

# Revolution in the Time of the Hamsters

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"I don't think we're in Kansas anymore, Toto," Dorothy shared her suspicion with her little dog as they peered out onto an unfamiliar landscape. Still reeling from her own climate crisis, Dorothy could recognize a new strategic reality when she saw it; one which would force her to rethink her capabilities, her goals and the alliances she would need to pursue her interests under radically altered conditions.

We in US left and progressive politics are experiencing a "Dorothy moment." Pressures that have been building for decades along underground political fault lines are combining to produce political tremors that cannot be ignored. Words do feeble justice to the dramatic scope of the changes: the steep decline of US imperial power; an unraveling financial sector and disintegrating social support systems such as housing, health care and nutrition; receding glaciers, rising sea levels, extreme storms and droughts, collapsing fisheries and agricultural systems; re-emergent infectious diseases, increasing hunger and burgeoning migrant flows.

Most of what passes for the US left, however, is content to believe that we are still in Kansas; that it will be sufficient to do what we have always done but more so: "redoubling our efforts" to protest abuses, fighting to expand the "political space" and hoping that more favorable conditions will someday allow us to address fundamental issues. These comments are meant to challenge that complacency. I will argue that the very way that protest and advocacy are structured ensures that our impact will be safely contained and that working twice as hard at flawed strategies will not bring us closer to a humane and sustainable future. I suggest that the tired leftist mantra, "we are weak, we are powerless," reflects a learned helplessness that prevents us from seeing, let alone seizing, a world of opportunity that surrounds us.

Our inability to think in bold strategic terms or to appreciate the abundant resources within our grasp is not an accident. It is the structural legacy of the mass movements that peaked forty years ago and the methods employed to disperse them. Brutal police repression was directed against the militant organizations of the darker communities while millions of federal and corporate dollars were directed into a fast-growing "non-profit" sector. Their emergence represented both a victory for movements that had demanded resources be directed toward the services and organizing efforts they had initiated and the success of the power structure in stripping them of their radical content. The aspirations of civil society would now be channeled through these closely regulated entities whose mandates are to advocate for specific constituencies or seek to limit the damage from particular corporate or government practices. Questioning the sanctity of corporate rule itself is not on the table. Accepting these constraints qualifies an organization to maintain its tax exempt status and compete for corporate and government funds. This provides an outlet for discontent but ensures that even when we win hard-fought victories they do not impact the overall balance of power.

This set-up can be likened to an array of hamster wheels. They do generate energy and often provide vital and necessary support to those most in need, but within limits that they usually cannot see. Struggles for homeless shelters, side agreements to treaties, pollution standards, welfare rights, media access and civilian police review boards, after all, are not struggles for justice. They are struggles to mitigate, limit and regulate *injustice*. Challenges to the structures of oppression (not just individual perpetrators) are quickly deemed “beyond our mission” and certain to alarm funders. Meanwhile, our adversaries work on a larger scale, molding the broader landscape upon which a hundred thousand hamster wheels doggedly spin. The non-profit focus on limited goals is reinforced by the lingering trauma of the Red Scare, which has made leftists exceedingly shy about articulating an alternative moral vision.

This devil’s compact has precedents. The Wagner Act of 1935 (and its 1947 step-child, Taft Hartley) conferred recognition on unions’ right to organize for narrowly defined purposes while declaring broader political and class issues off limits. A year before Wagner, the Indian Reorganization Act conceded a truncated “sovereignty” to Indigenous Nations in exchange for their submission to federal authority. The establishment of the “Commonwealth” of Puerto Rico (1952) fits this pattern.

The Oval Office operates within similar constraints. A President may seek reforms that do not threaten the sanctity of corporate power. Policies that express the current consensus of the corporate elite as a whole are known as “bipartisan” issues and are beyond the reach of a mere President to tinker with. Policy papers from the Rand Corporation or the Council on Foreign relations or Wall Street Journal editorials are generally a better predictor of future Presidential policies than any promises made on the campaign trail. This is why today’s major policy initiatives, be they about health coverage reform, financial regulation, housing, climate change or foreign policy, all have the protection of corporate interests at their center.

The current effort to invite the progressive non-profit sector into the imperial coalition follows the route taken by the labor movement over the last half century. In exchange for a bargaining relationship with domestic employers, the AFL-CIO assisted a US offensive against activist unions worldwide. The resulting suppression of union militancy in the poorer countries facilitated outsourcing of manufacturing to these now-pacified regions, followed by an all-out assault on those pesky US unions. As Tecumseh argued two hundred years ago, individual bargains with the empire don’t tend to end well.

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This structural overview tells only part of the story. Need produces innovation and there is no shortage of viable and exciting solutions to the crises afflicting our essential life support systems. What is lacking is what former UN Development administrator James Gustave Speth calls “a new operating system” which could integrate these initiatives into a new, sustainable social paradigm. That would require a radical shift of power from the corporate/financial elites to democratic structures rooted in civil society. The world can be a sustainable home for all who reside here or a giant ATM for the insatiable few... it cannot be both.

Uniting a multitude of fractured mini-struggles into a powerful movement requires a vision broad enough to embrace them all. This can produce both short-term and long-term benefits. People's movements won more progressive reforms under Richard Nixon than under Bill Clinton because mass movements were in the streets making "unthinkable" demands. The liberal establishment was spurred to make concessions to Martin Luther King Jr., knowing that more militant Black Power forces to his left were gaining influence.

Believing that the President is the "organizer-in chief" for a people's agenda has led labor and progressive leaders to seek influence rather than build power. Bill Clinton demonstrated where such a strategy leads: he paid eloquent lip service to labor law reform (including banning "replacement workers") but reserved his real political capital to pass NAFTA and "end Welfare as we know it." A glance at the current line-up of forces suggests a similar fate for the Employee Free Choice Act. The rabid attacks from the right against even the most tepid reforms – and by extension the Obama White House -- is causing the liberal left to mobilize all its capacity in defense of tepid, corporate-friendly bills.

If the road we are on leads to a precipice, then a shift in our strategic orientation is overdue. If the Obama administration proposes modest green-oriented initiatives and then waters them down to mollify corporate interests, we will still (it can be argued) end up further along than we were to begin with. If we envision ourselves as advancing across an expanse of open field, then we can measure our progress in terms of yardage gained and be satisfied that we are least moving in the right direction. If, instead, a chasm has opened up which we must leap across to survive, then the difference between getting twenty percent versus forty percent of the way across is meaningless. It means we have transitioned from a system of political letter grades to one of "pass/fail." We either make the leap or not.

Organizing is a form of public story-telling as the right wing has devastatingly demonstrated. At its best it transcends specific grievances to point to a compelling vision. Students in 1960 risked their lives to integrate lunch counters because it was part of a larger narrative about dignity and equal rights.

To achieve that kind of resonance our reform struggles must transcend the hamster-wheel model of addressing narrow grievances on behalf of single constituencies. Instead they should serve to illustrate the commonality of our dreams so as to foster grassroots alliances. In the 2006 strategy paper Beyond Marriage, its 17 authors propose a radical framework for challenging conservative "family" politics. Rather than a narrow focus on legalizing same-sex marriage, they articulate a broadly defined, pro-family agenda that encompasses legal protection for a wide range of deliberate domestic relationships (romantic or not): the right of immigrant families to be reunited (and an end to the raids that break them apart); mutual care agreements among elders; support for families with incarcerated members; nutritional support for school children and so forth. The Arizona Repeal Coalition in Arizona takes a similar approach in their campaign to roll back all anti-immigrant legislation, demanding "Freedom to Love, Live and Work Anywhere We Please." What emerges is a strategy that organically links constituencies that can otherwise be played against each other (witness Proposition 8 in California).

A radical, narrative approach to organizing can open new strategic possibilities. Reframing the issue of immigration, for example, might include blockading the Mississippi River with small boats to block the barges hauling subsidized GMO corn to Mexico where it undercuts the subsistence farm economy,

driving farmers off the land. It would illuminate the common interests of immigrant and other workers, farmers (on both sides of the river), and consumers all confronting the same corporate interests. Targeting the logistics of trade would expose a vulnerability in the system and open attractive avenues for youth participation.

The expanding financial crisis offers other promising arenas for organizing around immediate human needs. The emerging movement against home foreclosures in the US includes in its tactical arsenal blocking evictions and moving homeless families into foreclosed houses. This directly challenges the legitimacy of the “bankocracy,” asserts the primacy of need over greed and demonstrates the power of collective direct action. Like the landless movement in Brazil it combines protest with reclaiming vital resources for those who need them. Most significantly it embodies a transfer of sovereignty from the suites to the streets.

The tired dichotomy between struggling to improve people’s real-life conditions vs. fighting for fundamental change will not serve us now. If the advancing ecological and social crises increase the urgency of bringing about systemic change, they do the same for essential reforms. For progressive administration insiders such as Hilda Solis or Van Jones to make effective use of their window of opportunity, they will need a stronger wind at their backs than that which blows from the oval office. That wind will not come from corporate power centers but must emerge from the streets in the form of demands for more far-reaching changes than are currently “thinkable.”

If we raise our sights from our advocacy struggles, to take in the entirety of the dominant system, it becomes possible to notice its weak points. Of particular significance is the dual strategy of population management: the exponential expansion of a color-coded penal system to bring the African-American population substantially under the control of the criminal justice system (today’s version of the “Black Laws”); and the restructuring of immigration policy to replace the vast, undocumented workforce with a documented but highly monitored labor pool with limited legal rights, subject to inescapable employer control. In other words a new domestic order is under construction that straps the two populations who for historical and demographic reasons are best positioned to mount a major political challenge, into a straightjacket of legal vulnerability. This should suggest that targeting these repressive systems – and reducing that vulnerability – is a key to unlocking the political power of these constituencies. For other indicators of weak points in the system, look to what paths have been closed to us through legal or bureaucratic means: unions meddling in broad class issues, civil organizations addressing the causes of oppression and direct action which interrupts the functioning of commerce and empire. What clearer invitations do we need?

This larger perspective can also reveal strategic resources that are invisible from the hamster-wheel world of single-issue advocacy and contract management. The one growing sector in the collapsing newspaper industry, for example, consists of publications serving communities of color. These outlets are more progressive than the corporate press and enjoy the confidence of their readers. With Black newspaper circulation at fifteen million, Latino dailies at sixteen million and Chinese language papers reaching one million (to give only a partial picture), they constitute an established network of relatively independent media rooted in thousands of communities. These under-resourced outlets are often receptive to alternative news and analysis but rely on the wire services because they are easy to access. Offering a steady harvest of movement material to these papers along with neighborhood and local labor council press, can help shape the national discourse in way that is hard to do if we wait for New York Times to transmit our story. Such a strategy might have kept the battered Gulf Coast from slipping off the national radar even as it became the central battle ground for corporate land grabs and ethnic

replacement. We may not have the media sound system of the corporate class but shouting down a canyon can make hella noise!

There is more and in many ways more sophisticated organizing taking place today than at the peak of the mass movements, but without a unifying vision it does not constitute a movement. It is as though we had suffered a traumatic brain injury that severed our strategic vision centers from our functional capacity. This issue –the connections between our vision, our voice and our on-the-street capacity – defines the difference between generating energy and accumulating power.

No one knows what will trigger the next wave of mass struggles, what frame of reference will unify them into a movement or what organizational forms will emerge to embody their aspirations. Movement experience suggests that there are still things we can do to improve their chances for success. The most urgent of these tasks is to “decolonize our minds.”

Is it sensible to speak of revolution in the time of the hamsters? Some experienced movement heads are counseling the opposite. They argue that after decades of bombardment by the right wing sound machine it would isolate us to present any ideas too radical for our time. We would be vulnerable to reactionary attack and ridicule. That is true of course, but the right will attack as fiercely no matter what we offer and nothing excites them more than the scent of timidity. When conservative activists regrouped following the electoral defeat of Barry Goldwater in 1964, they wisely began their march to power by establishing a clear right wing pole around which to organize. They did not water down their vision because the left was dominating the public space. An unfavorable political culture is a thing to change, not accommodate to. The left intellectual strata have largely fallen into a paradigm of learned helplessness. When liberals are in power we are compelled to defend them lest the Republicans return. When the right is in power we must replace them at all costs, which means backing the Democrats. Logically that means there will never be circumstances that would justify building a movement that speaks with its own voice. The absence of such a voice makes us even weaker at each new juncture and that fact becomes an argument for further timidity. With no countervailing pole to the left of them the Democrats continue to move right in the Republican wake.

A strategy of timidity today will only reproduce the pathetic spectacle of the health care “debate”: orchestrated, right-wing mobs launching attacks against a tepid, corporate-friendly “reform” that sets no one on fire (despite mass public support, single payer is declared “off the table” by the ruling Democrats). If things have deteriorated to the point that the selections on the political menu range from neo-liberal to neo-fascist it is past time to proclaim another option rather than select among those offered. After decades of rightist propaganda people are hungry for someone, anyone, to unapologetically declare for cooperation, generosity and solidarity. That’s what they thought they had found in Obama. Millions of people stepped up to support what they thought was a radical turn toward justice, peace and compassion! Does that seem noteworthy?

Leaders do not create movements. Movements create leaders. When there is no movement, there are no movement leaders. In such a time the job of activists is to prepare the soil for both. Steps that can be taken include probing for volatile pressure points around popular grievances (remember the Montgomery bus boycott); instigating radical/narrative strategies in popular struggles (as in the examples above); strengthening our fragile web of movement institutions (the right figured this out a long time ago); learning from sister struggles in other places and times; encouraging the practice of concrete, rather than symbolic, solidarity; and continually exposing the oppressive structures underlying our people’s suffering.

Most important of all, we need to talk. This cannot be overstated. In other times that called for movement renewal we have turned to study circles, consciousness raising groups, freedom schools, popular education encounters, and other means to tap the creative reserves of the grassroots. Resetting the strategic compass for a movement is not something we can leave to a self-selected few. The changing correlation of political, economic and natural forces calls for a wide-ranging, complex, strategic discussion at every level of our movement and in our communities. This process, which is beginning to crystallize, should become an explicit priority for radical activists of all political tendencies. It is a process that can merge into organizing if discussions are initiated around people's concrete experiences, such as food prices, gang violence, housing and homelessness, jobs and workplace power, war and the economic draft, and so forth. When community people share their stories of police brutality it quickly becomes apparent that the problem is bigger than "a few bad apples." Through such collective, participatory engagement we can begin to shape the activist theory and organizing language we will need to break away from the hamster wheels of Kansas and reclaim the struggle for that other world we like to say is possible.