and preserve their revolutionary gains (and not coincidentally made future revolutions illegal).

This is to say that movements and institutions have antithetical interests at times. Those who lead institutions often see the brash (often young) movement leaders as threats to their power and the institutions themselves, and so they try to squash them. Likewise, those brash (often young) leaders of movements see institutional leaders as hopelessly compromised, stodgy and irrelevant and try to depose them. Maybe Freud got it partly right: progressives often eat their young and kill their elders. But to build power for the long-term we need both. Social movements create change based upon our collective social aims and values. And we preserve and sustain our collective values and aims through institutions.

So here is the rub. Conservatives have done a much better job over the years in supporting their leaders, nurturing their young activists, and building institutions that can carry out their values and vision. And despite progressives' rhetoric and often nostalgic embrace of grassroots organizing and movement building, conservatives have also done a much better job of engaging the grassroots in recent years. Perhaps this is because conservatives understand the arenas of power better than progressives.

Understanding how power works

If we experience power as social power and as personal power, and organize power through institutions and movements, we express it and contest it in three ways. Richard Healey of the Grassroots Policy Institute has described these as the "three faces of power," and what I will call the three arenas of power.

The first arena: Decision making power

The power of decision makers and decision-making is often the first way people understand how power operates. This is the power exercised by leaders, by policy makers, elected officials, corporate CEOs or Boards. These individuals or bodies are the ones actually responsible for making the decisions, for passing our laws, for making corporate choices. They are the candidates that we target to elect or defeat in a political election, the people we try to lobby once they are elected, or target in a corporate campaign. Identifying these decision makers and determining who is key is relatively easy. Consequently, this is an arena of power that most often gets attention.

Progressive groups and individuals expended enormous energy and expense last year on an election. Just about the only thing that held this diverse coalition together was a collective desire to remove President Bush from office – who was to be elected president to replace him was secondary. This was an important step, but only a step. By itself it was not fundamentally about building or sustaining progressive power.

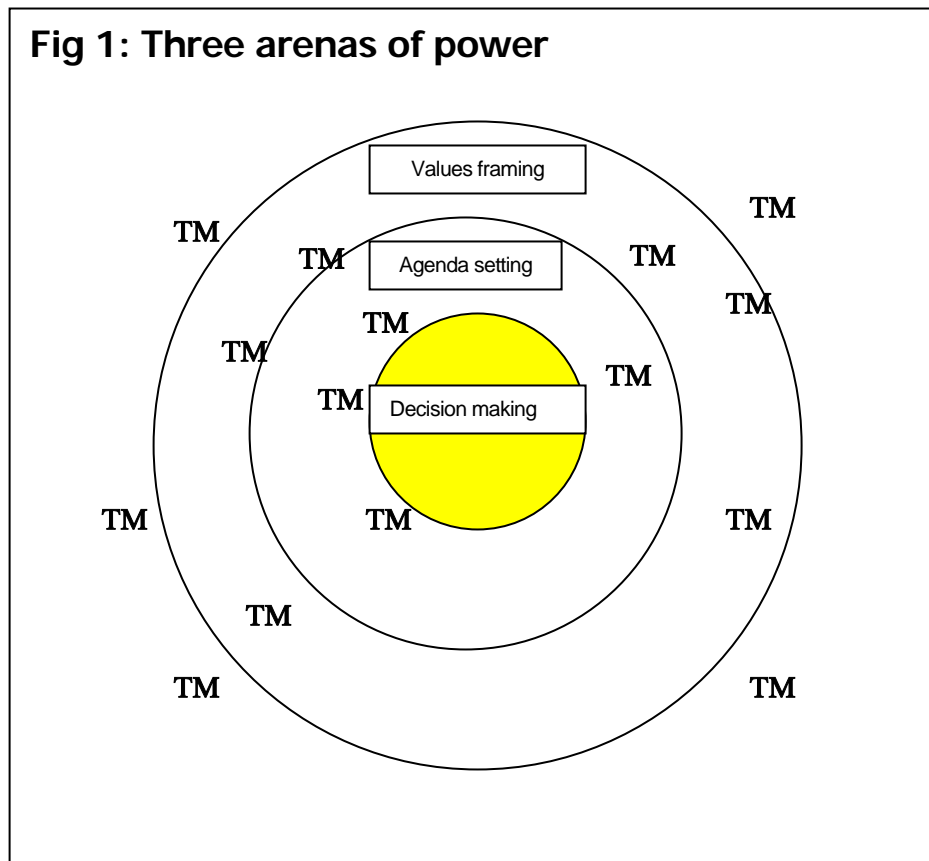
Good decision makers are an important component of building power, but decision making is only *one way* power is exercised. How many times have we successfully elected a decent progressive candidate only to be disappointed by how the person acts once elected. We cry “sell out” or stand confirmed that power corrupts even the best and that politics is a tawdry business. Sometimes it is because the individual truly has sold out and no longer shares our values. More often, it is because decisions are not made in a vacuum. One person cannot move a progressive agenda alone, no matter how committed they are.

The second arena: Setting the agenda

This brings us to the second arena of power – the power to set and move an agenda. Assume there are all of these issues and ideas out there (represented by the TM's in Figure 1). Which of these ideas do the decision makers actually act upon? Who decides that a national health care bill is on or off the table? Who has the power to

make the debate over minimum wage a debate over dimes rather than dollars? Who has the power to have a bill get a hearing in committee or not? Who decides that low-income housing only goes into low-income neighborhoods? Who is asked by decision makers to write our energy bills, our drug importation bills, our trade

Fig 1: Three arenas of power



laws, our zoning and development rules? How do decision-makers decide what merits discussion and what can be ignored? That is, who has the power to set the agenda?

There is tremendous power in having your agenda be the one debated. Skilled negotiators know how much power comes from negotiating off of their position (the inevitable compromises come from their starting point not the opponent's). The cliché goes that the best defense is a good offense, and if decision-makers are debating our policies, some other (perhaps less desirable) policies are being ignored.

The power to set an agenda comes through successfully organizing and mobilizing money, people and ideas. A compelling idea or policy argument – say in an op-ed or editorial or study – can move decision-makers to consider one issue or approach over another (that's organized ideas). Wealthy people, labor unions and corporations routinely make huge campaign contributions and use highly skilled lobbyists with inside connections because they help open access and make it easier for certain ideas to be heard and taken seriously by decision-makers (that's organized money). But you do not need money, special training, or inside connections to force an agenda onto the table. Our history is replete with mass movements – the civil rights, anti-war, feminist and environmentalist movements – comprised of ordinary citizens who have forced decision-makers to act on their issues by virtue of forcing their agenda through mass mobilization (that's organized people).

In the past few years in Minnesota, the Taxpayers League has been very successful at using the caucuses, influence over campaign contributions, and candidate pledges of “no new taxes” to ensure that their agenda is the agenda being debated at the state capitol. Similarly, a decade ago progressives defeated public funding for a baseball stadium by using the political party endorsement and caucus system to secure pledges from candidates to not use public money for a stadium. And when the Twins skillfully used their lobbyists and campaign contributions to win support among legislators nonetheless, and it looked like the funding would go through, citizens shut down the capitol switchboard with a flood of calls demanding that lawmakers say “no.” In 1964, Martin Luther King was reportedly told by President Johnson after he signed the Civil Rights Bill that it would be another decade before a Voting Rights Bill could be passed. But once civil rights marchers crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge outside Selma and marched to Birmingham, they forced the issue onto the national agenda and secured the Voting Rights Act five months later.

All of these are examples of effectively working in the second arena of power. Electing progressive leaders is not sufficient. Those elected officials also need a constituency to push for progressive ideas, and in the political realm, where compromise is inevitable, progressive leaders need a constituency to continually push their progressive agenda ever demanding more.

The third arena: Values framing

The third arena of power is often the hardest to understand, in part because its reach is so broad -- the power to shape the values that frame how our ideas are understood within the larger society.

It may be easier to understand with an example. Why in a recent Washington Post poll do 56% of Americans still think there are weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, when clearly there are not? And why does criticism of the war in Iraq get dismissed by large numbers of Americans as unpatriotic or an attack on the troops, so powerfully so that many of us feel compelled to reaffirm our support of the troops every time we criticize the war?

The answer, I believe, lies in the third arena of power. This is the realm of ideas or world view – the interpretative frames and values that we use to understand our world. For many Americans, the dominant frame for the Iraqi war is that it is a battle of good against evil. It's biblical. It's comic book. It's Spielberg. Most of us understand this frame immediately. And as George Lakoff has said, the power of framing is that if the facts don't fit the frame, it's the facts, not the frame that gets discarded.

Within the frame of Iraq being a struggle between good and evil, Saddam Hussein and his terrorist insurgents are the chief villains, and the United States is the chief good guy. The *fact* that no weapons of mass destruction exist only appears to lessen the evilness of our opponent and is either discarded as irrelevant or perceived as a threat that must be neutralized. Likewise, criticism of the war as unnecessary or ill-conceived or a distraction only tarnishes the righteousness of our cause and, again, the *fact* gets discarded or is seen as a threat to be defended against.

This frame did not happen accidentally; it was created by powerful people who understand intimately this third arena of power. There is enormous power in having one's ideas and values assumed to be so natural and commonplace as to be taken for granted. In marketing this is called branding. Coke is the "real thing." Most of us ask for a Kleenex rather than a facial tissue. We Xerox our reports rather than photocopy them. Corporations know how powerful this brand identification is.

Conservatives have been very effective in this realm of power. Over the past 30 years, conservative funders have spent \$2.5 - \$3 billion to create a conservative ideological infrastructure, which according to Rob Stein, a Washington researcher who tracks right-wing organizations, comprises 43 activist organizations. Harpers Magazine called this network "octopus-like" and noted it is "perhaps the most potent, independent institutionalized apparatus ever assembled in a democracy to promote one belief system." This "octopus" consists of think tanks, policy institutes, university research centers, television, radio, and newspaper media outlets, websites,

publishing houses, litigation firms, campus associations, grassroots training and candidate and leadership development organizations. Out of these idea factories come interpretative frames – frames like the war as a battle between good and evil – and they profoundly shape what we think is right, wrong, normal, crazy, or even possible.

Most of us are very familiar with the conservative frames. Less government is good government; a competitive, private sector, free market economy fueled by consumer choice is more efficient, innovative and effective than government regulation and control; individual responsibility, self-reliance, merit and initiative bring individual reward.

These value frames shape what decision-makers (and much of the public) considers normal and what is so “extreme” as to not really be on anyone’s agenda – those ideas and issues completely outside the circle and outside public debate (Figure 1). The debate over taxes occurs within an ideas environment that understands taxes as the government *taking* my money. The debate over health care takes place in an ideas environment that understands private sector competition as more effective than government regulated programs. The debate over foreign policy is conducted within an ideas environment where most Americans see the United States as a defender of liberty and not as a bully.

So what do we do? If Lakoff is correct, we don’t battle frames with more facts but with more convincing and compelling frames. That is, we speak out of our values. So what are the corresponding progressive values or frames? Do they exist? And if so, what are they?

What does it mean to be “progressive”?

Being progressive for me is not a place on the political spectrum. Nor is it a laundry list of issues. It is about presenting an alternative worldview grounded in values that matter to people and provide an explanation of our economy and world that makes sense and connects deeply with people’s lives.

As a loosely defined “movement” progressives have spent little time talking about what unites them. At a recent workshop I gave in Arizona, I asked a group of almost exclusively male (and burly) steelworkers: “What do the steelworkers, the GLTB community, and the Sierra Club all have in common?” After the initial stunned look, they started to pull it together. They all have a common opponent. The same people who are trying to erode civil rights of gays and lesbians are trying to take away the civil right to organize into a union. And the same companies that are poisoning the water and air and treat communities as expendable resources are the same companies that treat workers as commodities and dispose of them when a better deal can be found. Perhaps, after all, there is more that unites these groups than separates them. But unlike conservatives, who have organized a frame of

unifying values, progressives too often organize around our separate issues. Instead of trying to find the unifying common ground of shared values, we too often draw up tightly honed litmus tests of what issues a “true progressive” must or must not subscribe to.

For myself, I identify as a “progressive populist.” Progressive because I believe that things can (and should) change for the better. Populist because I believe such change should benefit everyone, not just the very rich and very powerful. I see being “progressive” as accepting a set of core values, acting upon those values, and ensuring our institutions and structures of power embody them.

My list of progressive values is not exhaustive, but what I come up with includes:

- liberty and justice for all;
- economic opportunity and equity;
- corporate and social responsibility;
- compassion and good stewardship
- trust, honesty and open communication

Each of these values link with a number of issues. *Liberty and justice* speaks to the democratic right of free speech and association in the workplace – e.g. the right to organize and join a union without threat or fear. The value of *equal opportunity* speaks to the right that all citizens should be able to realize their hopes and dreams – e.g. universal access to public education and universal access to health care. *Economic fairness* speaks to a tax code based on ability to pay that ensures all have at least sufficiency, or the right to true living wage if one is willing to work. *Corporate responsibility* speaks to responsible, ethical and sustainable business practices and a corporate legal code that codifies such values.

Progressives not only embrace these values but work to change our political, economic and social institutions to reflect them. Progressives are intensely interested in relationships of power – who has power, toward what end, and at what cost? Who is included in our civic life, who is excluded and why?

Building progressive power is therefore about creating ethical and democratic social, economic and political institutions, organizations and movements that reflect the values of equality, fairness, justice, opportunity, and responsibility for all.

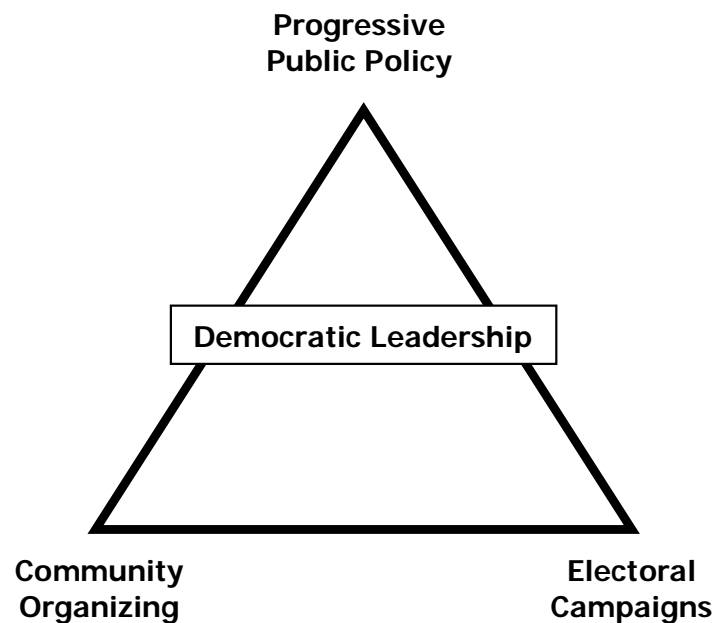
But how?

Building Progressive Power

To build power over the long-term we need to build movements that create change, and institutions that sustain that change. And we need to contest for power in all three arenas – decision-making, agenda setting, values framing.

Senator Paul Wellstone used to say that “electoral politics without community organizing is a politics without a base. And that community organizing without grassroots electoral politics is a marginal politics. And electoral politics and community organizing without good progressive policy is a politics without a head – without a goal.” Each depends on the other to be effective. Each is an important realm to contest for power. What Wellstone is describing is movement politics — the mobilization of resources necessary to build enough power to change our institutions and enact progressive public policies.

Figure 2: Wellstone Triangle



Over the past two years, Wellstone Action has taken these ideas and developed a model for building and sustaining progressive power, which they call the Wellstone Triangle (Figure 2). Each component of this triangle depends on the other. Community organizing reaches communities not involved in electoral politics and provides tools of empowerment — this is about building a base of power which can develop and ground progressive political leaders and hold them accountable, and build the progressive structures and institutions necessary for the long-term. This base, energized, organized and mobilized can force decision-makers to address our agenda.

Electoral politics aims to elect progressive decision-makers that are sympathetic to our values and agenda. The electoral arena is one of the most important places that decisions are made in a democratic society and where our ideas and values contest for power. Without building a base of grassroots support and constituency for change it is unlikely we will succeed in electing progressive candidates, or succeed in the arena of legislative decision making, even if we successfully elect progressive candidates.

The third component of the Wellstone Triangle focuses on the realm of ideas and public policy. Ideas inspire us; values ground and center us; public policies are how we enact our ideas and values in civic life. This means figuring out what makes a progressive school board significantly better or different than a conservative one? What does a progressive city council do that is markedly different? And how do our

policies for our schools and our cities bring about equality, fairness, justice, opportunity, and responsibility for all? This is the challenge and the responsibility of contesting for power: that we must develop policies that both work and reflect our values.

The politics of building progressive power.

Grassroots community organizing, electoral politics and public policy grounded in progressive values are all necessary for building and sustaining progressive power. Below are some specific directions progressive should explore for each.

- **Grassroots community organizing.** Too often our organizing and organizations become instrumental and extractive – they gain their power by extracting it from others – from ourselves, our families or our communities. Grassroots community organizing builds power through meaningful relationships over time. It is a power that grows through sharing with others rather than through disempowering others. In real terms, for progressives, this means:
 - investing in community organizing for the long-term around issues that matter to the community;
 - striving to find the common ground that ties our issues together so our collective efforts magnify each other;
 - building the institutional infrastructure and funding that makes such collaboration possible for the long haul;
 - recruiting, training, mentoring, and supporting young progressive leaders, activists and organizers.
- **Grassroots electoral work.** We need to develop effective grassroots campaigns to contest for power in the electoral arena and elect decision makers who are willing to push our agenda, and we need to hold these candidates and elected leaders accountable. For progressives this means:
 - building long-term relations within communities that extend beyond the election cycle and can be mobilized during the election cycle;
 - investing in training a new generation of grassroots political organizers;
 - investing in candidate recruitment and training with a long-term strategy for moving good candidates toward higher offices;
 - working to pass meaningful campaign finance reform so being wealthy is not a pre-condition for running for office, and election reform to encourage voting and make sure every vote is counted.
- **Building progressive policy infrastructure.** It is not that progressives do not have important issues or good ideas. We have lots of them. But the power of these ideas and their effectiveness in mobilizing and moving a base only comes through careful attention to the realm of ideas and values and

how we communicate them. Building this progressive policy infrastructure means:

- committing to a sustained media and message development strategy that examines the unifying values that form our common ground as progressives;
- providing the training and support and investing in the media institutions necessary to communicate those values to the broader public in a sustained way;
- investing in our intellectuals and the generation of ideas in basic research, on specific issues and policies and for the development of specific policy proposals, model legislation, and policy papers that address social concerns problems.

M.K. Gandhi taught that “we must be the change we wish to see in the world.” For progressives this means it is not enough to simply be right. We need to be sophisticated and strategic in building the power necessary to secure our goals. But neither should our aim in doing this be to replicate what the Right has done. Gandhi built a social movement to overthrow one of the most powerful governments on the globe, but he did it with an organization consistent with his values of non-violence, respect, and transformative justice. For progressives this means finding our common ground, the values that unite us, and then growing the movements and building the institutions that embody those values. I believe this type of power is possible; and it is necessary to build a politics that is about the “improvement of people’s lives, the lessening of human suffering, and advancing the cause of peace and justice.”