

# The Left's "Theoretical" Problem

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I started organizing at 19-years old, and have been organizing for about 16 years. In my early years, I was trained by the Center for Third World Organizing (CTWO) through Southwest Youth Collaborative, in Chicago. The CTWO came up in response to the Alinsky model of organizing—which was anti-ideology and dealt with class in only the most liberal sense. The Center for Third World Organizing felt doing organizing around racism, sexism, and imperialism was essential to building working class power—particularly among working class people of color. An example of CTWO's work on the media and discourse end is the website *Colorlines*. I then organized with the Puerto Rican Cultural Center and was member of Batey Urbano, a Puerto Rican-led activist space in Humboldt Park working to fight gentrification. If you have been by Humboldt you can see that we lost, and they won. And by "them," I mean white Hipster America. From there, I became a youth organizer for a few years in Uptown, doing work to stop school closings. Lost that fight too—most the schools got closed. Then I went SEIU, and finally started winning bargaining campaigns with support staff at Chicago Public Schools, the Park District, and at University of Illinois, Chicago. Lastly, I was an organizer with Black Youth Project 100, a national Black-led, Black-only organization that works within an abolitionist Black queer feminist politics.

I share all of this in order to show that I have lost a lot of campaigns and won some, too; I have done some good organizing and some bad organizing, as well. I once had a trainer tell me "just because you have organized for a long time, doesn't mean you are good at organizing." That always stuck with me. I share all of this because those experiences inform my beliefs and biases (sometimes they are one and the same) about how we can transform society within our lifetime.

I believe that building power for transformative social change, by which I mean socialist reform or revolution, comes from base-building organizing. I want to organize the majorities of people in our country, not just the current self-identified "left" that one finds in professional progressive left organizations, leftist activist groups and coalitions, and on leftist media websites, magazines, and social media. I want to create, build, and learn strategies and utilize tactics that engage with people who aren't using the social media networks that we are a part of, who don't listen to the leftist podcasts we listen to, and who don't interact with the traditional progressive and leftist outlets that we use when we are speaking to our vision of a socialist world.

I was taught that as an organizer I should have a general vision and political program for how society can be organized in a more just and democratic way. That

vision and program is informed by various ideologies and analyses that are rooted in the political organizing traditions of socialism, feminism, abolition and decolonization. I was also taught that ideologies, analysis, theories, and political traditions mean nothing if you are not committed to learning, building and sustaining the craft of deep organizing, whether it is structure-based or movement-based (which includes building workers strikes and mass direct actions that consistently disrupt elite power at a large scale, rather than just protest and oppositional electoral politics). Organizing means that our focus is on the majorities of people who are not yet with us in fighting for either a progressive, leftist, radical, or revolutionary political platform. It means engaging them face-to-face, in conversation, and building workplace power, community power, and electoral power through democratically ran organizations, formations, and mass campaigns that seek to strategically confront the forces of capital and the state.

I am about winning an abolitionist, decolonial, socialist future *now*, and I do believe that the various traditions of organizing I was taught can meaningfully contribute to such a worthwhile political project.

### **The Problem the Left Thinks It Has**

The left thinks that it lacks the correct meta-theory, ideological disposition, and frame of analysis. You see this most clearly demonstrated in the constant debates on *class-centric politics vs. identity politics*, which is just another iteration of the *anti-capitalism vs. anti-oppression politics* debate. This debate posits that if we arrive at the correct sets of questions, then the Left can be great again. This debate rests on the assumption that the correct strategy and tactics—and our capacity to enact said strategy and tactics—primarily flows from having the proper ideology and analysis. There is a guiding assumption that ideology, analysis, and theory are the main causal mechanisms for building a strong left in this country. In my opinion, both sides are complicit in these assumptions, and both sides are wrong.

The anti-identity politics, anti-intersectionality position is just as hyperbolic as saying leftist politics are primarily a white political project, or that because Eugene Debs may or may not have said something racist, we shouldn't work to build a socialist project. This debate allows for the Black anti-identity politics punditry of the likes of Adolph Reed, Cedric Johnson, Barbara Fields, Karen Fields, and R.L. Stephens, that speaks largely to a white Marxist audience and readership to validate their disagreements with identity politics as more than just disagreements, but as part of a deeper neoliberal pro-capitalist politics and the cause of the left's inability to build power. On the other end of the spectrum, it allows for a punditry that claims only theorizations from those who are most marginalized can be the basis of an effective politics, strategy, and tactics. It also paints any insistence of the primacy of class or

socialist politics as a thing that white people do, or as a marker of racism or sexism, and posits that the downfall of leftist politics in this country is a product of the white left.

As I stated earlier, the issue with this debate is that it portrays itself as building better theories and approaches of social change. I don't think it's actually doing that. In fact, I think that it—at best—produces good meta-theory and reveals some of the pitfalls of popular pet-ideologies. At worst, it becomes about people increasing their visibility and caché within the leftist and social justice culture industry, which produces its own version of a professional punditry class who do the work of brokerage politics—posturing either as the anti-identity politics spokesperson or on the anti-class politics spokesperson. I think this discourse is great at getting likes, retweets, and filling up comment sections. I think it does little to inform the debates around the connection between ideology, theories of change, and organizational orientations to mass struggle. It does little to help us better understand the leftist organizing traditions of non-professional bottom-up organizing that uses mass civil disobedience, workers strikes, and electoral politics that engage the masses of people, and scales from local to national to international victories.

The assertions against identity politics that come from these debates are coupled with the pronouncement that class politics—that is, anti-capitalist downward distributional politics—are less likely to be co-opted for neoliberal, capitalist, or imperialist ends. But I think the history of the AFL-CIO; the current support from significant parts of labor for the Dakota Access Pipeline; the second international; the creation of a privatized pension and healthcare system for union workers in this country; in conjunction with the decision by labor leadership to stop publically agitating for public pensions and healthcare, all speak to the ability for leftist class politics in the United States to be *co-opted* toward capitalist ends. One could make an easy argument that labor union leadership functions as an elite broker of working class power and interests in service to capitalist power. I could use all of these examples and say “*haha, see leftist class politics ain't shit, look how the state co-opts them, look how the professional managerial class of labor leaders capitulate to capital,*” and dismiss leftist class politics. However, I would say that is short-sighted and just wrong—just as short-sighted and wrong as those who dismiss “intersectionality” because Hillary now uses the term. My point being, all forms of what can be called leftist ideologies and analyses along the anti-capitalist/anti-oppression/class politics/identity politics/intersectionality spectrum have their strengths and their weakness. For me, it's a matter of how, when, and to what degree do they inform one's vision for changing the world and one's plan to get there. Still, such ideologies, analyses, and theories are pointless without organizational, institutional, and personal commitment to developing and practicing deep organizing.

Much like “All my skin folk ain't my kinfolk,” I would just as easily argue “not all working-class folk are my kinfolk.” And this is why we say the Marxist axiom that there is difference between class *in itself* and a class *for itself*. One's relationship to the

means of production doesn't mean one is automatically in the position to have a better set of politics, analysis, ideology. They are just in a better strategic position to build power against capitalism. But that building of power, and the solidarity that comes with it, is only achieved through good organizing in conjunction with ideology.

To organize people in service of a leftist project and to act in such a manner, does not primarily come from getting people to adopt a uniform set of "proper" analytical frameworks concerning the relationship between race, gender, and class. Some people have this, and some people don't. I have had non-Black workers who deeply believed Black men needed to pull up their pants and also deserve some form of welfare/basic income and a job guarantee. I have had Black workers who believed Black people need their own businesses and country, but also were willing to go on strike and believed that building a durable solidarity with white coworkers at UIC was needed for that. My point being, people can hold contradictory ideological and analytical frameworks for explaining the world and how they relate to the world and how they act to change it. People can believe racism is the motor of capitalism or that capitalism is the motor of racism. People can believe racism is rooted in the political economy, or that systemic racism can function outside of the political economy. Neither statement gives you much practical insight on learning how to build the people power necessary to end racism or capitalism. Understanding and learning the craft of mass direct action, community organizing, and labor organizing at the scale that covers the local to global is what does.

### **The Problem the Left Really Has**

My contention is that today's Left doesn't have an analysis, ideology, or theory deficit. Rather, it has a skills, ability, and capacity deficit when it comes to the basics of militant membership-based organizing, and building organizations, formations, campaigns and movements that can win social majorities.

In many ways, the framing of these debates comes from an ideology and theory-centric reading of leftist, radical, revolutionary and progressive politics, instead of a reading that also centers the strategy-, tactics-, skills-, organization-, and formation-building aspects of movement work and an understanding of how people develop the capacity to do this work. Such a reading shows that the main causal mechanisms for disruptive political upsurge in the United States during the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the ability to develop the capacity of organizing skills within leftist spaces, and act on such skills strategically and tactically. This, I believe, explains the strike upsurges in the 1930's and 40's and militant sustained civil disobedience, armed insurgency, rioting, strikes and bombings in the 60's and early 70's.

What's sad is that we have recently had plethora of books that speak to this concern and try to correct it. *Direct Action* by LA Kaufmann; *No Shortcuts* by Jane Mclevey; *This is Uprising* by Paul and Mark Engler; *Emergent Strategy* by Adrienne

Marie Brown; *Hegemony How To* by Jonathon Smucker; *Another Politics* by Chris Dixon; and *Rules for Revolutionaries* by Becky Bond and Zack Exley. There is an article by Kate Aronoff that seeks to contextualize all these different books and account for their strengths and weakness. Book reviews and podcasts about these books have also come here and there. Unfortunately, progressive/leftist presses and everyday debates on the left, do not prioritize this kind of discussion, let alone reading, it seems. I think investing more time in study groups, reading, writing, tweeting, Facebooking and learning about historical organizing methods and approaches, and debating about which ones are best for our present-day political circumstances, is far more productive than engaging in circular debates surrounding identity politics vs class politics, or whether systems of oppression (i.e. colonialism, anti-Blackness, heteropatriarchy) are rooted in the political economy or libidinal economy. These analyses are important for understanding key dynamics on the structural sources of domination, but I do not believe they illuminate a meaningful path to building the power we need to make a beginning at meaningful reforms, let alone total liberation and revolution as defined by abolition, decolonization, socialism, anarchism or communism.