

Power and Social Change

“Power is the ability to achieve a purpose. Whether or not it is good or bad depends upon the purpose.”

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Introduction

Power is an integral part of our work as organizers and activists. Whether we are confronting corporate executives or elected officials, school boards or landlords, we are dealing with issues of power — who has it, what kind and how they use it — all the time. And yet it is a difficult concept to describe. Power has multiple sources. It plays a role in shaping most social relationships and in determining who gets to decide important social, economic and environmental questions. Often we can see power at work in very direct and obvious ways. At the same time, power operates in less obvious and even hidden ways, through cultural norms, ideas and practices that perpetuate existing power relations and that discourage questions about, or challenges to, those power relations.

Defining Power

The word *power* is derived from the Latin word *potere*, which means “to be able.” This root meaning focuses on power as a general capacity—we all have the potential to shape our lives and the world around us. However, based on most peoples’ experiences with economic and political institutions, power has more to do with “control, influence or authority over others.” (as defined in Webster’s Dictionary). A common if unspoken assumption about power in our society is that unequal power relations are part of the natural order of things, and are, therefore, inevitable and unchangeable. We argue here that power relations are not based in nature, but are socially constructed and therefore, changeable.

Power-over and power-with. Traditionally, power is thought of in terms of *power-over*. An employer has power over employees because she can fire them. The employer has even more control if jobs are scarce and workers are forced to compete for them. In housing, landlords, lenders and realtors have power because they control who gets housing. Some collective approaches to shifting power in relation to jobs and housing include organizing workers into unions, organizing tenants and creating housing co-ops. These are examples of people coming together to shift control over resources by exercising *power-with* instead of power over. *Power-with* emphasizes inter-dependence and collective action among community members, constituencies and workers as a way of shifting and expanding power for the good of the whole, rather than the benefit of the few.

Power and organizing. Creating more just and equitable power relations, based on power-with not power-over, requires building and exercising collective power among diverse groups. Community and labor groups organizing for economic and environmental justice are trying to alter power relations by building power for workers and communities, identity-based groups and others who are often shut out of the arenas where the decisions are made that affect their lives. When organizing and campaigns lead to victories for our communities and constituencies, we experience a sense of our collective power, which opens up new possibilities. Without the means for collective action, most people feel powerless to change the conditions of their lives.

The Three Faces of Power

Our analysis of power is based on a conceptual framework called the *3 faces of power* that we have adapted for organizers. The 3 faces of power are: 1) direct political involvement; 2) organizational infrastructure; and 3) ideology and worldview. We use this framework for critical analysis and evaluation of groups' activities and areas of work: issue campaigns, relationships among coalition partners, and re-framing issues in a larger worldview context. For some groups, building progressive power might require shifting time and resources from the 1st face into work more connected to the 2nd and 3rd faces of power.

The 1st face of power: direct political involvement in decision-making

People often think of power in society as shaping the results of political decision-making: policies, laws, rulings and decisions made by public officials, legislators, and members of the executive and judicial branches of government. Electing public officials is part of the 1st face of power. The political parties, PACs, lobbyists, and major contributors are dealing with this arena much of the time. Progressive groups are attempting to exercise power in the 1st face when they lobby for bills or fight against bad laws, register voters, hold accountability sessions with public officials, and are involved in activities connected with day-to-day politics.

When asked why he robbed banks, Willie Sutton replied "Because that's where the money is!" Likewise, social change organizations spend a great deal of time responding to and attempting to influence decisions made in these 1st face arenas because, well, that appears to be where the power is. Gaining access to the arenas where decisions are made is very important. However, it can be all consuming. It can keep us focused on the short-term, on this election and this legislative session. It can divide and fragment us into disparate issue groups, each reacting to the immediate challenges in its issue area. Even multi-issue groups fragment their work, as it is often an effective way to organize in the short run.

Power dynamics in the visible decision-making arenas often are described as being like a game. There are players and there are rules. Anyone who has spent much time trying to influence political decision-makers probably knows that there are rules of the game, and that those rules are stacked against us. Too often, by the time we gain access to these arenas, the agenda and the terms of debate have already been set. It feels like we are fighting the same fights, over and over again. Any notion of fairness and democratic access to decision-makers is increasingly eroded by the ability of corporations and the wealthy to spend unlimited amounts of money on elections, legislation, regulations, etc.

The 2nd Face of Power: using organization to shape the political agendas

The power to shape what gets on the political agenda, or what is kept off, is another, less visible face of power. Behind-the-scenes forces are at work to determine who gets a seat at the decision-making tables and whose issues get addressed. Keeping things off of the agenda is one way that the powerful can avoid serious challenges to their power.

Power in civil society. Just how do these behind-the-scenes forces exercise their power to shape and constrain the political agenda? They usually do it through organized networks. The arenas through which similar interests come together and develop strategies for shaping and constraining agendas exist in civil society—outside of, though very much linked to, government and politics. Corporations, trade unions, think tanks, universities, media, religious groups and other organizations try to influence what is on the political agenda.

Organizations create formal and informal networks to wield power in the 1st and 2nd faces. Coalitions, trade associations, overlapping boards, and country clubs memberships are ways of building ties between organizations to pursue common goals. We use the term *political infrastructure* to indicate the most

developed and coherent networks of organizations, with implicit or explicit goals that go beyond the immediate interests of the member organizations.

Political infrastructure. The American Heritage Dictionary defines *infrastructure* as the underlying foundation for a system. It is telling that the example they use is the conservative infrastructure in this country. The corporate-conservative infrastructure consists of a loosely coordinated and overlapping network of organizations operating at national, state and local levels. Some of the more prominent organizations include the US Chamber of Commerce, the National Association of Manufacturers, the Christian Coalition and conservative denominations; the anti-abortion groups, the NRA; think-tanks such as the Heritage Foundation, and much of the Republican Party. This corporate-conservative infrastructure has exercised power to shift the political agenda to the right for decades. They nurture new issues and develop them to the point where they can be brought into the political arena. They try to keep other issues off the agenda, such as universal health care or labor law reform.

While there are thousands of liberal and progressive organizations and coalitions and networks, it is harder to identify something we could call a progressive infrastructure. The potential is there: trade unions, liberal and progressive denominations and religious groups, statewide groups that work local organizing groups, national issue organizations, policy shops and think tanks. and more. But this network is much less cohesive, less coordinated, and less powerful than the corporate-conservative infrastructure. That difference helps explain why the political agenda has shifted to the right, and it helps explain what happens during elections.

An aspect of strengthening progressive power, therefore, is moving from disconnected and fragmented social change work toward building a more deliberate, unified and coordinated movement infrastructure. A progressive infrastructure would be more than a collection of organizations; it would be an integrated, coordinated and strategically oriented network of different kinds of social change groups, representing diverse constituencies and issues that can impact state, regional and national politics.

To strengthen progressive infrastructure, organizations in statewide, regional and national networks could begin to discuss long-term strategic goals, and share their work on developing progressive worldview and progressive agendas. Agreeing on a progressive agenda does not mean that any one organization is engaged in immediate struggles around all the elements of the agenda, or even that it is formally adopted.

One other critical role for a progressive infrastructure is bringing in new groupings of people, based on a progressive agenda that offers people who are currently left out of the political arena significant reasons to participate. This is one important way to bring people together across identities: race, class, gender, sexual orientation, immigrant status, and more.

The 3rd Face: using worldview to shape meaning

Dominant power relations are maintained through the power to shape people's understanding of the world in ways that prevent them from asking questions or seeing any possibilities for change. The power to shape how people understand the world and their own self-interests is the 3rd face of power. This kind of power operates in the arena of worldview, culture, myths, stereotypes and values. It is exercised in part through control of the institutions that shape and create meaning: religious institutions, the media, television, mass consumer culture and popular ideas.

Many different belief systems in our society compete for attention. For example, belief in individualism and the free-market system are very pervasive the United States. This does not mean that everyone blindly accepts everything that is said about individualism and the market, but these ideas play a role in shaping how people behave toward and understand many political and economic issues. Contrasting beliefs about inter-dependence, community and cooperation compete for peoples' attention, as well.

Despite these competing beliefs, there is a set of beliefs and conceptions about the world that we can identify as the *dominant worldview*. The dominant worldview provides the context for the problems and issues that we are struggling with. When we confront powerful institutions and challenge decision-makers, we also are confronting the ideas and assumptions in society that support the status quo.

Conservatives have been very successful at building power on the terrain of worldview. They draw upon themes that shift the dominant worldview to the right. The core themes they use in their issue frames and political narratives are: rugged individualism, competition and market fundamentalism, and a minimalist role for government. On these core themes they hang a number of others to construct a corporate-conservative discourse about race, gender and family, sexual orientation, notions about equality and class, patriotism and militarism.

To build power at all levels, we need to challenge the dominant worldview and frame our issues to reflect our broader goals for social change. Part of our challenge is to help our members reclaim and redefine problems and issues so that we can pose alternatives to what is on the political agenda.

Powerlessness. If we look only at the way power operates along the 1st and 2nd faces, we will focus on groups that are already in the game, and on their attempts to influence the decision-makers. However, if we look at the 3rd face of power—the power to keep people from seeing themselves as agents of change, or to even believe that change is possible—then non-action and non-participation become much more important problems. Non-participation breeds a greater sense of powerlessness, making participation by oppressed groups even less likely.

Status quo power relations are reinforced by the fact that most of us experience powerlessness as part of everyday life. For most working people and historically oppressed groups, the experience of being shut out of decision-making processes gets internalized and understood as the ‘natural state’ of things. Consider the following reflections on powerlessness from Adrienne Rich:

“When those who have the power to name and to socially construct reality choose not to see you or hear you...when someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked in the mirror and saw nothing. It takes some strength of soul—and not just individual strength but collective understanding—to resist this void, this non-being, into which you are thrust, and to stand up, demanding to be seen and heard.”

Overcoming powerlessness. An individual’s sense of powerlessness is reinforced by the experience of social isolation. Too often, people who are disaffected from political and economic decision-making have no spaces in which to come together, think and discuss and struggle together to articulate their grievances into a set of demands. As Paolo Freire argues, the powerless are prevented from either self-determined action or reflection upon their actions. Denied the democratic experiences from which political consciousness can develop, the powerless instead develop a “culture of silence.”

In spite of the historical imbalance of power in this country and corporate power over decision-making, agenda setting and meaning, we have a rich history of resistance. Social change groups organizing in diverse communities and workplaces can give people a place to act together, reflect on their actions, engage in collective analysis, and challenge the 2nd and 3rd faces of power with new ideas and experiences. When they are combined, critical thinking and political action can break through the culture of silence.