

None but Ourselves*: An Approach to How the Left Can Get Organized

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* Bob Marley, *Redemption Song*, "...None but ourselves can free our minds..."

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I would be happy to send anyone who is interested the PDF version of this paper.



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Framing a Discussion on Progressive Movement Building

Where do we go from here?

We have just created, participated in, or witnessed the most energetic mobilization of popular democratic forces in a generation - the groundswell of energy focused on defeating George W. Bush. Now that this convergence has met with defeat¹, we face a loss of energy and the need to search for new ways to confront the hostile environment in which we find ourselves. Whether you took part in election work directly or not, and even if you believe that support for John Kerry was misguided, there is a widespread feeling that the 2004 election marks a turning point.

As progressives in the United States of America, we face an awesome responsibility for action at the same time as we grapple with internal confusion. Many of us have been frustrated for a long time in our desire to see the Left “get organized.” But we don’t agree on how this might happen or what it would look like if it did happen.

Before the election, most people working to defeat Bush agreed that no matter who won, we would need to regroup after November 2nd. Likewise, the anti-war and anti-globalization movements have been struggling for some time to figure out what their next steps should be. We are at a point where all of our movements need to consider where organizing should be focused in the next period.

Consensus on Building a Pluralist Movement

My approach to the question of how to build a more organized Left may seem counter-intuitive to some. I am arguing that we have a pluralist radical social change movement and that we should embrace our differing points of view in a new way. I don’t believe that we will achieve unity by forging a detailed political program or proving which of our differing strategies is “correct.” What is lacking is better ways for the different sectors of our movement to communicate, strategize, and help each other find like-minded activists with whom to organize.

Of course, some degree of agreement binds radical leftists to common, basic goals. A “short list” would look something like this:

- Advancing civil and human rights at home and around the world including equal rights for women, gays, and disabled people;
- Eliminating for-profit corporations’ dominance of politics and media;
- Ending systemic racism and white supremacy domestically, in immigration, and in foreign policy;
- Defending the self-determination rights of oppressed nationalities and countries;

¹ I believe the 2004 Presidential Election was stolen by a variety of means. There were blatant cases of Republican fraud and outright dirty tricks, as well as more long-standing systemic problems with U.S. electoral democracy discriminating against low-income communities and immigrants. However we were defeated in our attempt to prevent George W. Bush from holding office for another 4 years. The effort to clarify how our opponents defeated us takes its place among the many other issues we are working on.

- Humanizing work and distributing its rewards more democratically;
- Protecting the free expression of all cultures, languages, and spiritual practices;
- Providing everyone with essential human services including food, shelter, medical care, child care, and education; and
- Protecting and restoring the environment at all levels: individual, community, in wild areas, and globally.

But we don't have to work out exact language for our demands, or formulate the details of the future society that we want to build to be able to build our capacity significantly.² A more complete vision of the future we are building can only emerge as we struggle together and as global environmental, financial, and military crises unfold.

Many radicals are convinced that controlling corporate crimes against humanity will require ending capitalism. Others are skeptical of the Left's ability to create a truly liberatory form of socialism. Some of us see the "two-party" system as the principal obstacle to political change. Others have just worked our asses off trying to leverage the Democrats into a bulwark against the ultra-radical Right. These differences and debates will and should continue.

But I am convinced that some of us need to take a broader perspective. The economy in the U.S. is now service and information-based, and networks of various kinds are the basis of production. I am arguing that radicals can build a flexible, responsive movement around our networks and that this kind of movement-building can give us the context in which to develop more agreement on program and strategy.

Where Am I Coming From?

Let me be frank. I don't know exactly how radical political and economic change will be made in the U.S., much less in the world as a whole. I do know that our political points of view are crucially affected by class, race, gender, sexual identity, and by our experiences in struggle. So let me start by introducing myself.

I started out in politics as the daughter of truly middle class white, Protestant Republicans of English, Welsh, and German extraction. Both my parents and both of my grandfathers went to college. My father's father was the grandson of a poor German immigrant, but my great grandfather had made money in the cigar trade. On my mother's side, the family can trace ancestors to the New England colonies before the Revolutionary War.

In high school, I licked stamps for Richard Nixon when he ran against John Kennedy, but I was already more of a liberal than I realized. Then, in college during the war in Vietnam, I joined SDS. Soon I became a Marxist. At the time, I was convinced that this philosophy's method of analyzing struggles from the history of class warfare gave us scientific certainty about how best to organize. I believed that a worldwide proletarian revolution would be taking place in the not too distant future.

² Programs and lists demands exist. To pick a few, we have the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the demands of the Women's conference in Houston in 1978, and Michael Albert's work on participatory economics.

The branch of Marxism-Leninism with which I was affiliated was based on a prediction that “third-world” revolutions would play a key role in creating international socialism. I married a Venezuelan and went to Venezuela in 1968 to help this process, working with small groups of urban militants to jump-start a “people’s war.” The day I applied for my Venezuelan visa was the day Che’s picture appeared on the front page of the New York Times. He had been killed with the CIA’s help in Bolivia. I felt my hand was reaching out to take his weapon. I was arrested in 1972, and after a small amount of torture and a short time in jail was deported back to the U.S. with my one-year-old son. Groups like ours had been very unsuccessful at catalyzing a revolution in South America.³

Back in the U.S., I found a safe haven in a community of leftists who were building community in Los Angeles, and saw how institutions like a progressive child care cooperative could nurture people’s belief in the possibility of social change. I became more of a socialist-feminist and began to realize that the sexual division of labor was at least as important to human history and psychology as social class divisions. I also deepened my understanding of my own process in working to overcome my “white” identity. I realized that I had fled the U.S. and attempted to assimilate with the Latino culture because I didn’t know how to be an effective ally to people of color. Learning Spanish fluently, bearing a “biracial” child, and gaining a connection to Latino culture didn’t exempt me from privilege in Venezuela or back in the states.

I learned critiques of the Stalinist form of socialism that had developed in the Soviet Union and China from Trotskyists, but found the Socialist Workers Party to be authoritarian and dogmatic in its own ways. I rejected the almost comical authoritarianism of some radical feminists who insisted in the 70s that all true feminists should be lesbians, but now find myself in a lesbian relationship that has lasted over 16 years. My partner and I married during the “window” of marriage equality in San Francisco, only to have our contract nullified by the California Supreme Court.

I was on the National Political Committee of Democratic Socialists of America from November 2001 to 2003 and am collaborating with Committees for Democracy and Socialism on a popular education project to talk about class with workers from all income levels. I am a social worker and I am employed in the labor movement.

I see the Left’s variety of political points of view and strategies as a strength rather than evidence that we are disorganized. I may disagree with actions taken by various groups and individuals, but I want to include all stripes of honest leftists in the process I am advocating. I believe in a “movement of movements” out of which social change will be fought for and grow. I believe we need to embody the values we advocate and “prefigure” the caring, beloved community we want to build by shaping our movement in its image today. I participate in left dialogs about theory, but more urgently, I want to help the Left organize ourselves as we work together, rather than waiting until some future consensus emerges.

³ Armed struggle of the kind we attempted was more successful in Central America. Victories there however have been neutralized or reversed in Nicaragua and El Salvador. Current resistance to the neoliberal agenda in Mexico and South America also owe some debt to the legacy of resistance shown in the old armed struggle “foquista” movements.

I am proposing that the Left is ready for a qualitative leap and that we can do a better job of building our movement if we see the forms of our organizing as significant and worth attention.

Movement Building

First of all, we need to focus more on movement building. No matter if you agree with the rest of what I have to say: I hope you will think more about this idea: if we are going to be more successful at building the movement for social change, we have to address the question directly: **How can progressives increase our capacity for effective political action?**

In the past, there have been two poles in the Left's attempts at movement building: 1) a program-driven approach that focuses on consolidating an ongoing organization; and 2) ad hoc coalitions and convergences that come into existence for greater or lesser periods, but which are not intended to last.

In between these two extremes, a variety of collaborations and connections exist on a more or less formal basis. It is in this middle ground where a thorough understanding of network-based movement building can contribute the most. I argue that we can build a more coordinated, effective movement if we adopt four core principles:

1. **Build on our strengths,**
2. **Network organizations and individuals,**
3. **Interact in accountable ways, and**
4. **Facilitate strategic analysis and collaboration.**

Build On Our Strengths

When leftists talk about our movement, we have often complained that we are weak, divided, and ineffective. This negative focus takes our attention off of our accomplishments. But try looking at our assets and examples of what we are doing right!

Specific Issues Where the Left is Breaking Ground

- **Peace** – It is commonplace now to herald the global protests on February 15, 2003 as groundbreaking demonstration of a new “superpower.” The speed with which the anti-war movement organized, the sophistication of efforts such as “War Times”, and the commitment to overcome sectarian divisions has been breathtaking.
- **Health** - Advocates for universal and employer-paid health care, senior activists, and AIDS patients and allies have brought the issue of health insurance and prescription drug prices back into central focus after the eclipse that followed the Clinton administration's failed attempt to enact health care reform.
- **Environment** - Environmental protection has scored important victories by stalling attempts to open up the Alaskan Wildlife Refuge to oil drilling and with California's recent ruling on greenhouse gas emissions from automobiles. The environmental justice wing of the movement broadens the issue by focusing on people of color and working class people's greater risk of exposure and harm.
- **Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning Rights** – Gay marriage is only the most current example of this diverse movement's new strength and opposition. Queer rights groups are also dealing with immigration, hate crimes and street violence, health, parenting, and discrimination in housing, the military, and at work.
- **In a class by itself, the breadth and depth of popular organizing to defeat George Bush deserves special focus.** Across the United States, people gave time, money, and creativity to find ways to prevent the continuation of the most reactionary, militaristic, and anti-human rights administration in recent history. The mobilization of activists from “blue” to “red” states began a dialog that will have long-lasting effects and needs to continue.

- **A huge upsurge of popular movement activity is occurring around specific causes.**

The sidebars accompanying this list of strengths give some examples of the variety of organizing taking place around the country. How can we not be inspired by its depth and creativity?

- **We are of all ages.** From high school and even younger students, up to our gray-haired elders, we have an inter-generational movement. Veterans seem less likely to try to tell young people what to do than in the past. Movement people of different ages relate more as equals than in the past.
- **People of diverse ethnic and racial groups** are participating in anti-war, criminal justice, reproductive choice, electoral, labor and community organizing as never before.
- **There is more awareness in our movements of corporate capitalism as a core issue** driving the imperial system and degrading the quality of life here and around the globe. Movement activists are “connecting the dots” on more issues than was true a few years ago.
- **We are using technological resources undreamed of in just the recent past.** The Internet, new communication devices, and media technology are all serving the movement in creative and empowering ways.
- **After years of struggle, we are beginning to understand the “-isms” that oppress us.** Men, white people, heterosexuals, able-bodied, and people of different ages are more willing to look at how their behavior affects others than ever before. People of color are relating to each other more directly across ethnic lines.
- **World public opinion is on our side,** and we have many more links to people in other countries than ever before. The consciousness is dawning on us that we could be part of a global movement led by people from other countries.

More Ground Breaking Work:

- **Labor** – Fighting attacks and the slide in union density with all its might, U.S. unions are more active and radical now than at any time since the 1930s. Labor is deliberately building links with communities of faith, immigrant rights, environmentalists, and community-based organizations to strengthen its clout.
- **Community Organizing** - ACORN has built a nationwide network of 750 chapters in 60 cities and registered thousands of voters. Other C.O. networks include the Gamaliel and the Industrial Areas foundations. The National Organizers Alliance (NOA) provides support for the profession. Intermediary organizations like Highlander and the Center for Third World Organizing help train and shape C.O. work.
- **Alternative Globalization Movement** - U.S. activists played key roles in mounting massive demonstrations and social forums against economic globalization starting with Seattle, and served as a base for the huge mobilizations against the war in Iraq both here and around the world. Social Forums and international women’s conferences continue to link U.S. activists to comrades around the world.
- **Independent Media** - Struggles to save the Pacifica radio network, resist repressive regulations of the FCC, and chronicle the anti-globalization and anti-war movements have built a vibrant independent media movement of awesome proportions. Pacifica’s daily news magazine “Democracy Now” is airing on over 225 radio stations, and is carried by both satellite TV systems. The medium of the documentary has been transformed by masterpieces on urgent political issues that have been used to organize in groundbreaking ways.
- **Creative Internet-based Organizing** Creative use of the Internet for organizing is typified by MoveOn.org. and Howard Dean’s combination of electronic recruitment with face-to-face meet-ups. These projects have revolutionized grass roots progressive electoral activism.

- **Art and spiritual practice is an integral part of our movement.** From the puppets that regularly appear at street demonstrations to the Hip Hop Summit, from poets to documentary filmmakers, from Buddhists to the Catholic Worker movement, cultural and spiritual work is incorporated into our movement in groundbreaking ways.
- **We have elected some representatives we can count on.** From veteran Barbara Lee who voted against Bush's war powers in Congress in 2001, to Jason West, the 26 year-old Green mayor of New Palz New York who married 25 same sex couples in February 2004, we have a few elected representatives who are taking courageous stands. Sheila Kuehl, a state Senator in California is leading the struggle for single payer health insurance.

Radicals are participating in the broader Left today as it becomes energized and active, and the broader Left is more united in challenging the abuses, and even fundamental principles of corporate capitalism than at any point I can remember. The energy and outrage of hundreds of thousands of people in this country have been stirred by recent events, and it is time to ask how radicals can move this energy forward. We can offer people a great treasure: an opportunity to work for real change. But if the Left is to focus this energy, we have to become inclusive.

Thinking Inclusively – Both / And

An important way of building on our strengths is to change some of our old habits of thought. Looking at our movement as a whole, there is room for groups that are applying different approaches. We need to apply a criterion of "both/and" rather than "either/or." We really don't know which strands of organizing will be most productive and all of them have something to teach us. In fact, the multiplicity of Left strategies may be healthy for our movement.

One single strategy cannot win the energies of all the people we need to mobilize. It is fine for each of us to argue for our own positions, and for

Still More Ground Breaking Work:

- **Opposing the Prison-Industrial Complex** - The Critical Resistance conference held in Spring of 1998 catalyzed a process of networking among groups working against police abuse, the death penalty, and criminalization of youth. Regional work has blossomed around this convergence and it is a model for Left coalition building.
- **Immigrant Rights** – The Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride in 2003 came on the heels of vigorous work to defend immigrant rights in the post 9-11 environment. The labor movement led the Freedom Ride and is joining immigrant rights advocates to resist new bracero programs, fight for job protection, get drivers licenses, win legalization and family reunification, and protest the wall at the Mexican border.
- **Reproductive Justice** – The March for Women's Lives in Washington DC on April 25, 2004 was the largest pro-choice rally in history, and its racial and ethnic diversity was unprecedented. It was sponsored by an historic coalition, and helped bring together groups working for sex education and condom distribution, international funding for reproductive health, and access to the widest range of reproductive health care procedures and drugs.
- **AIDS** – Moving from a primarily white, gay constituency in the past, AIDS activism has grown through important participation of people of color and linking up with the global movement. Prejudice has been reduced, and more work is urgently needed.
- **Reparations** – A broadening movement to discuss the lasting effects of slavery in today's world has grown up around the concept of reparations. This movement is a conscious attempt to refocus the civil rights agenda beyond affirmative action and raise consciousness among both "whites" and people of color.

organizations to point out when another group's strategy proves ineffective. But dogmatic certainty that other leftists are part of the problem must be rejected. If we look at the movement as a lifeboat, we need to stop trying to throw each other overboard. It is not the Greens, the anarchists, the liberals, Democrats, the queers, or the communists who are our problem.

We are in hostile waters. It is extraordinarily difficult to hang on to radical consciousness in the face of all the contrary messages coming at us from the media, family, co-workers, neighbors and most elected officials. To face this level of psychic pressure to conform, some leftists barricade ourselves into small bands that share our point of view and our frustration. When these groups are supportive and sane, they can furnish the sustenance we need to continue with the struggle. One use such supportive, small networks have is to serve as "affinity groups," the building blocks out of which large, diverse actions can arise. In this form, small groups can serve both personal and political needs without becoming dangerous.

However we must accept that tight, supportive groups can become cult-like.⁴ One of the hallmarks of cult-like behavior is a process of excluding "others" who do not hold true to the principles and rules laid down by the group. Some left groups' principles represent strongly held but sensible political positions. Others seem peculiar and out of touch with reality. I believe that some groups that claim they want to grow are in fact using each other for personal/ political support. A small group that thinks it is doing political organizing but is stuck with a band of "true believers" may have such a dynamic going on. Newcomers to left organizing who first connect with a group like this are apt to be turned off.

A more dangerous signal that cult-like behavior is present is veneration for a revered leader. This approach has dominated portions of the far Left in obvious ways, but it can also creep up on us unawares. Cultish features in any organization tend to drive healthy people away and the experience of participating in a cult can poison someone's commitment to the Left for ever.

Arthur Deikman has studied cult behavior and has made an important contribution to how we understand this disturbing behavior. Deikman reframes the usual question asked when we confront this issue from: "Is this group a cult?" to the more complex question, "How much cult behavior is taking place?"⁵ From this point of view, none of us are exempt from cult-like thinking. He points out that we all have the longings for safety and certainty that cults play upon. The key to resisting cult-like behavior is perceiving reality not just in terms of "black and white" but seeing gray areas as well, increasing our capacity for critical thinking.

The history of the far Left in the U.S. shows that some groups with the most radical agendas for how to realign the economy have been quite authoritarian in their internal organizational practice. There is more to this history than even the better known example of the Communist Party USA during its period of allegiance to the Soviet Union under Stalin. Max Elbaum has documented a more recent legacy of self-proclaimed vanguards, sectarian disputes,

⁴ Usually we think of cults as religious formations but Dennis Tourish and Tim Wohlforth have called attention to the existence of left political cults in On the Edge: Political Cults Left and Right, Shape, 2000. Tim, a veteran organizer, has personal experience belonging to a rather successful Trotskyist cult based in England whose best known adherent is Vanessa Redgrave.

⁵ Them and Us: Cult Thinking and the Terrorist Threat, Arthur Deikman, Bay Tree, 2003, p. 2.

and political rivalry among 60s generation radicals.⁶ Elbaum's story is tragic. He shows how much insight into the evils of racism and imperialism and how much commitment to changing the system these groups started with. But their adherence to authoritarian ideology, and their inability to find authentic ways to engage with the dominant individualist and capitalist mentality in the U.S., led to a mind boggling waste of resources and energy.

This kind of organizational mentality is not far removed from the world view of our opponents on the Right. We would do well to heed Audre Lourde's admonition that the master's tools will not dismantle the master's house.⁷ In "Political Conservatism as Motivated Social Cognition,"⁸ a team of researchers found five common psychological factors among political conservatives. Three of them read like a diagnosis of traditional left sectarians:

1. Dogmatism and intolerance of ambiguity,
2. Uncertainty avoidance, and
3. Need for cognitive closure.

The remaining two characteristics: fear and aggression, and terror management can be found on the left too, particularly among groups aligned with highly unpopular identities or positions, and groups that have actually been attacked or infiltrated by police.

Why does left culture lead us to believe that we have to arrive at ONE position, and that other opinions must be defeated for our movement to grow?

Radicals look for root causes. For example many people have argued that if capitalism is the problem, the only solution is to get rid of it. So far, so good. But when this logic is extended to say that anyone who denies that capitalism is the problem becomes part of the problem, we run amok. The trouble with this approach is that we become obsessed with being right, rather than seeing how anti-capitalism can become a strand in a larger web of social change. Groups that believe that they have the exactly RIGHT strategy can be so closed minded that they see others on the Left as enemies rather than as comrades.

I believe that this all-or-nothing approach is characteristic of patriarchal organizations and that the Left has to challenge our heritage of patriarchal thought. The Left is not exempt from a simplistic, authoritarian assumption that if I am right and you don't agree, it makes you wrong. Our very framework of "left" and "right" labels locks us in to a one-dimensional metaphor to describe complex political viewpoints.⁹ Riane Eisler's book, The Chalice and the Blade,¹⁰ lays out a philosophy of history based on the oscillation between what she calls "partnership" and "dominator" worldviews that is no less compelling than Marx. What is

⁶ See Revolution in the Air by Max Elbaum, Verso, 2002.

⁷ Sister Outsider, Crossing Press, 1984

⁸ Psychological Bulletin, 2003, Jost et al.

⁹ I have a copy of an intriguing map reprinted in the Utne Reader several years ago which uses two axes to broaden our ability to locate groups on the political landscape, I believe one axis was socialist – capitalist and I know the other was authoritarian-libertarian.

¹⁰ Harper & Row, 1987. The Chalice and the Blade starts out from the archeological discoveries of Marija Gimbutas published in a series of provocative books, including Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe, University of California Press, 1981. However Eisler goes far beyond Gimbutas with extensive analysis of a variety of cultural and religious traditions.

important about Eisler is not only her analysis of history. She also provides tools to help us understand what has gone wrong in our own movements.

According to Eisler, each of the founders of a great religious or political philosophy has shared a transcendent, mystical grasp of basic truth. From Socrates to Jesus, from Buddha to Mohammed¹¹ - our greatest leaders have all taught that humans need to question ourselves and our leaders. These core teachings share a radical interrogation of privilege and power. They ask us to reject passivity and complicity with the abuse of the humble by elites.

The problem comes when the great teacher has died, and successors try to cast the teaching in cement. The followers of the teacher lack his or her insight and their attempts to preserve and spread the teaching degenerate into perpetuating a new dogma. Eisler labels the original mystical insight a “partnership” mentality, and the dogmatic, authoritarian derivative a “dominator” mentality. She argues that this process: messages of unity and inclusion being superceded by dogmas of domination and authority, has been governing humanity since the Iron Age.

If we are really going to make a change, the Left has to get rid of our fantasies of control over society and each other, and allow solutions to arise from the multitude.¹²

George Lakoff’s compelling model of how this dichotomy is expressing itself in the U.S. today is fully compatible with Eisler’s insights. In Moral Politics he argues that family-based models for morality are at the root of the extreme polarization between progressives and conservatives. Conservatives base their worldview on the traditional model of the family with a strict father who establishes absolute moral principles and punishes the children for violating them. In this model the father is hierarchically superior to the mother. Liberals on the other hand, base our conception of reality on a family in which both parents nurture the children and teach them to reason about moral issues, rather than parents’ primary functions being to serve as unquestioned disciplinarians. In the more progressive kind of family, relations between the parents are more egalitarian.¹³

Lakoff derives the vastly different agendas of the Left and Right from these core beliefs about how parents should behave. Progressives and conservatives are literally speaking different languages because our morality is premised on such different values. Lakoff’s point is that progressives need to understand the beliefs that underlie the Right’s positions on such “hot button” issues as reproductive choice, the death penalty, taxes, and gay rights before we will be able to make sense to people influenced by the Right.¹⁴

¹¹ I might also include Mary Wollstonecraft, Frederick Douglass, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Marx, Engels, Joe Hill, Gandhi, and Che. What is the relationship between political passion and spiritual/ethical principles?

¹² I find the work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri interesting but unnecessarily difficult reading. I haven’t had a chance to see their new work, but I understand that they have changed some of their most controversial opinions expressed in Empire, Harvard, 2000.

¹³ Besides presenting the dichotomy between the two family models, Lakoff provides evidence that families based on the nurturing parent model actually produce children that are able to think more creatively and are better adjusted than families using the strict father model. Equality and respect work!

¹⁴ Lakoff’s book on new ways to frame the Left’s political agenda, Don’t Think of an Elephant, Chelsea Green Publishing, 2004, provides a road map for engaging in dialog with people in the middle.

Even though Leftists oppose the Right's political agenda, we are not exempt from these cognitive models. Lakoff's insights are not just useful in understanding our opponents. Many Generations of leftists have grown up in authoritarian families. Virtually everyone has belonged to organizations that are strictly hierarchical such as churches, schools, or the military. Even unions tend to be structured along these lines. Most of us are unaware of the extent to which we are still playing out the assumptions that come with the authoritarian, patriarchal world-view.

I do not mean to suggest that we all need to delve into our families' psychological angst before we organize. What I am suggesting is that we examine our preconceptions of what a strong movement should look like so that we can appreciate our true strength. That strength includes the diversity of approaches and tactics that portions of the Left are using. We do not have to agree on tactics to be strong. **Our unconscious assumptions about what organizations "should" look like make it difficult for us to unite as Leftists.**

How can we take advantage of our different points of view and still FEEL like a stronger movement?

When we discard the patriarchal, dogmatic tendency to make others wrong if they disagree with us on any issue, we can begin to see the Left's strength and diversity. There is a whole left subculture that sustains us. A young relative traveling around the country told us he could always find like-minded people in any town by going to the health food store. A gay theater troupe found that audiences in every town laugh at the same places in their play. Michael Albert encourages us to think about all the thousands if not millions of people who have been in touch with one or another left organization since the 60s.¹⁵ We may not be aware of the tremendous numbers of people who are potentially members of our movement.

Left Assets - Some people who tend to agree with us are:

1. People whose personal, community, and spiritual values are opposed to inequality, exploitation, and greed –and who are not fooled by the hypocrisy of our opponents;
2. Intellectuals -professors, writers, and reseachers- who see the need for equality and justice based on an analysis of the shortcomings of our current system;
3. Disgruntled people who have a gut-level feeling that they are being lied to, taken advantage of, or played for chumps;
4. Working people who are brought into union and political activity around their jobs;
5. Community people and social service workers who approach political activity around an issue such as schools, services, environmental pollution, or police brutality;
6. Adherents of any political group that opposes capitalism;

¹⁵ The Trajectory of Change: Activist Strategies for Social Transformation, South End, 2002

7. People who are active in “mainstream” electoral politics from a left perspective;
8. Members of “minority” groups, women, disabled people, lesbians and gays, and immigrants who are treated unfairly;
9. Artists whose incisive vision of reality detects the absurdity, banality, and hypocrisy of the ruling paradigm;
10. Media professionals who see truth and resent the constraints they are under to misrepresent reality; and
11. Young people who are repelled by the social system they are being conditioned to accept.

These are our people. One political party or organization could not possibly meet all of their needs. But if we present them with ways to participate in a networked movement that fits their daily lives, many of them will respond. Taking action feels good! We have a lot to offer people.

As leftists, we have been systematically isolated. We are up against formidable opponents. Being strong and effective does not mean that we will always be right or win. Our efforts have often met with failure, and sometimes the best we have been able to accomplish has been to lose ground more slowly. In addition to threatening our civil and human rights, our adversaries have done their best to marginalize our whole way of thinking.

We decry the effect of corporate monopoly of the media on the news, but seldom stop to think about its affect on ourselves. How can we avoid internalizing some of the barrage of messages put out through every avenue of the culture that there is no alternative and that our left movement is irrelevant? If we sometimes feel ineffective and useless, it should not be a surprise. Where do we find images of ourselves as courageous resistance fighters?

Some of us live on the verge of despair. In a long-range study of extremely militant anti-Vietnam war activists, Jack Whalen and Richard Flacks discovered an important irony. Many of the 60s radicals they followed over time had sacrificed professional success, had more turnover in their intimate partnerships and less satisfying relationships, and were more subject to depression than a matched cohort of their peers. **But these leftists did not see how their activism had contributed to their life problems.** In a sense, they had “bought” the American myth that each of us is responsible for our own success or lack thereof. Recent revelations about Cointellpro show that the FBI dogged Free Speech leader Mario Savio for years after he climbed up on the hood of a police car on the University of California campus at Berkeley.¹⁶ The FBI talked to employers and landlords and contributed to Savio’s deep depression. Some of us pay a high price for our convictions.

There are other ways that we may be “buying into” our opponents’ worldviews. Some of us have a romantic fantasy of what it would be like to be part of a strong social change

¹⁶ SF Chronicle, Sunday, October 10, 2004, Magazine.

movement. I have heard other leftists bewail our lack of charismatic leaders. One of the factors contributing to our movement's difficulties that we may not give enough thought to is that many of our most compelling leaders have been murdered or died prematurely. Consider for a moment an alternative reality in which we would still have Malcolm X, Cesar Chavez, Audre Lorde, Paul Wellstone, Fred Hampton, Gloria Anzaldua, and June Jordan with us. While we are at it, how about wishing that Leonard Peltier, David Gilbert, Asata Shakur, Marilyn Buck, and Mumia Abu Jamal were free and at our sides? We might not be in power, but with these leaders' help, we might have made even more important strides toward an effective, multi-racial movement.

Is it wrong to wish for powerful leaders? No, but it is wrong to depend on them. I submit that this is another case where we can use the "both/and" paradigm. We need to value leaders who are still with us, like Dolores Huerta and Barbara Lee. I have hopes for Barak Obama. At the same time, we must echo lines from a June Jordan poem that Sweet Honey in the Rock made into a song: **We are the ones we've been waiting for.**

It is tempting to believe that an effective movement would be unified under a powerful orator who would proclaim an inspiring platform. A strong movement should at least sport brave banners fluttering in unison. But here is an opposing idea I hope you will also consider: **Our movement as it exists is strong because of its very anarchy.** In the next section of this paper on networking, there is a list of ways that our poly-centered, redundant movement is actually more effective because we are not all in one humongous group. We innovate; we develop our own approaches; we experiment.

If this seems counter-intuitive, so be it. The multi-faceted way our movement has grown is related to the enormous upsurge of energy and creativity that is all around us. No one is asking permission to get active – all around the country, individuals and groups have come forth on their own to get involved. Now we need to see how we can take advantage of what we are doing and encourage communication, co-operation, and collaboration.

And an anarchic movement is much less vulnerable to attacks on a few charismatic individuals. We know that our opponents have no scruples about killing or imprisoning us, and they will certainly continue to send spies and provocateurs to harass and mislead us. Isn't it better for the base of our movement to feel empowered and able to organize on its own? Isn't this evidence of the freedom we hold dear? Part of our heritage that we can endorse?

This is the ultimate aspect of our movement we need to understand to build on our strengths. The social movement exists, and it is growing. If we want it to be more effective, we must love it and nurture it, not make it wrong and problematic. According to Lakoff and numerous child development experts, in parenting the nurturing approach is the one that can actually build strong, self-reliant character. We owe it to our own mental health, and to the future of the movement, to overcome the tendency to look for a strict father and enforce a single movement "line" or philosophy.

In understanding why some of us feel depressed, it may help to compare members of the U.S. Left today to hostages. We feel responsible for changing the country's direction, but we know we have little formal power. We live in the relative bounty of this country and reject the

means that are used to appropriate all this wealth. We have fantasies of escape. By presenting a viable alternative, we can help other see that fleeing to Canada isn't the best solution.

There are many reasons why movement building is a difficult project, and many other issues that demand attention. No matter whether you feel that you want to get involved in the “nuts and bolts” of organizing the Left or not, if you are active in progressive causes, how we organize ourselves –or don't– affects you too. If we only listen to fanatics who spend hours each day sending emails to each other, we will not be able to organize our way out of our current marginalization.

One of the key issues we have to struggle with is that “ordinary people,” folks who have families and jobs, or even students who are working to put themselves through school, cannot afford the time to sit around in long meetings, delving deeply into wordy discussions. If we don't make sure the movement's shape and spirit is useful and welcoming to all of us, we will keep reproducing environments that actually turn people away. In *The Trajectory of Change*, Michael Albert writes about a variety of ways we can nurture our movement. We have to make the movement more “user-friendly”, more rewarding to be a part of.¹⁷

Does honoring our strengths mean that we shouldn't focus on areas where we need to improve?

Absolutely not. Take the example of one of the social change movement's most enduring problems: its relationship to racism. The Left urgently needs to explore how many of our organizing dilemmas stem from a refusal to come to terms with the roots and effects of white supremacy. Reputable left thinkers have blamed the weakness of the Left on multicultural, postmodern politics and people of color who choose not to be active in mixed groups.¹⁸ We need to rethink our analysis of class in the U.S. to take better account of how the structures of white supremacy have thwarted working people's efforts to unite around collective goals. Our anti-war agitation needs to explain to the general public how denial of our country's genocide against indigenous people still feeds this country's blindness to the crimes being perpetrated in our name in other countries.

But a strengths perspective also looks at our resources for changing the movement rather than only focusing on what is wrong. White guilt and denial of structural racism in our movement are still prevalent on the Left. But guilt and hand wringing don't do much to change the situation. Change in this area will not be easy, but it is not impossible.

Instead of bemoaning a lack of members of color, more organizations could look at what the Ruckus Society did recently. Ruckus evaluated its practice and took specific steps to become more relevant to communities of color. If we endorse affirmative action for the society in general, why shouldn't we implement it for ourselves? In *Webs of Power*,¹⁹ Starhawk presents a valuable list of measures to help the alternative globalization movement in the U.S. reduce its

¹⁷ Trajectory of Change.

¹⁸ Todd Gitlin in *The Twilight of Common Dreams*, Holt, 1995, and John Sanbonmatsu in *The Postmodern Prince*, Monthly Review, 2004.

¹⁹ *Webs of Power: Notes from the Global Uprising*, New Society, 2002, “Building a Diverse Movement,” pp 179-200.

isolation from communities of color. Robin Kelly's book, Freedom Dreams, is a fantastic resource for white readers to open up their awareness of the creativity of Black radical imagination.²⁰ We have to work on bias on the left in both organizational and individual ways.

Another area where the Left has an opportunity to improve its practice is in the incorporation of feminist insights into our strategic vision. The 2004 election loss for the Left should point out to all of us that issues of gender, family, and sexuality are at the core of our movement. The Right focused on abortion and same-sex marriage because feminism and gay rights are revolutionary. In framing our discussion of Left values, we don't have to accept the Right's isolation of gay marriage and abortion as the terms in which we discuss "values." But we do need an analysis of why these issues are so significant to the Right, and so scary to voters locked into traditional values.

It is profoundly significant to me that George Lakoff's analysis of prevalence of the "strict father" cognitive model on the right is coming from a male academic. Lakoff has certainly made a breakthrough in formulating this argument from a sound cognitive scientific foundation. But where is the feminist Left in this discussion? We need to rebuild a women's liberation agenda including: resistance to the Right's forcing poor women to marry; to the burden posed by families' needing two, three, and even four jobs to survive; and the impact of increasingly huge gaps in the safety net for human services.

One of the key areas where networking could help articulate better grounded resistance to the Right would be the relation between women's rights and gay rights. I have the feeling that many liberals and progressives haven't given this nexus much thought. How can we organize protests including women and gay rights activists against Arnold Schwarzenegger's use of the disgusting epithet "girlie men?" And this kind of action doesn't have to be depressing and humorless. This Halloween I played Schwarzenegger dressed as a female impersonator bodybuilding dominatrix named "Conana." After all, as Stephen Ducat points out in The Wimp Factor, the Right is driven by the politics of anxious masculinity.²¹ There is something very insecure, if not downright closeted, about a politician who feels it necessary to impugn the masculinity of his male colleagues, not to mention the overt message this sends about women and gays in government.

One extremely interesting detail of Riane Eisler's analysis of history concerns pornography. Eisler, seeing history as an oscillation between partnership and dominator modes of thinking, shows that in times of war pornography becomes much more popular. We are seeing an epidemic of porn right now in our culture. Mark Morford, a progressive columnist for the San Francisco Chronicle even invoked porn as a tool for Left mental health on November 5, 2004.²² I disagree strongly with the position that adult pornography should be outlawed or

²⁰ Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination, Beacon 2003

²¹ The Wimp Factor: Gender Gaps, Holy Wars, and the Politics of Anxious Masculinity Beacon Press, 2004.

²² "...After all, you don't hand over all your children the first time the flying monkeys bang on your door. You don't give up your dream house just because a bunch of gangbangs moved in down the block. You become a bit more wary and alert and you stock up on the superlative porn and the expensive wine and the deepened sense of true beauty and sex and love and hope and you hunker down and grit your teeth and dig in for the long haul, and you work on making your own goddamn garden more beautiful than even you could have imagined, because, well, the neighborhood -- and the world -- needs it, more than ever." Message forwarded from sfgate.com.

sanctioned. I do think that feminists and women's allies must figure out why portrayals of objectified and degraded women are erotic for so many men, and take action to build a culture that frees our sexuality from this blight.

While doing the research for this writing, I have wondered whether the whole question of movement building may suffer from neglect because relationship building is seen as "women's work." There are many books analyzing aspects of the Left, but most of them are by men who seem sublimely unconcerned with actually doing the organizational "house-keeping" required to make change. An exception is Bill Moyer (not the T.V. personality, a Bay Area progressive and peace movement consultant). But after he passed away, the people he worked with seem not to have continued his movement-building practice. His book, Doing Democracy, is one of the most cogent and useful attempts to explain the stages we go through in organizing around causes, and the personality types and roles of people working in our movements.²³

The Left has also had a troubled relationship with the labor movement. Many leftists routinely disparage organized Labor as bureaucratic and reactionary. There is much to criticize in the history of the labor movement, including blatant and subtle racism and class collaboration. The AFL-CIO has served U.S. imperialism abroad and is apparently continuing some involvement of this kind.²⁴ The labor movement came through a long period of racist refusal to organize Black workers, and was notoriously hostile to women's leadership.

Nonetheless, the labor movement represents the largest independently funded voice for workers rights in our country. This section of the progressive or liberal movement has been undergoing its own transformation recently. Particularly since John Sweeney was elected President of the AFL-CIO in 1997, Labor is playing an increasingly positive role and working desperately to reverse its loss of jobs, salaries, and benefits. Leadership in major unions and labor bodies has increasingly passed into the hands of 60s generation leftists and movement veterans.

The AFL-CIO convention in 2005 is opening up a discussion of how labor can win more representation and present a more effective political alternative. While this is a necessary debate and a change of course may be needed, it is crucial to see if the changes being proposed will increase members' ownership of their unions. There is a real danger that a drive to open new organizing will leave existing represented workers feeling less attention to their needs. "Business unionism" is not dead, even among those who are most active in mobilizing their base. These developments bear watching by the rest of the Left. The labor movement has been a key partner in left struggles, including living and minimum wages, immigrant rights, overtime protection, family leave, and ergonomics. Despite some resistance, labor has also begun to play a role in environmental and peace activities, and it has played a role in questioning some of the most blatant negative effects of economic globalization.


A wider critical acceptance of Labor as part of the Left would help eliminate the tendency of some progressives to frame Labor in the same terms as the Right, as a "special interest" out only for its own gain. I have been shocked at the cavalier attitude among some

²³ New Society Publishers, 2001.

²⁴ Progressives are investigating use of U.S. government funding for AFL-CIO dealings with Venezuelan unions.

leftists who claim to advocate for the working class but never seem concerned that what they are saying goes directly against what the most organized, active workers are saying and doing. We do need to advance a discussion on class in the U.S., but routinely assuming that organized workers are dupes of their unions' sold-out bureaucracies is patronizing and divisive.

A problematic area on the Left that has recently received a bit of attention is our relationship to non-profit organizations. A conference called "The Revolution Will Not Be Funded" was held in April of 2004 by Incite! Women of Color Against Violence, co-hosted by the University of California Santa Barbara Women's Studies Department.²⁵ Some of these questions were also voiced at the World Social Forum in Mumbai India in January 2004. What should the relationship be between tax-exempt groups and the movement for social change? What is an appropriate level of salary for people who are paid to be activists, compared to those who work at non-movement jobs? How can we avoid having the funders of important movement organizations dictate priorities when their employees are paid to attend events where policies are discussed and determined? All of these questions merit extensive discussion and a much wider airing than they have received to date.

Focusing on our strengths means framing the discussion of the Left in terms of what radicals are doing right and what resources we have to do better, not ignoring areas re we need to organize more effectively. It means stopping our tendency of wringing our hands and disparaging others' work. It means coming to terms with our movement of movements, as it exists on the ground, and finding a place to lend a hand.

One way to find a place to engage is to look for the networks that we are already a part of and learn more about how networks work.

²⁵ CDs from the conference are available from INCITE c/o CARA, 801 23rd Ave. S. #G1, Seattle WA 98144, email: incite_national@yahoo.com, (484) 932-3166.

The Strength of Networks

When I stopped thinking the Left should all unite in a single organization around a single platform, I began to realize that we are united through our networks. Valuing our networks is perhaps the most important way that we can appreciate our strengths and grow the movement. This may seem like common sense to many younger people. They are used to a fluid, networked movement. But older activists tend to have been “brought up” in a left culture that paid attention to the organizations that made up the movement. These strong, often centralized organizations tended to draw attention away from the network of relationships that links us with others irrespective of organizational affiliations.

If you have been around the Left even for a little while, you have probably got a political network. There is the woman who dragged you to another anti-war demonstration in 2002. If you wanted to get in touch with environmentalists, you could call an old classmate who is out in the woods working against logging. Your partner’s sister is married to a man who works in a youth organization. He could put you in touch with anti-police abuse groups. People at your kids’ school have been registering neighbors to vote. Your email address book includes acquaintances who are in touch with independent media, labor, and reproductive choice activists.

Right up front I want to emphasize that by left networks I am referring to more than the Internet. The Internet is an important tool that can facilitate networking. But it is person-to-person connections that are the real threads linking us to each other. In the Internet we have a new avenue for these contacts, but it can also obscure the personal relationships that are the fabric of organizing. An important principle that I learned rather late in life is: **all organizing is “one-on-one.”**

If you have a personal connection with someone, you are much more likely to listen to what they say or return their calls.²⁶ And this connection lasts through changes in the organizations we are working with or levels of participation. I’m not shocked anymore to hear that someone I have known to be a strong activist in the past is taking a break from political activity.²⁷ I can catch up if we get a chance to speak in person, keep track of them through mutual connections, or track them down if I really need to.

What is new about networks?

It’s not that social networks themselves are new. However our awareness of networks is growing exponentially, and they are being used to organize in creative, new ways.

²⁶ Dr. Terry Day of the Center for Working Life shared a wonderful teaching with me about how important it is to establish a real personal connection as part of the organizing process. Terry says that Johnnie Tillmon, founding chairperson and later director of the National Welfare Rights Organization, taught organizers to expect to stand outside someone’s door on their first house visits, not just once but for awhile. If you were skillful, you might be allowed inside. Then you needed to let the woman (or occasional man?) talk before you said much. Only after more visits did you invite the person to a meeting, and you didn’t expect her to talk in the first meeting. This kind of care and respect built a powerful national network of local organizations of poor women of color in the 1970s.

²⁷ In the 60s, militant leftists assumed that you had to be constantly active to prove that you were committed. This dogmatic recipe for burnout has had the opposite effect of its intention and has weakened the movement by driving normal people away. Whelan and Flacks document the effect of demands that activists prove “which side” they were on.

Networks are the basis of the information-based mode of production. Marxists among my readers may find it significant that with networks, the technology and form of production is once again affecting social relationships! Al Qaeda's attacks on September 11, 2001 turned many people's attention to the network as a form of organizing that is extremely flexible and difficult to eradicate. But two RAND researchers had predicted in the 1990s that networks would be the basis of wars in the new millennium.²⁸

We have just seen groups like MoveOn and the Howard Dean campaign turn networking into powerful avenues for organizing. By understanding how networks operate, consciously building and nurturing them, and taking every appropriate opportunity to activate them, the Left can increase our effectiveness and reach much further than we could by using a strict, organization-based approach.

I began to become aware of the potential of networks for our movement when I got ready to move. I had been active in Los Angeles for 25 years and I was moving to the Bay Area where I knew only a handful of folks. I found myself with tears in my eyes at an open house held by the Community Coalition in South Central L.A.²⁹ I knew I would be leaving all these people who had been contacts and friends over the years.

When I got to the Bay Area, I enrolled in a social work program and decided to do some research on networks. I interviewed five political activists in the Bay Area about their political connections. What I found amazed me. My informants' networks extended much further than I had suspected, and had supported their work in unexpected ways.

One of the people I interviewed, Matt Chapell, a gay AIDS activist then in his 30s, had found a connection with Greenpeace for ACT-UP to learn how to stage direct action protests. Then breast cancer activists had come to him at ACT-UP to learn the same information. With this series of exchanges, I could document movement "know how" traveling from the environmental movement to a predominantly gay setting, and from there being disseminated to a largely women's constituency. A recovering drug addict, the same activist had built relationships with experts in the National Institute of Health's AIDS clinical trials unit based on his understanding of the technical scientific jargon gained in researching the drugs he was using. He saw part of his mission as helping activists in the HIV world advocate for changes in government policies around medications.

Another person I interviewed had been active in the past with a group of primarily white lesbians to protest U.S. foreign policy, and she brought these contacts into her volunteer work against rape. Thanks to her and other feminists' insistence, the rape hotline's mandatory training for volunteers included extensive discussion about racism and imperialism. This organization believed that women who call for help after an assault are affected by oppression in other aspects of their lives. Her knowledge of U.S. imperial exploits and connections to people who had been

²⁸ Arquilla and Ronfeldt's prescient briefing document from 1996, *The Advent of Netwar*, can be downloaded free from the RAND website. Their post 9-11 update [Networks and Netwars](#), RAND 2001, includes articles of great interest to progressives.

²⁹ Karen Bass, the Executive Director of the Coalition has played an extremely positive role in building inter-ethnic solidarity and is on her way to the California legislature!

protesting U.S. military policy in Central America helped her break into a new job in the independent media movement. Thanks to her connections, she was able to put together coverage leading up to the groundbreaking anti-globalization protests in Seattle that helped both to build and document them.

The second woman I interviewed, Millie Cleveland, had been part of an African American rank and file movement in unions. At the time I interviewed her, she was working on violence prevention with Oakland youth. She was still in touch with an attorney who had handled her ex-husband's union grievances while they were in the plant, and the lawyer had recently been elected to the Oakland school board. Millie was part of his "kitchen cabinet" advising him about policy in the schools. She has subsequently gone on to work as staff for a union, and the knowledge of training and mediation skills she gained working with youth is coming in handy in labor.

Warren Mar was working for the AFL-CIO Organizing Institute when I interviewed him, but he also had a solid background in Chinese American community organizing in San Francisco. He had gone into the hotel and restaurant union after doing radical community-based organizing, and had strong connections to the lively academic world in the Bay Area as well. I worked with him later in the Labor Immigrant Organizing Network (LION) which helped change the AFL-CIO's official position to oppose employer sanctions for hiring undocumented workers. His connections with Chinese community immigration activists, unions, and radical politics helped bridge these disparate worlds. He later went to work at the University of California, Berkeley Center for Labor Research and Education, where he co-authored a text for teaching English as a second language using workers' rights as the subject matter. He is currently serving as temporary director of the Labor and Community Studies program at San Francisco Community college.

In terms of the size and breadth of his networks, the star of my research was Tim Sampson. He had strong connections in the United Farmworkers, the Love Canal neighborhood anti-toxics network, health care, homecare, welfare rights, labor, consumers' rights, community organizing, legal and social work worlds. Tragically, he passed away in 2001, but his memorial service in downtown Oakland brought people together from around the country. Even though he had talked with me at length about all the people he had known over the years, I was surprised by the breadth and depth of his legacy.

My discussions with these fascinating people showed me the danger of trying to classify activists as belonging in a single field of struggle. In addition to their active connections at the time I interviewed them, all five of the participants still had a wealth of contacts reaching back years into the projects they had worked on before we met. Besides learning a great deal about how diverse political networks can be, my research had an additional benefit. By talking to five politically savvy people in the Bay Area about their networks, I began to understand more about my new home. I started to form my own networks here in a more intentional, conscious way, and I did not totally lose the connections I had made in Southern California either.

SPINS

The idea of applying social network theory to social movements is not new, but I don't believe this approach has been publicized enough.³⁰ In the late 60s, Luther Gerlach and Virginia Hine started to look at the structure of movements from this perspective. Their analysis confirms many of my observations. They came up with the acronym "SPIN" to describe key characteristics of these movements: "**Segmentary**: composed of many diverse groups, which grow and die, divide and fuse, proliferate and contract; **Polycentric**: having multiple, often temporary, and sometimes competing leaders or centers of influence; **Networked**: forming a loose, reticulate, integrated network with multiple linkages through travelers, overlapping membership, joint activities, common reading matter, and shared ideals and opponents."³¹

How Networks Work

"Over the last few decades there has been a paradigm shift in scientific understandings of living systems. Scientists are now discovering what indigenous knowledge has long taught – everything is connected. Ecologists, biologists, physicists, and mathematicians have begun to be able to describe vastly complex connected webs of life, which are made up of networks within networks. They have gradually realized that life has the ability to self-organize and mutually adapt, without anyone in control. Their descriptions of living systems are perhaps the best model yet for how the [alternative globalization] movement functions..."

"High-speed film reveals that the movement spreads across a flock [of birds] in less than one-seventieth of a second. Yet this should be impossible, as it is much faster than a single bird's reaction time. The flock is clearly more than the sum of its parts. But how is this possible?"

"Observing the movement of affinity groups from police helicopters during many of the mass mobilizations of the past few years, or trying to map the daily flow of information between the forever-transforming activist groups on the internet must create a similar sense of bafflement for the authorities. Even participants in the movements are often confused as to how everything seems to somehow fit together so well..."

"Nowadays software designers, urban planners and ecologists all use these concepts in their day-to-day work; the realm of politics has yet [to] catch up."

"For this is truly organizing from below. The process of simple local units generating complicated global or group behaviour, a process not directed by a conscious entity, but rather emerging through the interrelationships of the system's parts is known in scientific circles as emergence."

³⁰ Our movement is not finding and disseminating research that could help us understand how we to utilize our strengths! As part of our networking, we need connections to academics and we should ask these people to help us find other scholars and studies that would illuminate our efforts.

³¹ "The Structure of Social Movements: Environmental Activism and its Opponents," Luther Gerlach, Chapter Nine in Arquila and Rodfeldt, Networks and Netwars, RAND 2001, pp. 289-290.

“If numbers, neurons, crowds, computer programmes, cells, city dwellers, bird behave like this, why not a networked movement of movements?”³²

If the Left wants to grow our movement from a networking perspective, we have to learn more about the nuts and bolts, or should I say the warp and woof, of networks. Fortunately, we are in the midst of a period in which networks are receiving a great deal of academic and commercial attention. In addition to the work of the two RAND researchers, Arquilla and Ronfeldt, Albert-Laszlo Barabasi’s book Linked³³ is a good place for a novice like me to start. It brings science –his discipline is physics– together with highly entertaining stories illustrating properties of networks. He also shows how new the scientific analysis of networks is, and proposes that there are amazing congruencies among networking phenomena in physical, social, and biological sciences.³⁴

A few characteristics of networks will be obvious to anyone who is familiar with the Internet. First of all, the whole of a network is difficult, if not impossible, to perceive. When you first connect with the Internet, all you are in contact with is one “page” or node. It takes a few experiences “navigating” from one node to another by means of “links” to understand what you are actually doing. This would explain why so many leftists are missing the essential networked nature of our movement: they see the “page” but not the “links.”

In our movement as on the Internet, large or important nodes can become hubs. A hub can be as simple as an individual’s homepage, or as fancy as Yahoo, but real hubs get huge amounts of traffic. In our movement, hubs can be individuals, organizations, or even web sites that end up transmitting a high volume of useful connections. The relative popularity of web pages is expressed in “hits.” For a social change movement, we could understand a hub’s effectiveness in terms of its links to other hubs, its ability to turn people out, its capacity to raise funds, its influence on a “domain” of struggle, or all of the above.

A key social networking theory shows how this approach can help us organize more effectively. It is a breakthrough by a sociologist named Mark Granovetter. When he got involved with research on social networks in the late 60s, a lot of attention was being paid to small networks with intimate, strong connections, the people we depend on for nurturance, social support, and day-to-day socializing. Members of such close groups tend to agree with each other about many things and feel comfortable in each other’s company.

Granovetter, however, realized that to understand how new information can travel among these strong, primary networks, we have to look further. It is our “weak ties” with people whom we do not know so well that provide us with access to ideas and connections from outside our primary social network. Granovetter’s theory, “the strength of weak ties” has become a basic principle of social network theory. It applies to the Left in several ways.

³² we are everywhere: the irresistible rise of global anticapitalism, edited by Notes from Nowhere, Verso, 2003, “Networks, the ecology of the movements,” pp. 67-68.

³³ Linked, The New Science of Networks, How Everything is Connected to Everything Else and What it Means for Science, Business, and Everyday Life, Perseus, 2002.

³⁴ A few other books that seem useful in this regard are Six Degrees: The Science of a Connected Age by Duncan Watts, Norton, 2003 and Nexus: Small Worlds and the Groundbreaking Science of Networks by Mark Buchanan, Norton, 2002.

The “strength of weak ties” principle can explain how important it is to stay in touch with old friends or “hang out” at movement-oriented social events. The real work of the movement moves along just as surely at a party as at a meeting. It’s also important that we not throw away our old address books. When I was doing my research on networking, I told the woman who had been involved with anti-imperialist work about this idea, and she was actually very relieved. “Now I don’t feel so guilty about not being able to be in close touch with people I’ve worked with in the past,” she said. On the other hand, we also commented on how sad it is that the Left has lost the names and addresses of people with whom we have worked for years. Imagine how strong the Left would be if we had maintained contact with all the people who worked on Jesse Jackson’s two campaigns for president in the 1980s! Networking can be the vehicle for the movement to keep connected with people beyond the life of a particular project.

One crucial question that Granovetter’s theory raises for the Left is whether we are good at connecting with people who disagree with us. Too often we are fearful, repulsed, or disdainful of people who support opposing political positions. And there is good reason for our reactions. Our beliefs are anathema to many of our neighbors, and maybe even to relatives and co-workers. We tend to cut ourselves off from meaningful interaction with anyone we fear might treat us with anger or hostility. But according to Granovetter’s principle, these may be the connections that can bring us new information. They are certainly connections that we could use to bring the information we have to a wider audience. How can the Left change people’s minds if we are too angry, fearful, or sure of our own correctness to be willing to talk to them?

Strengths of a Networked Movement

Gerlach acknowledges that movements networked along his and Hines’ “SPIN” model are often “labeled disorganized, poorly organized, loosely organized, or underdeveloped-and thus...(have) been denigrated or criticized not only by opponents or observers but at one time by movement participants.”³⁵ Instead, these researchers found distinct strengths in these movements. Networked movements are:

- **Hard to suppress** because there are multiple groups and leaders. If one group is forced out of existence, others come forward;
- **Attuned to a variety of social niches**, offering every supporter things to do, even though they may have found these spots through factionalism and division;
- **Able to divide up the labor** by member groups specializing in specific tasks and skills;
- **Able to adapt to changing circumstances**, with member groups free to innovate and respond quickly to new situations;
- **Reliable** because the failure of one group does not compromise the whole;
- **Good at learning from successes and failures** by virtue of having a variety of approaches and experience to synthesize;
- **Tactically flexible** by including both “hard line” and “moderate” groups, the movement as a whole can roll out a wider range of tactics; and,


³⁵ Gerlach, in Arquilla and Rondfeldt, p. 302.

- **Innovative and energetic** as component groups strive to develop new approaches and win support.³⁶

Does this mean that there is no need for strong organizations?

None of this networking theory I am proposing negates the need for strong, defined organizations. The National Organization for Women (NOW), for example, is a clearly constituted membership group with local chapters that elect officers and participate in national conventions. They are in the forefront of organizing for a broad agenda of women's rights.

But even a powerful organization like NOW couldn't have staged the March for Women's Lives. In this effort, NOW worked with the Fund for a Feminist Majority, the National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL), Planned Parenthood, the National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health, the American Civil Liberties Union, and the Black Women's Health Imperative.³⁷ As a result, the event was much stronger and more diverse than any one of the sponsoring organizations could have managed alone.

Such pro-choice coalitions have existed in the past, although maybe not with the conscious emphasis on racial and age diversity of this one. My question for these groups is: Are you continuing to relate to each other and building linkages that last? If not, we will have wasted an important resource for movement building. If so and an ongoing network  being built, how can we help – and how can you provide access to your network for the millions of people who were unable to attend the march?

Critical Resistance - How to Build a Network

The best example I have found of movement organizing along the model I am advocating is Critical Resistance. A member of the original collective that put this project together told me that two graduate students at UC Santa Cruz who received funding to hold a conference on abuses in the criminal justice system started Critical Resistance. Under the mentorship of Angela Davis, they built a collective and a network by contacting groups around the country active around this issue. Then they consulted these groups in person, asking what kind of a conference would best meet their needs. Prisoners and ex-offenders were involved in the planning, and a range of points of view was included.³⁸

I was privileged to attend the original Critical Resistance conference on the University of California Berkeley campus. It was an overwhelming success, not only in the numbers of people attending -3000 compared to a goal of 550- but in the range of ages, ethnicities, socio-economic and educational levels, ideologies, sexual orientations, and experience. Participants came from all across the country. Specific tracks had been set up to attract youth and to include cultural expression. The collective that planned the conference had gone beyond the original funding and raised thousands of dollars to provide scholarships for groups from other locations to come. A sold-out stellar concert was held on the Friday night before the main conference and admission to the conference itself was free. A compelling graphic had been designed for the conference

³⁶ Based on points raised by Gerlach, pp. 303-306.

³⁷ I don't mean to imply that NOW spearheaded the organizing, I am not familiar with the background of this event.

³⁸ Personal conversation with Dr. Terry Kupers.

and it appeared on the conference website, tee shirts, posters, and materials. The atmosphere at the conference felt safe, diverse, and rich in wisdom, acceptance, and activist energy.

All of this happened in the spring of 1998, a year and a half before the anti-globalization demonstrations in Seattle that are often seen as the dawn of our current upsurge in movement activity. I ran into veteran social movement scholar and commentator Mike Davis at the conference. We agreed at the time: the energy and excitement we were seeing at this event heralded a new period in social change organizing, and this was more than a year before Seattle.

But it didn't end there. The collective managed to translate this success into ongoing organizing around the "prison-industrial complex." Regional conferences have been held in the East and South, and the networking of groups active against police abuse, prison construction, juvenile injustice, the death penalty, and prisoner rights has continued. A network has been built. Critical Resistance is a model for what can be accomplished when radicals listen to, rely on, and support the multiple groups organizing around related issues.

Objection: We're already doing this.

It's true. Left activists and groups are networked. But couldn't we be more effective if we knew more about basic networking principles? Aren't there a lot of people who would like to engage with the progressive movement but who don't know how to find like-minded folks and a level of activity that would fit their lives? Couldn't we make a breakthrough if we declared to ourselves and to the world that we are using this new approach?

Many of our networks are somewhat informal. Organizers who are "in the know" have connections to each other, but they may be reticent or unaware of the value of letting others know that such links exist. Knowledge is power, so it would only be human for leaders to keep some of this information private. Networking requires trust too, so many links can't be shared for fear of abuse or over use. But making the networking process a topic for learning and discussion can help us respect connections. More networking "know how" could let newcomers and less experienced organizers progress faster in their movement learning curve.

Objection: You have to engage in action to build networks, it can't be an abstract project.

This objection is true too. Just sitting around and talking about networking will not build the movement. But if activists carry this knowledge with them into the variety of projects and settings in which they are already active, I believe it will help them care for connections that they might otherwise ignore or forget. Many areas of expertise are based on common sense, but people who are good at a particular kind of work develop insights and skills that less experienced practitioners don't have. Networking is a learned skill and it improves with practice.

I am taking for granted that our movement is ongoing, a living, constantly evolving group project. I hope that the ideas I am sharing will prove useful and that others will be drawn into working to apply them more broadly. This approach will have to be organized for. Just like any other goal we have for our movement -fighting racial bias, building women's participation, keeping a good mix of ages, and attracting people from a variety socio-economic groups- networking more consciously will require effort.

What I am proposing is that we start working on understanding our movement from this perspective. It doesn't matter so much that we "get it right" to begin with. What is important is that we make the effort to start analyzing our connections from this point of view. I believe that it will prove useful, and that by using networking theory, we will be able to improve our effectiveness. Following the principles of praxis, we will want to return to the drawing boards regularly to update our theory based on what we have done and experienced.

Objection: What You're Describing Isn't Organization, It's Anarchy!

This objection has a grain of truth in it, but it misses the point. I am arguing that we accept a reality that is disorganized and begin to see the kernels of organization in it. This approach seems more productive to me than deciding a priori what organization we should be seeing and rejecting reality when it doesn't fit our preconception.

But the objection also presumes a negative judgment of anarchy. Those of us who do not identify with the anarchist tradition may have something to learn from our comrades who do. We have certainly seen huge screw ups among leftists following an authoritarian, centralist model for organizing, maybe it's time to try something different.

If some aspects of the new movements look chaotic, new scientific principles in chaos theory may be useful too. One of the most helpful ideas I have gleaned from my scant acquaintance with chaos theory is the idea that planning and measurement may only work in low energy environments. When a system in motion gets energized, it reacts in ways that are difficult to determine beforehand. If movement organizers are always trying to structure protests and build an organization to "get a handle" on the energy when poor and working people take to the streets, they may actually be working against the flow of events.³⁹

Objection: There's no way you are going to get a handle on all this networking, it is changing all the time.

The object of this approach is not to "herd cats." It is to facilitate processes that are already going on. Yahoo and Google don't actually list every website on the Internet.⁴⁰ What they do is find and index popular web pages. We will never have control of Left networks, but if we can help activists and organizers to understand the networking they are already doing, and do it more effectively, the Left as a whole will benefit.

³⁹ As I understand it, this argument is advanced by Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward in their classic work, Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How they Fail, Vintage, 1978.

⁴⁰ Barabassi provides fascinating descriptions of attempts to map the Internet and figure out how big it is in Linked.

Can Networking Be Organized?

Networking is a chaotic form of organization. For those not used to chaos theory, this may sound like a put-down. But in fact, chaos can result from, operate in, and coalesce into various forms of order. It is more fluid than processes that can be described with a neat formula, but that is somehow reassuring to me. I have always mistrusted neat packages that claim to include all relevant factors. The young people who have put together the most impressive direct actions against the WTO, IMF, and World Bank's policies can teach us a great deal about how they made space for the spontaneous with careful organizing.

“Spontaneity is a vital tool of resistance, but it occurs only under certain conditions. The most successful movements are those that are able to adapt to situations rapidly and spontaneously, much like the flock of birds avoiding the predator, precisely because of a stunning amount of preparation, interconnection, and flow of communication that is already in place.

“What are the ingredients of successful mass actions? Incredible structures are developed beforehand: we find large buildings and transform them into convergence centers; we organize workshops, trainings, and coordinating meetings; we form affinity groups which meet each other and form clusters; we work out communication channels via mobile phones, pagers and so forth; we set up independent media centers and pirate radio stations, ready to compile information from multiple street reporters and feed it back to the streets; we develop beautiful and enticing printed propaganda; the list is endless. It takes months of planning to set up the networks from which can emerge the intelligence of a magically moving, thinking swarm, a shape-shifting organism that can survive the chaos of the streets or the disruption and repression of the state.”⁴¹

This list is not unfamiliar to anyone who has worked on a large demonstration, but it can also suggest ways that we could build longer-standing support for our movement of movements. What could we do to promote a networking approach to movement-building? What would it look like “on the ground?” What concrete projects would emanate from this understanding of our movements, and how would those projects move the Left forward?

The people who agree that movement building with a networking approach is a priority will have to see what we want to work on individually and together. But there are several things I think might be useful to do:

- **Collect and Disseminate Information on Existing Left Networks**
- **Educate, Agitate, and Organize for the Network Approach**
- **Map Existing Networks**
- **Identify Gaps in Left Networks**
- **Facilitate Connections with the Global Left**

⁴¹ we are everywhere: the irresistible rise of global anticapitalism, edited by Notes from Nowhere, Verso, 2003, “Networks, the ecology of the movements,” pp. 68-69.

- **Dialog on Movement Priorities and Strategies**
- **Increase Flows of Information, Support, and Resources**

Collect and Disseminate Information on Existing Left Networks

The FBI almost certainly knows more about the Left than we know about ourselves. In order for radicals to communicate more effectively, it would be helpful to have a better idea of who is out there doing movement work from a radical perspective.⁴² Networked collaborations are particularly interesting because they are already using this approach. Each of us has our own lists of contacts. Let's put some together and see how useful they may be. This is actually a first step in organizing for the networking approach to gain wider acceptance, because it should give us some leads on who to talk to.

This step is akin to the initial gathering of information needed for a “search engine” like Google or Yahoo. Imagine trying to find your way around the Internet without an index. The individual web pages would still be out there, and many of them would be linked to each other. But you could stumble around for a long time looking for which web page would lead you to the one you wanted rather than getting a list with the most likely “hits” listed first.

Educate, Agitate, and Organize for the Network Approach

Networking is an art and a science. I have barely scratched the surface of what we need to know about this subject to be effective. Movement activists can be encouraged to look at their own networks and ask how those networks can be useful in our struggle to take back political initiative from the Right.

Particular attention is warranted for intersections where activists bring multiple identities to the table. For example, U.S. Labor Against the War is an important organization because it intersects with both the labor and peace movements. Lesbians of color have a long history of providing leadership in three worlds –women, people of color, and queers.⁴³ Intersectional people and organizations can see more deeply into our situation because they have multiple “lenses” that help focus on aspects that might otherwise remain hidden. They also need particular support as they can face extraordinary pressures: too often they are “othered,” not seen as “us,” by each side of the divides they straddle. They may be interrogated on each “side” by people trying to lock their identity down.

Those of us who want to work on this project need to educate each other and ourselves. We need to identify how this approach goes beyond traditional coalition work so that the connections we make last longer than the project where they are made. What can we bring to the networks that already exist that can help them endure in this hostile environment? How can we help activists connect across boundaries and maintain connections that are distant or tenuous?

⁴² Some groups may prefer to be anonymous, but if they are active they almost certainly have some kind of recognizable presence. Also, this is not about totality – if we miss someone and they surface later, so be it!

⁴³ Three of my particular “sheros” are Alice Walker, June Jordan, and Audre Lourde. Gloria Anzaldua is near the top of my list to read.

Then, based on what we believe needs to be done, we will have to go out and evangelize for this concept. Movement people are busy by definition. Activists can also be paranoid, often with good reason, and protective of our time and our connections. It may take some time for this project to gain a toehold on the Left, and even longer for it to mature to the point where we can demonstrate what we are talking about. To the extent that this effort requires conceptual work, we may have to swim upstream against the attitude of anti-intellectualism that is prevalent on the Left.⁴⁴ As we do this work, we need to apply networking concepts to ourselves. This kind of project can be a laboratory to test our ideas and discover our own misconceptions.

Map Existing Networks

As we get more familiar with existing networks, we will get a better idea of the geography of the Left. Beginning with lists of movement connections, we may eventually be able to evolve a conceptual map of how our movements are connected internally and among each other at a particular point in time. This kind of map can help us see what is working and what is not. That information then becomes fodder for evaluation and strategizing.

An example in my neighborhood could start with Global Exchange. Beginning as a project that encouraged global justice by sponsoring trips to various countries, at some point they branched into promoting importation of fair trade products and opened the store where I can buy Palestinian olive oil. They were a natural fit to help organize the movement questioning economic globalization that has held various protests and social forums around the world. Being positioned to facilitate exchanges across national boundaries, they have been active against wars. One of the founders, Medea Benjamin has run for the U.S. Senate as a Green, and now she is organizing a women's direct action group that pokes fun at the paranoia of different security risk levels with Code Pink. Her network on the ground in Iraq helped photojournalist David Bacon when he went there to document U.S. sanctioned repression of labor unions, and his story was picked up and given an award by Project Censored operating out of the journalism department at the California State University at Sonoma. David also got help from U.S. Labor Against the War, and his work has been disseminated through the AFL-CIO. David's stories are broadcast on KPFA, which is part of the Pacifica Radio Network, and Medea is a frequent guest on Pacifica, both locally and through the nationally syndicated show, Democracy Now.⁴⁵

Global Exchange has its detractors –it is not radical enough for some, may not be internally well organized, and sometimes serves to promote Medea's public image. What this organization has been able to accomplish may depend partly on Medea bringing financial resources to her projects. But Global Exchange is at the center of a robust and interesting hub of activity. The point is not to criticize but to see what is working well, and learn what this organization might tell us about networking.

Identify and Fill Strategic Gaps in Left Networks

⁴⁴ "Action Will Be Taken": Left Anti-intellectualism and Its Discontents by Liza Featherstone, Doug Henwood, and Christian Parenti's discuss this tendency in an article in the debut issue of "Radical Society." I found it at <http://www.leftbusinessobserver.com/Action.html>.

⁴⁵ All of this is my own observation, if I got any of it wrong, I hope to correct it in future drafts!

There are a number of logical bases for networking that can help us identify places we might help to build links that don't exist yet:

- **Progressives in the same geographic area** can help the movement grow if they are in touch with each other, and their connections can help extend movement contacts to nearby areas that don't have as much radical presence.
- **People working on similar issues** can build umbrella coalitions that raise awareness of their overall cause more effectively.
- **Personal identities** can be the basis for organizing, but we also carry them with us into work that is not identity-based. Networking helps women, African Americans, and queers to maintain our sanity while working with groups that are not necessarily receptive to our particular concerns.
- **Ideology** will certainly continue to provide a basis for some activists to relate to each other across issues that they are working on. Socialists, anarchists, social democrats, and post-modernists should continue to develop our ideas in practice and offer them to the wider movement.
- **Projects** like preparing for major demonstrations and events will continue to bring leftists into coalitions. Our job may be to see that these contacts result in ongoing connections and future work.

By looking at our movement's geography, we can see where networking could prove helpful. Given our recent experience with elections, I would ask what kinds of links exist among all of the groups that are active around electoral reform? Maybe there is an electoral network like the one I saw forming at Critical Resistance, but if so, I haven't heard about it. Are there things that the Greens and progressive Democratic activists could agree on? Are the proportional representation experts in touch with the campaign finance reform people? How about links among the Greens, New Party, Peace and Freedom Party, and Working People's Party? If such links don't exist or need support, maybe these groups could use help. Finding gaps in Left networks does not mean that they can all be filled, but it could help us prepare the ground for more communication and collaboration.

Facilitate Connections with the Global Left

Most U.S. leftists haven't been able to travel to any of the World Social Forums or visit the Zapatistas, so the breakthroughs that are being made by radicals in other countries are not fully accessible to us. We hear that progressives around the world are mystified by U.S. public opinion's jingoism and difficulty in penetrating the lies of the Right, but most of us don't have the means to let people in other countries know what we are doing to change policy here. For a while, I was forwarding emailed notices from an Oakland based peace network to the friend of a friend in England. I had heard she didn't know that any anti-war activity was happening in the U.S. But if we were more networked as a whole, it might be easier for us to relate to progressives in other countries with two-way communication. We need to find bilingual activists who can help us bridge language gaps to do this with more than the Anglophone world.

Dialog on Movement Priorities and Strategies

The point of the Left networking is not just for us to feel less isolated and more powerful. Ultimately, we need to learn from our practice and forge more consensus on how and where we can grow. George Lakoff and some colleagues have just founded the Rockridge Institute to help progressives frame our messages to undecided or swing voters from a more informed knowledge base. I think that it is urgent to keep as many connections as possible with progressive people who traveled to swing states as possible. They have immediate, direct experience of what it was like to discuss politics with people who think differently than us lefties.

We are living in challenging times. Will we be able to stave off attacks on Social Security? Will global warming prove to be a crisis before dwindling oil resources force capitalism to come to terms with the need for alternative energy sources? Will the stock market crash or will privatization of Social Security infuse it with cash and stave off a depression? Will the crisis in the Middle East erupt into a regional war before progressive movements are able to link up in South America? What attitude should Leftists in the U.S. take toward women's issues in Islamism?

If we had a more developed system of movement networking, we might be able to discuss issues like these more broadly and quickly than we can now. We have just seen enormous energy going into convincing people that electoral work should be a priority. Now we need to dialog again, looking for themes and issues to keep us from despairing at the same time as we rest a bit and recuperate from the defeat we have suffered. MoveOn's "meet-up" process held on November 28, 2004, to discuss post-election strategy is an example of this approach applied to a middle-class progressive constituency. What would it look like to forge this kind of approach for a more working-class, radical base?

**Increase Levels of Flow:
Communication – Coordination – Co-operation - Collaboration**

As networks grow, they will provide us with ways to move through some distinct levels of work together. Helping networks understand how they are working together now and preparing them to work together more closely could open up more flows of information, resources, and support.

In looking at levels of networked energy, we see that groups or individuals start by communicating with each other. From there they can move to coordination, actually taking each other's actions and plans into account. An example would be not scheduling competing events at the same time or choosing different areas for leafleting. The next higher level of interaction is co-operation, where groups plan together and take specific roles in working together. Individuals or groups that collaborate have a still closer relationship, with a greater degree of mutual planning, combined execution of plans, and joint evaluation.

This kind of progression is optional. But knowing that it can happen, and having a vocabulary to describe what level of connection exists should help facilitate the movement becoming better articulated.

A networked Left will help us confront these questions. We know there will be attacks on the Left now that Bush will be in power for four more years. We can expect volatile and

dangerous developments in the next decade. And as we discuss international issues, we need to be attentive to each other's experiences working for change in the U.S.

But our networking will not be able to reach its fullest potential if we don't create a movement culture that holds individuals and groups accountable. This is not about punishing or pointing fingers, it is about creating trust. Individuals and groups screw up. We have to be aware of our standards for ourselves and others, and openly talk about when those standards are not met. To do otherwise would be to run the risk of gossip, sectarianism, and in fighting. These can tear our networks apart, and in so doing, spare our opponents from dirty work in which they are all too willing to engage.

Interacting in Accountable Ways

The third principle I believe is key for making the Left stronger is to begin to develop criteria for accountable relationships. This will only be possible if we can communicate with each other, and it is a necessary task if left networks are to function optimally. We have to find ways to promote ethical behavior and address a series of behaviors that weaken our movements.

Humans are distressingly fallible. It is not a weakness to acknowledge this; it is actually more dangerous to deny it. The traditional, strong father mentality that Lakoff describes invokes punishment as the key to enforcing key moral principles. But it doesn't work! It is amusing to see how often pillars of conservative morality end up discredited for one or another crime or violation of their own codes. Priests who molest children, politicians who take bribes, and police who frame suspects have all become icons of modern life. It is not their fallibility that is comical but their hypocrisy in pretending that they are not subject to the same weaknesses as the rest of us. And authoritarian punishment strategies such as trying juveniles as adults, 3 strikes laws, and the death penalty are manifestly unjust and counter productive.

Those of us who don't subscribe to the authoritarian model for our relationships have to find alternative ways to promote personal and movement standards. Listening, dialog, respect for people who have earned it, consistency, and setting limits are fundamental to non-authoritarian strategies for dealing with conflict.⁴⁶ This may be another place where the Left has rejected necessary work as "feminine" and "personal" rather than seeing how we could benefit from applying new techniques.

A consequence of the Left's polycentric geography is that we don't have a central authority, no place or way to register support for or disagreement with others' actions. Still, we have to find ways to support ethical behavior and express disapproval when someone behaves badly. Networking would not create a central authority, but it would allow better communication around limit-setting and accountability processes.

Some old-fashioned problems will always be with us. Truth-telling can be difficult. It is tempting to exaggerate the size of our demonstrations and stretch reality to make our accomplishments more impressive. But truth must be our most trusted weapon. The Bush administration has taken lying to new lows, and the Left will only be effective if we are known for always "telling it like it is." We have to teach ourselves the principle honored by some indigenous peoples: to tell an untruth is to tear a hole in the fabric of the world.

Non-violence is a principle about which there has been a great deal of disagreement in our movement. Starhawk suggests the old violence/nonviolence dichotomy is outmoded. She develops a very insightful critique of our history in this area, and provides guidelines for a new type of "third-road activism as empowered or empowering direct action." Her nuanced and creative approach draws out ten ethical principles on which this new kind of activism can be based: empowerment; life, body and connectedness; radical imagination and prefigurement;

⁴⁶ Marshall Rosenberg has systematized one method for accomplishing this and has created a movement of practitioners who use and teach his approach, Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Compassion, PuddleDancer Press, 1999. Older strategies commonly taught include "I messages" and assertiveness training.

hope; solidarity; choice and intention; inclusiveness and diversity; direct democracy and horizontal organizing; dialogue, and; freedom and passion.⁴⁷ I believe that Starhawk's work on this matter can serve as a basis for the ground rules of a movement ethics.

But it is also important to come down from the mountain of our ideals, and deal with some nitty-gritty realities. Chances are that someone is using movement money for personal needs right now, rather than keeping it safe and using it for the purpose it was intended. SDS, the Black Panther Party, at least one group chronicled by Max Elbaum, and your humble author have all experienced problems with drugs to a degree that damaged our work and was problematic for other activists. Domestic violence and child abuse, including child sexual molestation are personal problems which have had devastating implications for movements when they were denied or covered up.⁴⁸

Networking won't stop these negative things from happening, but it could allow us to spread the awareness of how to prevent, identify and address this kind of problem.

Other misbehavior is more specific to leftist contexts. For example, I have heard that during the organizing that led up to major peace demonstrations, one group might apply for a permit when they knew that a coalition was planning to demonstrate at the same time and place. There have been stories that groups have posted incorrect signs before rallies, directing people to a site where one group was meeting apart from the main body of the demo.

In a networked Left, we could build more agreement on how to handle such behavior. One approach is to be open about evaluations of our practice so that people who want to know what mistakes were made and what disagreements arose are able to find out. You can be sure that the agents among us are always collecting this type of information, so airing it in a respectful way is not a weakness but a strength. Handled appropriately, this kind of feedback actually helps newer activists learn who is who, and what behavior is acceptable.

Another sanction that networking allows us is to reduce communication with groups or individuals with whom we have had bad experiences in the past. This reaction should be used sparingly, as it weakens networks. Every attempt should be made to understand where another person or group is "coming from" before communication is limited or cut off. Points of view on this kind of disagreement may differ widely. Acknowledging that we find an action unacceptable is the first step toward being able to dialog about it.

How can we stay away from gossip, and still criticize individuals and groups if they behave badly? The Left has a history of either silencing discussion of behavior that hurts our movements or spreading it around too widely. Centralist organizations have "internal discipline" to deal with members who screw up, but in an open, networked Left, the alternative has too often been to walk away or "trash" the other person or group. Trust and collaboration will be nurtured by finding responsible ways to speak out about unacceptable behaviors.

⁴⁷ Webs of Power: Notes from the Global Uprising, New Society, 2002, "Many Roads to Morning: Rethinking Nonviolence," pp. 206-236

⁴⁸ One example that comes to mind are the allegations against Daniel Ortega of the Sandinistas. A dear friend of mine and a long-standing, committed leader left the movement when her organization refused to believe that her female domestic partner, also a leading member, could be physically abusing her.

Networking in Accountable Ways

When we begin to look at the Left as a networked whole, we can see some areas where our practice is not consistent with our principles. Attempts to correct this kind of inconsistency can benefit from input by a wide range of groups, and ideas for solving them will arise from this kind of exchange. Here are a few issues that I think should be addressed in this context and no doubt there are others:

How can the Left include people who don't have access to the Internet and email in our networks? More and more of the "business" of the Left assumes email and access to information through the Internet. The digital divide is a class and socio-economic division that we cannot let go unaddressed, but which is not easily bridged.

What participation and input can we guarantee for people whose schedules don't permit them to spend time at meetings or on email? Here again, we cannot afford for class, income, and discretionary time off become bases of discrimination but we need to find systemic ways to overcome them.

How can we encourage restraint and filtering of communications when some activists seem to live in front of their email and deluge us with opinions? All of us have to become more assertive about letting over-communicators know that they are mucking up our capacity to participate. Groups of individuals working on a common project should feel empowered to limit or even cut off access to their discussions when needed. We have to find better technology for shielding ourselves, while being able to keep access to groups and people we are interested in.

How can we build a multi-lingual and multi-cultural movement at home and become more committed to forming part of a global movement? Immigrants bring us a wealth of resources, but it takes conscious effort to network across linguistic and cultural differences. Mistrust of the U.S. government can spill over to us. We need to attempt to explain our movement abroad, but more, we need to listen to what the global Left is saying to us and what others ask us to do.

How can we address groups who do not want their true names or ideological make-up to be known? Some groups on the Left have had to hide who they were for fear of repression. Others adopt an open stance in public work but see that as a way to recruit young people and folks with less experience into groups with cult-like characteristics. How can we encourage openness and trust if some organizations are functioning on this basis?

Facing Ethical Dilemmas

Networking should allow us to discuss pressing issues of accountability that are truly complex and thorny. Here are examples of issues that could be discussed more widely:

How can we encourage leftists who run for office to make the best use of our energy and money? Electoral organizing is notoriously expensive. If the Left is going to put its resources into elections, we deserve to know that they will not be wasted.

Winning an election poses certain problems. How do we keep our candidates faithful to their campaign promises? If a candidate we supported was never “ours” we face still different dilemmas. Randy Shaw provides some very useful guidelines in his Activist’s Handbook.⁴⁹ We have to spread this discussion around and ask electoral activists to be aware of the questions they need to deal with.

There are also gains to be made even when a campaign is lost. But too often these gains are not captured and incorporated into ongoing organizing. Just the other day I questioned an activist who had served as campaign manager for a local candidate about the candidate’s future plans. What use was she planning to make of the connections the campaign had made now that she had lost? He couldn’t tell me, but said they would talk about it after they held a party to raise the rest of the money they had spent.⁵⁰ I was disappointed. There are different issues when candidates are not leftists. In these cases we have to provide our own strategies for capturing connections and building on the campaign infrastructure once the election is over. This is urgent business around the country right now!

What is the ideal role of demonstrations in movement building? Too often it seems that the Left calls demonstrations from a need for catharsis, to express itself loudly, rather than from a conscious strategy for how to build the movement. Demonstrations are not only intended to influence government policies. Rallies can offer visible evidence to the public of how many people reject a government action or policy; but for this evidence to reach more than the actual participants and bystanders, the demonstration has to be publicized in some venue that the public accesses. Another purpose demonstrations can serve is providing the participants with comfort in knowing that they are not alone and isolated. But this goal is akin to catharsis, it is an end in itself that can both build energy and diffuse it. If a rally has speakers, they can inform and inspire participants, but only if their messages are heard and expressed in terms the audience can take in. Finally, demonstrations can help network, but this goal also has to be carefully prepared.

How can direct actions contribute to or detract from demonstrations? Leftists need to accept that we have committed comrades who will often engage in public direct action around our issues. As I mentioned before, Starhawk presents a wonderful guide to dialog around direct action and nonviolence in Webs of Power.⁵¹ Once again, young activists are asking some important questions related to the tactic of demonstrations and the role of direct action. The Notes from Nowhere collective observes that the RAND book, Networks and Netwars,⁵²

⁴⁹ University of California Press, 1996.

⁵⁰ In all fairness, the vote count for the office was not complete at the time I had this conversation. It is certainly unwise to do anything suggesting concession before the last tally is approved. But many of us have repeatedly seen Left candidates promise to take their campaign apparatus into post-election organizing only to be disappointed yet again. This is a place where we have to begin to insist on iron-clad guarantees or consider withholding our fullest support.

⁵¹ New Society, 2002, “Many Roads to Morning: Rethinking Nonviolence,” pp. 206-236

⁵² Arquilla and Ronfeldt, eds, RAND, 2001.

“...suggests that this movement is ahead of state authorities in its mastery of swarming. But it also suggests that the police learned a lot for their failures, and that activist groups have learned little from our victories. Although mass mobilizations have grown steadily since then, there has been a tendency in the latest mobilizations to repeat ourselves, to attempt to reproduce Seattle, or even worse, to return to familiar forms of struggle, the mass marches instead of decentralized actions, rallies and speeches instead of assemblies and spokescouncils – forms which squander our new-found advantages, and do not reflect the new worlds we want to build. The new is always more daunting than the familiar, but if we don’t want to repeat the failures of the great rebellions of the past, we need to continue to develop ways of working that learn from our victories, which build on the past and yet are always reaching into the unmapped and unknown future.”

There is a huge need for older, more conventional radical “regulars” to hear about this new young radical approach, to connect to it, and to find ways to build integrated strength in combination with it.

How can the Left address other leftists that we believe are speaking or acting in racist, sexist, homophobic, or other biased ways? There are important questions about how we stay true to our principles in internal Left processes. One example is sexist and homophobic material broadcast without a disclaimer on KPFA during “African Mental Liberation Weekend.” Another is the practice of the Southern Poverty Law Center in listing Louis Farakaan’s organization as a hate group along with outright white supremacist groups such as the KKK. How can we address anti-Jewish slogans that come from anti-war groups such as the International Action Center and ANSWER? What about middle class leftists’ garden variety, unconscious white arrogance regarding low-income people of color? Men’s unconscious and women’s internalized sexism? Without retreating into a morass of breast-beating or finger pointing, we need to search for ways to identify where we fall short of our goals of inclusion and non-discrimination, and incorporate our stated principles in all aspects of our work.

These kinds of considerations lead to the final goal I believe we need to address to put the movement on firmer ground: facilitating strategic analysis and collaboration.

Facilitating Strategic Analysis and Collaboration

Ultimately, the Left in the U.S. will be judged by the results we are able to achieve. We will only be able to attract the kind of support and energy we need if people believe that we can make fundamental change. Without laying out a road map for how that change is actually going to happen, we have to be willing to set out a strategy for promoting it. Our task is monumental, and we are the only ones who can take it on.

If a networking approach to movement-building is useful, it must help us focus our resources and work toward significant goals. Not having a centralized, powerful organization at our core does not mean that we should abandon the effort to analyze our practice. What it does mean is that we are free to argue with deeds as well as with words. To the extent that a strategy can win adherents and put activists to work at concrete organizing tasks, it has a chance to demonstrate its effectiveness. On the other hand, long range planning and preparation may take years before they bear fruit. Our opponents have been laying their own infrastructure carefully for at least 30 years. It is time for us to catch up.

We have just seen evidence of how a strategic goal can mobilize energy. The proposition that the most important movement goal of 2003-2004 was to defeat George W. Bush's second presidential campaign won the vast majority of the hearts and minds of the Left. A huge number of leftists and progressives of a variety of persuasions came to identify this task as one to which they would contribute time, energy, and money. Although the attempt failed in its stated goal, it succeeded too. The Left has been developed by this effort, and it provides us with a graphic demonstration of what we can accomplish when we are motivated and aligned. This strategic decision bears scrutiny. What can it teach us about building a coherent Left?

A strategic analysis of the Left's position and what we should do next is an urgent priority. While one of the points of this paper is that we will not all march to the same drummer, we do need to dialog about what we think we can accomplish by organizing. In analyzing our situation, we also need to account for weaknesses in our opponents' position.

An example is the fight that is shaping up around Social Security. George Bush would like to allow younger workers to invest some of the money that they are setting aside for their retirement. I believe that opposition to this plan will be a key part of the post election mobilization we need to sustain. It brings together a number of factors that the Left can utilize to organize:

- The Baby Boom generation is just beginning to reach retirement age. This not only presents Social Security with a demographic bulge that will need to be financed for years to come, it gives us a substantial population to appeal to.
- Bush's plan relies on young people investing in the stock market. That allows us to raise the well-documented crimes committed by Enron and similar corporate thieves again. Young people can be brought into this issue by showing that they are being courted to become the next group of suckers to bet on corporate accountability.
- The stock market is a huge "pyramid" scheme at the moment. Many analysts believe that it is overvalued, and the huge debt that Bush is creating to pay for his military and

security adventures has devalued the U.S. currency. His Social Security plan allows us to talk about some of the most basic features of U.S. capitalism.

- Doing the research to invest money wisely is not easy. It requires education, information, and time. With so many families holding multiple jobs –I heard of a couple with five jobs between them the other day- this scheme can allow us to talk about working people’s lack of discretionary time, the media’s “feel good” approach to business news, and failures of the educational system.
- Many conservatives are concerned about this idea because they rely on social security to retire and they sense that Bush is not operating prudently in the long-term best interest of the U.S. economy. We have allies in Congress that could cross over to vote against this plan if their constituencies are mobilized.

My point is not to fully analyze this issue, but to suggest the kind of approach that we need to use to assess where to put our energies.

Another concern that we have to take seriously is our own security. We have known for a long time that there were spies and informers on the Left. If we are able to seriously challenge Bush, we should expect a new wave of trumped up charges and political arrests in this country. We know that investigations and smear campaigns are often politically motivated. Just now, Don Perata, the new Democratic Senate Speaker Pro Tem in the California legislature is in being charged with improprieties. Mabel Tang, the San Francisco City Assessor Recorder who implemented Mayor Gavin Newsome’s decision to marry same sex couples, has also been the target of investigation recently.

Rebecca Gordon and Jan Adams, two Bay Area anti-war activists who were part of the War Times project were detained at an airport in 2002. They have since led the fight against the government’s “no fly list.” How can we prepare and respond to the kind of repression we can expect in the next period? Networks provide some security compared to centralized organizations, but what could we do now to inoculate ourselves against provocateurs, rumors, and sabotage? How can we try to ensure that when the repression worsens, it helps us recruit rather than scaring people away?

We have to invest time and money in think tanks where strategic approaches and tools can be forged. I have already referred to the Rockridge Institute that George Lakoff and a team of colleagues are building to help us frame left messages more accurately. Jean Hardisty observed in 1999 that the Right has sunk huge amounts of money into conservative think tanks and training programs, while the Left was more likely to use our resources for humanitarian projects designed to shore up the “safety net.”⁵³ One of the debates we need to encourage is about how we can combine issue-based organizing and advocacy with projects that have a service component. Despite the problems with non-profits as a base for our movement which I have already mentioned, service providers see the day-to-day ravages caused by cut backs, unemployment, and greed. But all across the political spectrum of the Left, we need academics to come out of their ivory towers and help us apply the research they have been doing.

⁵³ Mobilizing Resentment: Conservative Resurgence from the John Birch Society to the Promise Keepers. Boston: Beacon Press, 1999.

Building strategic goals into our service work can be a way to bridge the gap between politics and human needs. Over this Thanksgiving holiday, I found that an old friend is a big fan of George Lakoff too. Ruth Beaglehole is organizing a non-profit project around non-violent parenting. She agreed with me about the importance of addressing people's conceptions of the family and parenting styles as a key to building a more just and humane politics. Her goal is to continue to teach parents how to raise children without hitting them, but at the same time to build a movement for children's rights. She compared the need for non-violent education and child rearing to the domestic violence movement in its infancy. "We didn't say that it's OK to hit your partner as long as you don't leave marks!" she exclaimed. "I want nothing short of a reform of our laws about child abuse." Ruth is taking a long range goal, and translating it into concrete organizing. She has won converts and is beginning to connect with others who see this need. I want all of us to keep doing the nuts and bolts work we are doing in the trenches, but to see how each dewdrop of our movement can reflect the universal change that is needed.

We have untapped resources for change in our heritage of movements against discrimination and for inclusion. In writing this paper and researching networks, I have been struck by how important it is to tap the energy and inspiration of women and people of color for our movements. Our opponents clearly see the fundamental role that family plays in popular consciousness, and the racism in the Right's position is only thinly veiled. One area of work that would feed our strategic analysis is retrieving and discussing our histories of struggle on a variety of fronts. There is still much to learn from the civil rights movement, from the Panthers, from Women's Liberation, and from Malcolm X. This kind of story telling could bridge some gaps between my generation's veterans and today's young activists. It could also pave the way for discussions on how to save and extend reproductive rights, build true democracy and insist on equal education for all.

Building this Networking Project

By self-publishing this paper, I am hoping to launch an organizing campaign to build Left networking knowledge and practice. I have included the names of books and people not to say these are the only writers that have something to say but to help others access resources that have been useful to me. There is so much more to read and say that it is hard to let this paper go. But one principle that I hold on to tightly is that "You alone can do it, but you don't have to do it alone." Every time I talk to someone about these ideas, I get a better sense of what I am trying to do. Frequently, the person I am speaking with helps me clarify my ideas, or offers me new resources.

If others are interested in this project, I encourage them to contact me. As we put together a core group of radicals willing to work on this project, I will try to communicate with everyone who has contacted me.

If this is not a project that interests you, it may still be helpful to you. Networking concepts can help inform how you work in your area of focus. Knowing that networking can be a key to greater Left capacity, you may find yourself intentionally building links in new ways. I will try to build information about networking for the Left, and publish it as widely as possible.

If you are interested in this project from that point of view, I will try to put you on a list of people to whom I disseminate future versions of this paper and other material of interest.

“I have tried hard to match my friends in their pessimism about the world (is it just my friends?), but I keep encountering people who, in spite of all the evidence of terrible things happening everywhere, give me hope. Especially young people, in whom the future rests.

Wherever I go, I find such people. And beyond the handful of activists there seem to be hundreds, thousands, more who are open to unorthodox ideas. But they tend not to know of one another's existence, and so, while they persist, they do so with the desperate patience of Sisyphus endlessly pushing that boulder up the mountain.

I try to tell each group that it is not alone, and that the very people who are disheartened by the absence of a national movement are themselves proof of the potential for such a movement.” Howard Zinn, November 4, 2004, Z Net.