

## PUBLIC POWERS FOR THE COMMONWEAL: A Challenge to Faith-Based Organizing

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*If we are going to give power to the philosophers, the Prince, the elected, or to the party central committee, we have to explain why. In the case of restoring power to the people, no such argument is required. An explanation may be required of why such a situation will be safe, efficient, lasting, or a source of wise decisions, but not why it is legitimate. Radical democracy is legitimacy itself.*

—C. Douglas Lummis<sup>1</sup>

*Commonweal*—our very soul as a nation springs from this word. By the 17<sup>th</sup> century it defined the political system in which the supreme power of government is vested in and legitimized by our consent.<sup>2</sup> It described our common wellbeing, our general good, our welfare and prosperity as a community.<sup>3</sup>

But what does it mean to us now? How many of us believe that the supreme power of the government of the United States operates by our consent, or that its power and authority lie in our hands? As Sheldon Wolin writes: “. . . [It is in] the interest of corporate power, not simply that ordinary citizens should perceive how money buys politicians and legislation, but that they should perceive how *much* money it takes. That knowledge provides an invaluable lesson in powerlessness.”<sup>4</sup> Or as David Simon (creator of “The Wire” TV series) puts it: “America is not working for people without power. And that’s the way people with power have designed it to work.”<sup>5</sup>

The lesson has not been lost on us. The sea change did not escape our notice. We have watched its waters rise at our feet and eat away the ground on which we stand. We have seen the rising tide float the boats of others but not our own.<sup>6</sup> The power that was ours, our economic and political wherewithal, it washed away. In its absence we live uneasily as strangers in a strange land.

For the money-corruption of government has alienated us from the rights, roles, and resources required to exercise public powers for the commonweal—that is, the powers reserved to governments—an alienation that is greater than at any time in living memory. The short-lived Occupy Wall Street mobilization of 2011-12 is its latest memorial.<sup>7</sup>

And the connection of this alienation to the evils of poverty, oppression, and injustice is unmistakable. The upward skewing of institutional power into the hands of a few drives a host of crises for the majority, including: despoliation of the environment, unchecked mass surveillance, criminalization of dissent, continual war-profiteering, systemic educational failures, racism and race-related violence, criminal justice system injustice, organized crime, epidemic metabolic-syndrome diseases,<sup>8</sup> inaccessibility of health care, decline of the middle-class, loss of living-wage work, chronic poverty, and more.

What’s worse is that ordinary people now share drastic limits on their opportunities for sustained action as citizens to address such problems. Precisely at the time when we should have a role *in* government to act in our public capacity, “public space” has all but disappeared. And so we lack the opportunity for contributing to our own public good. Not surprisingly, the word “commonweal” has disappeared from our American vernacular,

and with it the shared vision for our happiness, health, and safety. The soul of America is sick.

What's to be done? Historically, it has been the forces of grassroots organizing that have responded to this kind of loss. But they, unfortunately, have been responding only to the *effects* of the inequality of power. They have not dealt directly with the *structure* of that inequality, with the fact that it is institutional in nature. *They have not brought about a vesting of directly democratic, countervailing institutional power in the citizenry at large.*

### **Why institutional power?**

If we want to transform the country's structural inequality of power at its root, then we will need to recognize and act on four inviolable principles of successful social movements: Build or rely on existing community. Build organization. Build mobilization. And build (or rebuild) institutions. Unfortunately and tellingly, that last and pivotal principle has fallen through the cracks of grassroots organizing's strategic vision.

Moreover, we will need to distinguish between (1) building power—that is, organizing and mobilizing people in sufficient numbers to mount campaigns that leverage targets on issues (which is what grassroots organizing does); and (2) contending for state power—that is, using the power built through organization and mobilization to acquire control of those powers reserved to governments, which include the powers to legislate, to tax, to spend public monies, to police, to take by eminent domain, and to market tax-free bonds. These latter are the powers exercised by the people “in power.”

This is an idea that leaps beyond organizations that win concessions; it envisions vitalizing and shaping historic movement, institutionalizing the full citizenry as permanent partner in the country's political-economic decision-making.

This is an idea that offers hope for balancing the current inequality of power.

But if that's the case, why haven't we availed ourselves of these powers? Perhaps we tell ourselves that they are not accessible to us, or conversely, that we are not entitled to them. As historian Lawrence Goodwyn (d. 2013) pointed out several decades ago, based on his classic study of Populism, even reformers accept the idea that their reforms will not significantly transform the structure of power-inequality.<sup>9</sup> Or perhaps we are ignorant of the need for, and the method of, institutionalizing direct citizen action.

More likely, we ignore the potential of public powers because they are maligned, a consequence of their being disconnected from their justification of serving the commonweal. They have been commandeered by the members of a privileged class, those whom Samuel Adams described in his

own time as “. . . raising themselves on the ruin of this Country.”<sup>10</sup> Surely none of us doubt the capacity of that class or of powerful corporations to corrupt national, state, and big-city governments. According to Thomas Picketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2013), this is what happens historically in capitalist systems—they trend toward inequality.<sup>11</sup>

Sheldon Wolin, too, offers a penetrating conceptualization of partisan-dominated representative government in the service of major corporations and the wealthiest individuals. He describes the emergence of corporate totalitarianism from a seemingly strong democracy, a scenario in which democracy is completely “managed,” without appearing to be suppressed. In depicting what he calls “inverted totalitarianism,” he notes, that “. . . [it] succeeds by encouraging political disengagement rather than mass mobilization, that [it] relies more on ‘private’ media to disseminate propaganda reinforcing the official version of events.”<sup>12</sup>

All-encompassing repossession of public powers by the mass-citizenry is the antidote to this disengagement, and it is the sine qua non of our progressive future.<sup>13</sup> In our estimation, no other approach has the potential for building countervailing institutional power to disempower corrupt partisan forces and promote the commonweal.

But perhaps the most convincing evidence of the need to possess public powers is to be found in the failure of grassroots organizing itself to consolidate the power gained in thousands of successful campaigns over a half-century. The model of community organizing that has been in vogue for several decades requires in effect that we rebuild community and organization and mobilization-capacity over and over again. It requires what we call “slash and burn.” In order to keep expanding the total number of member units in an organizing project, and because projects rarely have sufficient funding to continuously staff campaigns and actions for all of their individual units, they must necessarily “slash” staff support to some units. Without staff support, those individual units “burn out,” requiring repeated redevelopment.

Moreover, in the absence of institutional power, grassroots organizing has not been able to reliably raise the income needed for “builds” (such as membership recruitment, leadership development, formal training, program evaluation, etc.) to support the campaigns and actions that produce the “wins.” It has failed to continuously expand the funding platform.

As others have noted,<sup>14</sup> dependence on foundation grants and government contracts, given the funders' preoccupation with “wins,” leaves grassroots organizing projects financially hamstrung. And even if internal fundraising can partially compensate for that handicap, such efforts constitute a

continuing drain on the time, energy, and morale of organizers and leaders.

Further and disturbingly, Interfaith Funders (IF), a funding clearinghouse for religious and secular foundations that have supported faith-based community organizing, ceased most of its operations on September 1, 2014. The explanation given by the IF Board Chair was that, “In the past year, some IF member foundations have changed their funding priorities and ceased funding organizing as a social change strategy.”<sup>15</sup>

Unfortunately, they’re not the only ones to do so. Increasingly “vitriolic” attacks from far-right groups within the Catholic Church on the activities of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD)—“without any question for the last forty years the single largest funder of basic, hard scrabble community organizing”<sup>16</sup>—is resulting in the loss of funding for broad-based coalitions. “In 2012-13 alone, five affiliates of the Gamaliel Foundation—one of the nation’s largest networks of faith-based community organizers—lost CCHD funds.”<sup>17</sup> These attacks by far-right groups are also “. . . creating a culture of fear and making it increasingly difficult for community organizers and community groups to be part of broad-based coalitions that augment their power.”<sup>18</sup> Catholic leaders are said to be appraising social justice coalitions and partnerships with “increasing suspicion.”

We also note that the Great Recession of 2008 has had substantial effects on foundations and their social justice grantees, including those doing community organizing. As the report on *Sustaining Organizing* notes, “Organizations are doing a lot more work with a lot less—less money, less training, less infrastructure and less staffing. We hope that the findings in the report stimulate conversations on how to create a more sustainable infrastructure for organizing groups—both in terms of short term recovery and long term sustainability.”<sup>19</sup> While the economic recovery has been slow but nonetheless continuing, much less certain is whether those foundations making social justice grants will return to their pre-recession levels of commitment to community organizing.

This may be further compounded in the long run, at least for faith-based organizing, by the decades-long outmigration from affiliation with religious organizations and institutions, as confirmed by the 2008 *Religious Landscape Survey* of the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. Moreover, a new Pew survey of more than 35,000 Americans reports that “. . . the percentage of adults (ages 18 and older) who describe themselves as Christians has dropped by nearly eight percentage points in just seven years, from 78.4% . . . in 2007 to 70.6% in 2014. Over the same period, the percentage of Americans who are religiously unaffiliated—describing themselves as atheist, agnostic or ‘nothing in particular’—has jumped more than six

points, from 16.1% to 22.8%.” This outmigration points to an incremental weakening of religious legitimization, membership recruitment opportunities, and fundraising for faith-based organizing in the U.S.<sup>20</sup>

There may be some optimism regarding fundraising for community organizing based on the successful grassroots canvassing reported by The Center for Popular Democracy (CPD).<sup>21</sup> The Report recognizes that foundation funding for grassroots organizing “ebbs and flows,” and that “Building a diverse funding base with revenue-generating canvass operations and small-donor programs can enable base-building organizations to scale up their work and enjoy a higher degree of institutional stability and independence.” The CPD report presents numerous “best practices,” virtually all of which are based on canvassing experience and bound to be useful. While we agree with the near- and medium-term promise of grassroots canvassing for issue-driven community organizing, we have questions and doubts about the long-term prospects, which are not addressed by the CPD report.<sup>22</sup> Our perspective is based on Moshe’s extensive experience with grassroots canvassing—as canvasser, canvass-organizer, organizer of a successful canvass, recruiter and trainer of a few hundred canvassers, and author of a published how-to paper on canvassing.<sup>23</sup> On balance, we are not sanguine about the long-term potential of grassroots canvassing to build and sustain a national movement that successfully remedies the country’s institutionalized inequality of power.

All of the foregoing make it extremely difficult to scale up organizing significantly beyond current levels, and ultimately limits the ability to deal effectively with the structure of power-inequality.

By contrast, institutionalizing *public powers* in the hands of the citizenry can institutionalize the resources needed for citizen action. By employing the public powers of taxing, eminent domain, tax-free-bond-marketing, etc., we can limit the operational costs of acquiring those resources. That same citizenry may then appropriate them as required to act for the commonweal.

Lastly and most importantly, despite its innumerable successes, grassroots organizing has had little or no effect on the nation’s structure of power-inequality, exercised through myriad policies, laws, and “deep state”<sup>24</sup> machinations. After a half-century of inspired and inspiring grassroots community, congregational, and labor organizing, power and influence are more oligarchically concentrated than at any time since the 1920s.<sup>25</sup>

Without permanent institutional powers, we believe grassroots citizen action is destined to remain below the national political radar, not unified despite its expanding statewide and national initiatives,<sup>26</sup> and with little or no substantive effect on

the inequality of power. Under the present circumstances, without the capacity to raise sufficient funds to sustain decades-long mass citizen action, prospects are dim for a progressive national movement to transform institutionalized power-inequality.

And indeed, Martin Gilens and Benjamin I. Page have concluded as much in their recent peer-reviewed research: “. . . economic elites and organized groups representing business interests have substantial independent impacts on U.S. government policy, while mass-based interest groups and average citizens have little or no independent influence.”<sup>27</sup>

How can we remedy this structural inequality of power, which if not successfully challenged will only grow in scale and effect? Where and when and how does such a grandiose ambition begin to be realized?

### ***Is there a model for institutionalized grassroots empowerment?***

Clearly, given the resources at our disposal today, we should not begin with a strategy that focuses on national or state governments. We should instead focus our efforts on government in the metropolitan areas where the majority of Americans live and work, and where there is nearly total alienation of the middle- and low-income citizenry from the exercise of public powers. The boundaries and scale of metropolitan governments also make them approachable by an organized citizenry wielding nonpartisan populist power, and their structure can be repossessed and redirected to serve the commonweal.

Fortunately, the United States has a well-tested, directly democratic political institution, a highly serviceable model to create a lower tier of urban social infrastructure, which can be adapted to meet contemporary needs. The model for this bottom-up institutionalized empowering of urban populations is the open, directly democratic New England town.<sup>28</sup>

A little history of Massachusetts will help us understand its potential, beginning with the puritans settling in the Bay State in the late 1620s under a royal charter given to the Massachusetts Bay Company. The charter, although a commercial document, created civil government by a quarterly General Court comprised of the governor, magistrates, and all freemen (that is, company stockholders). The Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay colonies were combined in 1633. The following year the towns informally appointed deputies to attend the Court. They removed the governor, replaced him with one of their own choice, and approved legislation naming themselves and their successors as the official town representatives to the Court,

with all legislative powers—and that was just the beginning.

In our own era, nearly four centuries later, “open” town meetings in New England are still popular assemblies, with membership extended to every adult citizen, entitling each to act politically in the government—directly and in-person. Typically, each town elects an odd number of “selectmen” (which includes women), usually three or five, but sometimes as many as nine or 11. The officeholders call annual and special meetings, enact laws, and generally supervise a broad range of town activities. Their powers also extend to appointment of other town officials. *However, while the selectmen may plan roads and other public works and the tax assessments to pay for them, these plans and assessments do not have the force of law until the citizens “signify their satisfaction” in an open town meeting.* In many respects, the viability of open New England town government is due to the excellence of this selectmen system. While selectmen function as an executive management committee, the legislative power remains in the assembly itself. There is virtually no evidence in the records of any serious encroachment by selectmen on the prerogatives of the town meeting.

Thomas Jefferson was one of the great admirers of town-meeting direct democracy, which he regarded as the foundation of the nation. His definition of a republic was a government controlled by the grassroots citizenry—“acting directly and personally”—according to rules established by the majority. Governments, then, are more or less republican in proportion to direct citizen action in the exercise of public power, and the purest form of republic for Jefferson was reflected in the open New England towns. The linchpin of Jefferson’s visionary strategy for a republic was his proposal to subdivide the counties into small, independent governments resembling New England towns. He envisioned town-like “little republics,” direct democracies that would afford opportunities for every citizen to act *in* the government (rather than acting *on* the government—that is, exerting influence from the outside).

Jefferson also anticipated that directly democratic government would enhance public administration by drawing large numbers of citizens into the management of public affairs. In a letter to Governor John Tyler, and as if anticipating the need for two-tier urban government at the metropolitan and neighborhood levels, Jefferson mentions the subdivision of the counties and general education as “two great measures . . . without which no republic can maintain itself in strength.” Six years later he declared, “the article nearest my heart is the subdivision of the counties. . . .”<sup>29</sup>

It was Jefferson’s belief that the “regularly organized power” of town-meeting governments

would prevent insurrections by giving the citizenry a practical means “to crush, regularly and peaceably, the usurpations of their unfaithful agents [at higher levels of government].” Hannah Arendt<sup>30</sup> elaborates:

The Bill of Rights in the American Constitution forms the last, and the most exhaustive, legal bulwark for the private realm against public power, and Jefferson's preoccupation with the dangers of public power and this remedy against them is sufficiently well known. However, under conditions, not of prosperity as such, but of rapid and constant economic growth, that is, of a constantly increasing expansion of the private realm—and these were of course the conditions of the modern age—the dangers of corruption and perversion were much more likely to arise from private interests than from public power. And it speaks for the high calibre of Jefferson's statesmanship that he was able to perceive this danger despite his preoccupation with the older and better-known threats of corruption in bodies politic.<sup>31</sup>

But, as Arendt illuminates, partisan party interests kept directly democratic town government from its rightful place in the Constitution.<sup>32</sup> Jefferson's vision ultimately remained unrealized. By the mid-nineteenth century, urbanized government—burgeoning in scale, under the influence of political machines, and lacking a viable two-tier conception—had no use for direct democracy.

### ***How does direct democracy work in practice?***

Ralph Waldo Emerson, in 1835, summarized many of the qualities of open town government. Reviewing Concord's town-meeting history, Emerson acknowledged that he was unable to discover any absurd laws, offensive legislators, witch-hunts, abuse of religious minorities, or bizarre crimes committed under open town authority. He also noted that frugality had not stopped the town meeting from voting to appropriate resources for education and the poor. Lastly, he described the political paradox, for the citizenry, of direct self-government:

In every winding road, in every stone fence, in the smokes of the poorhouse chimney, in the clock on the church, they read their own power, and consider the wisdom and error of their judgments.<sup>33</sup>

Revealing a similar sentiment, Henry David Thoreau, in 1854, spoke publicly of his high regard

for the open town meetings that allowed every member of a community, high or low, to have a hand in the management of the government:

When, in some obscure country town, the farmers come together to a special town meeting, to express their opinion on some subject which is vexing the land, that, I think, is the true Congress, and the most respectable one that is ever assembled in the United States.<sup>34</sup>

It is reasonable to hypothesize, then, that the legendary contentment of New Englanders with the political and fiscal integrity of their towns derives from their own direct control. They have not been victimized by misallocation of resources to special interests. Town-meeting government places the privilege of making public policy, appropriations, and structural alterations in the government itself under direct citizen control. Directly democratic towns provide an effective means for citizens to shape their own laws and policies, and to articulate their demands for collective goods and services.

In that regard, one of the most intriguing aspects of the New England popular assembly is its “feedback mechanism” by which members come to realize that a structural adaptation is necessary to meet changing conditions. That realization occurs because the citizens are both the producers and the consumers of town-government public goods, every citizen having both roles. Thus when the citizens become conscious of the need for a basic change in the structure of their government, they can act to accomplish it. At the same time, government behavior that is unwise, unjust, or otherwise punishing lands on the same citizenry charged with the responsibility of decision-making. All of this has had the effect of directly stimulating the introduction of structural innovations, such as selectmen, town managers, and finance committees. Open town government thus addresses the flaw of political elitism—that is, the practice of deciding for others without having to experience the consequences of those decisions oneself.

The viability of open town government is a continuing demonstration of the capacity for bottom-up-governance of public space by popular assembly, even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. According to the most recent comprehensive survey, open town government has mostly been preserved in the modern era.<sup>35</sup> One Maine town among 420 has abandoned the open meeting. The open meeting “remains fundamentally the same” as the assembly of freemen of the 1600s in 84 percent of Massachusetts towns. In New Hampshire, 81 percent of the towns continue the open town meeting. And in Vermont, only the town of Brattleboro has abandoned it. The explanation for this loyalty to open town government is not sentiment or myopia, but a

conviction of the citizens that they are equally or better equipped than elected representatives to make political decisions. Throughout New England, large percentages of survey respondents rate the quality of town-meeting debate and decision-making as excellent or good—which is hardly the contemporary view of *representative* forms of local government.

Open town governments have also received high praise for giving discontented citizens alternatives to deal with higher levels of authority that have become oppressive to their interests. In one instance, more than 20 Vermont town governments on annual meeting day approved similar resolutions to prohibit nuclear power plants and radioactive waste within their borders.<sup>36</sup> As of July 2014, in response to a proposed high-pressure pipeline that would convey gas from fracking fields in Pennsylvania to East Coast ports, 20 of the 30 Massachusetts towns in the pipeline's path had adopted resolutions opposing the pipeline.<sup>37</sup> Directly democratic citizen action thus enables us to move beyond what Thomas Jefferson characterized as the endless cycle of "repression, rebellion, and reform."

Adopting the open town-government model would allow us to democratize big-city government, balancing the existing top-down system, by allocating public powers to a lower tier of government that is driven from the bottom up. The well-considered model for this purpose is *two-tier metropolitan government*, which divides public powers and functions along metropolitan and neighborhood boundaries.<sup>38</sup>

Our conception of the two-tier model envisions a *directly democratic lower tier*. It reflects Tocqueville's perspective:

Face to face democracy was the foundation—not a substitute for—representative institutions, federalism, and national democracy. In direct personal participation, Tocqueville observed, people both learn the skills of citizenship and develop a taste for freedom; thereafter they form an active rather than deferential, apathetic, or privatized constituency for state and national representation, an engaged public for national issues.<sup>39</sup>

Thus directly democratic government at this lower level is not precluded from having a leveraging effect on the entire metropolitan government, as we have pointed out above. If the foundational neighborhood units acquire public powers, they will have opportunities for joining together to direct and counter even much higher levels of authority, public and private, that act contrary to their interests. Hannah Fenichel Pitkin and Sara Shumer remind us of our forgotten history in this regard:

Democrats need to think hard—both historically and theoretically—about the circumstances and the institutions by which large-scale collective power can be kept responsible to its participatory foundations. In the new American states, for example, after the disruption of British rule, radicals insisted on unicameral legislatures, weak or collective executives, frequent elections, rotation in office to prevent formation of a class of professional politicians. Most important, representatives were elected by participatory town or country meetings, thus by political bodies with an identity and some experience in collective action, rather than by isolated voters. Consequently, dialogue between representatives and their constituencies was frequent and vigorous; representatives were often instructed and sometimes recalled. But there are many possibilities for vital and fruitful interaction between the local and the national community.<sup>40</sup>

### ***Why hasn't grassroots organizing focused on direct democracy?***

Why has the idea of targeting the *structure* of power-inequality (and permanently transforming it) been anathema to the organizers and leaders of grassroots reform movements over the last 50 years? There are several plausible explanations.

Changing the power structure of the nation is not in the legacy of Saul Alinsky, which has been inherited by almost all American organizers and organizing initiatives. Despite his radicalism, Alinsky was a devoted "religious" regarding institutionalized power. He wanted to refine and perfect its outcomes, not to fundamentally alter the structure.

European organizers and grassroots leaders have a different, revolutionary inheritance, so changing the structure of the state is not a foreign idea to them—which is ironic, since their roots are in monarchy, while ours are in revolution. The irony is compounded when we realize that it is the *structure* of American government that is the most valued legacy of our founders and their successors, one that affords us the possibility of achieving every other worthwhile objective. How is it that we who esteem so highly the constitutional framework—the federal system of local, state, and national governments; the tripartite division of powers among the legislative, executive, and judicial branches; the direct election of representatives; and the independence of the judiciary—give so little consideration to the importance of structure for the democratization of metropolitan government?

Disinterest in challenging the power structure may also reflect our cultural certainty that our form of government represents something on the order of Divine Providence, an unstoppable historical force. This naturally disinclines many of us from concentrated thinking or action to bring about fundamental changes in the structure. We may have internalized belief in the inevitability of “progress”—we remain committed to improving laws, policies, practices, and officialdom—but we nonetheless also believe that transforming the power structure is unnecessary and, at any rate, unachievable.

### ***Who can lead?***

A national movement to reclaim the public powers for the commonweal will eventually require the active political participation of millions of citizens in hundreds of diverse urban communities. But which organizations will take the first steps in such an historic initiative? Which can act as the vanguard to organize and mobilize such a movement?

One way to approach this question is to set out the qualifications for the organizations most likely to launch and lead such a movement successfully. Consider the following criteria:

- Which organizations are well established in long-lived communities of shared values and interests in virtually every major metropolitan area of the country?
- Which organizations have the capacity to promote a compelling moral vision?
- Which organizations have included diverse populations in their membership, leadership, and professional staff?
- Which organizations have developed a knowledge base and practical skills with which to mentor grassroots leaders?
- Which organizations have a history of recruiting and training leaders and members?
- Which organizations have a history of commitment to nonpartisan political action?
- Which organizations have demonstrated a capacity to mobilize thousands of citizens in disciplined actions to negotiate with decision-makers?
- Which organizations possess decades-long experience of successful multi-issue campaigns aimed to serve the commonweal?
- Which organizations can educate the public to understand and support the movement?

The faith-based organizing projects, founded and supported by the major U.S. training centers dedicated to progressive grassroots organizing—such as the Industrial Areas Foundation, PICO National Network, Gamaliel Foundation, and Direct Action Research and Training Center—satisfy all of these criteria. Their Alinsky inheritance (at least in regard to power-building campaigns and ac-

tions), their extensive experience, and their faith-based character establish their credentials for the vanguard-organizing role.

This last qualification is of no small significance. Successful social movements have a story that communicates their moral vision and gives hope for the future. If grassroots organizing is to concentrate sufficient power to transform the structure of power-inequality, it must be unified in a common visionary strategy. It must develop and widely promote a moral vision<sup>41</sup> of the commonweal we want for our children and grandchildren.

And for many of us, that moral vision is religiously derived. We agree with Marshall Ganz: It’s essential to recognize the importance of spirituality, faith, and religion in the lives of the people as the foundation and sustenance of their political understandings and commitments.<sup>42</sup>

We are thus encouraged by the decades-long role of faith-based organizing in building America’s contemporary pluralistic civic religion. This civic religious life reflects the unique culture of American spirituality and the widespread longing to remake the day-to-day world in the nearly universal image of God’s love, as revealed in our commitments to each other for righteousness, truth, and justice, freedom, peace, and kindness.

### ***Who will lead?***

We know, however, that changing the form of metropolitan government—introducing a directly democratic lower tier—by campaigning for ballot initiatives or state legislation is not in the strategic visions or organizing repertoires of the faith-based federations. We have worked in that world, and we can easily imagine their organizers, project directors, and training-center staff responding: “We don’t do that.”

We also know that the vanguard of a movement to achieve public powers for the commonweal must energize and ally itself with a wide range of organizations—Internet-based, turf-based, and identity-based—which faith-based organizing has only begun to do.<sup>43</sup>

Yet change may be in the wind. According to two major surveys,<sup>44</sup> some of the ranks of faith-based organizing recognize the need for a more compelling strategic vision, presumably one not constrained by current methodological considerations. Some recognize the need for more innovative fundraising methods that will take them beyond their current resource plateau. And some are aware that their models, methodologies, and strategies have virtually no effect on the country’s structure of power-inequality.

Will the faith-based organizations be in the forefront of a movement to reclaim the public powers for the commonweal? The challenges they face may bring them to increasing recognition of

the need for institutionalized empowerment of the citizenry. If not, then our era of grassroots organizing may be unable to bring about social development on a scale comparable to that achieved by the American independence, labor, or civil rights movements. We're hopeful that consciousness of their particular strengths as grassroots, progressive, faith-based organizations may positively influence their thinking and actions in this direction.

But our hope is guarded because the field has more or less settled on successful organizing methods and models that, ironically, limit their vision. Whether faith-based organizing will take up this challenge depends on its recognition that to suc-

ceed in the future, we have to try new methods and models. We must integrate what we have learned from the past, but avoid *always* doing what we know how to do. We have to be historians appraising the past, visionaries of the future, and method-innovators in the present.

### ***One last question . . .***

Is there a faith-based organizing project somewhere in the United States that wants to realize this vision, to transform its metropolitan government, returning the public powers to the people for the sake of the commonweal?

*Trust the people—the wise and the ignorant, the good and the bad—with the gravest of questions, and in the end you educate the race. At the same time you secure, not perfect institutions, not necessarily good ones, but the best possible while human nature is the basis and the only material to build with.*

—Wendell Phillips<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Lummis, *Radical Democracy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), p.28.

<sup>2</sup> We note that so-called “popular democracy”—inclusive of women, minorities, and non-landowners—was of course not fully achieved in law until the 20<sup>th</sup> century; and at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we are witnessing purposeful partisan efforts to limit the voting franchise of the elderly, minorities, students, and low-income citizens.

<sup>3</sup> From: *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, Vol. I (Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 696.

<sup>4</sup> See Wolin, “Revolutionary Action Today,” in (John Rajchman and Cornel West, eds.) *Post-Analytic Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 252.

<sup>5</sup> See Bill Moyers Journal, April 2009 PBS broadcast interview of David Simon (accessed at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qulcqNMHVic>).

<sup>6</sup> In “An Idiots Guide to Inequality,” *New York Times* (July 23, 2014), Nicholas Kristof notes: “*First, economic inequality has worsened significantly* in the United States and some other countries. The richest 1 percent in the United States now own more wealth than the bottom 90 percent. Oxfam estimates that the richest 85 people in the world own half of all wealth. The situation might be tolerable if a rising tide were lifting all boats. But it’s lifting mostly the yachts. In 2010, 93 percent of the additional income created in America went to the top 1 percent.” (Emphasis in original.)

<sup>7</sup> The duration of the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) “movement,” regardless of any theoretical speculation, seemed destined to be short: (1) it did not emerge from coherent community of shared values and history of injuries and injustices (beyond a presumed economic-inequality victimization); and (2) it was committed to significant mobilization before developing disciplined organization and seasoned leadership. Nonetheless, given the efforts by local governments coast-to-coast to criminalize and thus halt the mass consciousness-raising effect of the mobilization, which targeted the beneficiaries of economic inequality, the truncated lifespan of OWS may be understood as a memorial to the alienation of the citizenry from the public powers. For a recap of the main OWS developments, see David Walls, *Community Organizing* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2015), pp. 138-43. Barney Frank, whose career from 1981 to 2013 as one of the most dependable progressives in Congress, highlights a critical weakness of OWS: “One of the messages I try to get across is to my allies on the left, that we would be better off if they were more disciplined. I wish Occupy



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acted more like the Tea Party—politically, not substantively, obviously—and I’ve spent a lot of time arguing with friends on the left that these expressive demonstrations are only rarely the best way to go and that in any case, you need to get involved politically. It’s been my frustration that some of the groups I disagree with like the National Rifle Association and the Tea Party do a much better job of mobilizing and influencing the political process than the people I agree with. That was a significant part of what I was trying to get across in the book.” See Elias Isquith, “‘Republicans are getting worse’: Barney Frank unloads on GOP bigotry—and Obama’s mistakes,” Salon.com (Mar 17, 2015 05:30 AM PDT) (accessed at: [http://www.salon.com/2015/03/17/republicans\\_are\\_getting\\_worse\\_barney\\_frank\\_unloads\\_on\\_gop\\_bigotry\\_and\\_obamas\\_mistakes/](http://www.salon.com/2015/03/17/republicans_are_getting_worse_barney_frank_unloads_on_gop_bigotry_and_obamas_mistakes/)).

<sup>8</sup> See Robert Lustig, *Fat Chance: Beating the Odds Against Sugar, Processed Food, Obesity, and Disease* (New York: Hudson Street Press, 2012); and “Healthy, Wealthy & Wise,” YouTube (accessed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P3WkXJokBAU>).

<sup>9</sup> See *The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. xi. In *Democratic Promise, The Populist Moment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), Goodwyn writes that after the election of 1896, “The idea that serious structural reform of the democratic process was ‘inevitable’ no longer seemed persuasive to reasonable reformers. . . . A consensus thus came to be silently ratified: reform politics need not concern itself with structural alteration of the economic customs of the society. . . . The reform tradition of the twentieth century unconsciously defined itself within the framework of inherited power relationships,” p. 531.

<sup>10</sup> From *The Rights of the Colonists: The Report of the Committee of Correspondence to the Boston Town Meeting, November 20, 1772*, Old South Leaflets no. 173 (Boston: Directors of the Old South Work, 1906), 7:417-428.

<sup>11</sup> But as economist Joseph E. Stiglitz has written in “Inequality Is Not Inevitable,” *New York Times* (June 27, 2014), “Widening and deepening inequality is not driven by immutable economic laws, but by laws we have written ourselves.” He explains, “The American political system is overrun by money. Economic inequality translates into political inequality, and political inequality yields increasing economic inequality.”

<sup>12</sup> See Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism* (Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 44; and “Inverted Totalitarianism,” *The Nation* (May 19, 2003).

<sup>13</sup> We have considered this proposition in several publications: “It’s the Public Powers, Stupid!” (<http://www.gatherthepeople.org/Downloads/SECESSION.pdf>); “Political Liberty and Neighborhood Government” ([http://www.gatherthepeople.org/Downloads/NEIGHBORHOOD\\_GOVERNMENT.pdf](http://www.gatherthepeople.org/Downloads/NEIGHBORHOOD_GOVERNMENT.pdf)); “Vill Economics” ([http://www.gatherthepeople.org/Downloads/VILL\\_ECONOMICS.pdf](http://www.gatherthepeople.org/Downloads/VILL_ECONOMICS.pdf)); and “You Too Can Organize A Government” ([http://www.gatherthepeople.org/Downloads/ORGANIZE\\_GOV'T.pdf](http://www.gatherthepeople.org/Downloads/ORGANIZE_GOV'T.pdf)).

<sup>14</sup> See Brian Johns and Ellen Ryan, “Leadership Is Not A Deliverable,” *Social Policy* (Winter 2013) (accessed at: <http://www.socialpolicy.org/component/content/article/4-latest-issue/637-leadership-development-is-not-a-deliverable>).

<sup>15</sup> See Discussion list for COMM-ORG, [COMM-ORG] Discuss: Interfaith Funders transitions news release, Wed Aug 6 15:56:22 CDT 2014 (accessed at: <http://comm-org.wisc.edu/pipermail/colist/2014-August/007032.html>).

<sup>16</sup> See Wade Rathke, “Faith in Public Life Answers the Pope’s Call and Defends CCHD,” on Wade Rathke: Chief Organizer Blog (December 3, 2013) (accessed at: <http://chieforganizer.org/2013/12/03/faith-in-public-life-answers-the-popes-call-and-defends-cchd/>).

<sup>17</sup> See John Gehring, “‘Be Not Afraid?’ Guilt by Association, Catholic McCarthyism and Growing Threats to the U.S. Bishops’ Anti-Poverty Mission” (Faith in Public Life: June 2013), p. 2 (accessed at: <http://www.faithinpubliclife.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/FPL-CCHD-report.pdf>).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* p. 8.

<sup>19</sup> See “Executive Summary,” *Sustaining Organizing, A Survey of Organizations During the Economic Downturn* (DataCenter and the National Organizers Alliance: June 2010), p. 1 (accessed at: <http://www.datacenter.org/wp-content/uploads/SOS-report.pdf>); and Sara K. Gould, *Diminishing Dollars, The Impact of the 2008 Financial Crisis on the Field of Social Justice Philanthropy* (Foundation Center: 2011) (accessed at: [http://foundationcenter.org/gainknowledge/research/pdf/diminishing\\_dollars2011.pdf](http://foundationcenter.org/gainknowledge/research/pdf/diminishing_dollars2011.pdf)).

<sup>20</sup> See “Summary of Key Findings,” *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey* (February 2008) (accessed at: <http://religions.pewforum.org/reports>), which presents the following survey highlights: (1) “The survey finds that the number of people who say they are unaffiliated with any faith today (16.1%) is more than double the number who say they were not affiliated with any particular religion as children. Among Americans 18-29, one-in-four say they are not currently affiliated with any particular religion” (p. 5); (2) “Catholicism [which provides the organizational backbone of faith-based organizing] has experienced the greatest

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net losses as a result of affiliation changes. While nearly one-in-three Americans (31%) were raised in the Catholic faith, today fewer than one-in-four (24%) describe themselves as Catholic. These losses would have been even more pronounced were it not for the offsetting impact of immigration” (p. 6); and (3) “. . . [T]he biggest gainer is this religious competition—the unaffiliated group. People moving into the unaffiliated category outnumber those moving out of the unaffiliated group by more than a three-to-one margin” (p. 7). And *America’s Changing Religious Landscape; Christians Decline Sharply as Share of Population; Unaffiliated and Other Faiths Continue to Grow*, Pew Research Center (May 12, 2015) (accessed at: <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape>).

<sup>21</sup> See *Seeding Justice: Revenue-generating membership and fundraising canvasses for community organizing: Lessons from the field*, The Center for Popular Democracy (October 2015) (accessed at: <http://populardemocracy.org/news/seeding-justice-revenue-generating-membership-and-fundraising-canvasses-community-organizing>).

<sup>22</sup> To understand the long-term limitations of grassroots canvassing, it’s essential to examine the historical record of this fundraising method. The record reveals that, as with foundation funding for organizing, door-to-door canvass fundraising also ebbs and flows in more or less decade-long cycles. There are many ways to understand this phenomenon, but two variables are readily apparent to practitioners in the field: (1) Issue-driven grassroots fundraising enjoys a finite window of opportunity, which reflects successful resolution of issues that contributors perceive to be in their direct self-interest. To the extent that significant issues—such as economic inequality, immigration reform, and universal low-cost accessibility to health care—are not resolved, the window of fundraising opportunity closes. (2) Closely related to this process is the increasing difficulty of recruiting and retaining canvassers, who also become increasingly disillusioned by the failure to resolve critical issues.

<sup>23</sup> See “A Doorknocker’s Guide to Canvassing,” *Community Jobs*, 4(1):18-19 (February 1981) (accessed at: <http://www.gatherthepeople.org/Downloads/CANVASSING.pdf>).

<sup>24</sup> See Moyers & Company interview of Mike Lofgren, “The Deep State Hiding in Plain Sight” (accessed at: <http://billmoyers.com/episode/the-deep-state-hiding-in-plain-sight/>); and “Essay: Anatomy of the Deep State” (accessed at: <http://billmoyers.com/2014/02/21/anatomy-of-the-deep-state/>). As Lofgren notes, “It is not too much to say that Wall Street may be the ultimate owner of the Deep State and its strategies.”

<sup>25</sup> See G. William Domhoff, “Wealth, Income, and Power,” published on Who Rules America? (accessed at: <http://www2.ucsc.edu/whorulesamerica/power/wealth.html>). On historical trends in economic inequality, see Chad Stone, Danilo Trisi, Arloc Sherman, and William Chen, “A Guide to Historical Trends in Income Inequality,” published by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities—revised December 5, 2013 (accessed at: <http://www.cbpp.org/cms/?fa=view&id=3629>).

<sup>26</sup> At the same time as the expansion, however, “The median number of member institutions per IBCO [institution-based community organization] declined from 23 to 21. . . . Since 1999, the number of member congregations has remained the same.” See: Richard L. Wood, Brad Fulton, and Kathryn Partridge, “Building Bridges, Building Power: Developments in Institution-Based Community Organizing” (Interfaith Funders, 2013), p. 6 (accessed at: <http://www.soc.duke.edu/~brf6/ibcoreport.pdf>).

<sup>27</sup> See Gilens and Page, “Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens,” *Perspectives on Politics*, 12(3):564-81 (September 2014) (accessed at: [https://scholar.princeton.edu/sites/default/files/mgilens/files/gilens\\_and\\_page\\_2014\\_-testing\\_theories\\_of\\_american\\_politics.doc.pdf](https://scholar.princeton.edu/sites/default/files/mgilens/files/gilens_and_page_2014_-testing_theories_of_american_politics.doc.pdf)). They note, “Our results provide substantial support for theories of Economic Elite Domination and for theories of Biased Pluralism, but not for theories of Majoritarian Electoral Democracy or Majoritarian Pluralism.”

<sup>28</sup> We have explored the history of New England towns in detail in our monograph, “New England Town Government” (accessed at: [http://www.gatherthepeople.org/Downloads/TOWN\\_GOVT.pdf](http://www.gatherthepeople.org/Downloads/TOWN_GOVT.pdf)).

<sup>29</sup> See Thomas Jefferson, Letter to Governor John Tyler, May 26, 1810, in (Albert Ellery Bergh, ed.) *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson* (Washington, D.C.: Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1907), p. 393; Letter to John Adams, October 28, 1813, in (Paul Leicester Ford, ed.) *The Works of Thomas Jefferson*, Vol. 11 (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1905), pp. 343-46; Letter to John Taylor, May 28, 1816, in *The Works of Thomas Jefferson*, Vol. 11, p. 529; Letter to Samuel Kercheval, July 12, 1816, in *The Works of Thomas Jefferson*, Vol. 12, p. 9; Letter to Samuel Kercheval, September 5, 1816, in *The Works of Thomas Jefferson*, Vol. 12, p. 16; Letter to Major John Cartwright, June 5, 1824, in (Thomas Jefferson Randolph, ed.) *Memoir, Correspondence, and Miscellanies, from the Papers of Thomas Jefferson* (Boston: Gray and Bowen, 1830), p. 396.

<sup>30</sup> We are not sanguine about the evidence of Hannah Arendt’s behavior while covering the trial of Adolph Eichmann in Israel, compellingly related by Richard Wolin in “The Banality of Evil: The Demise of a Legend,” *Jewish Review of Books* (Fall 2014) (accessed at:

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<http://jewishreviewofbooks.com/articles/1106/the-banality-of-evil-the-demise-of-a-legend/>) in his review of *Eichmann Before Jerusalem: The Unexamined Life of a Mass Murderer* by Bettina Stangneth. At worst, Arendt's statements at the time might be characterized as overt anti-Semitism; at best they might be described as Jewish self-hatred or, in more up-to-date language, "internalized oppression." In this vein, Ron Rosenbaum in "The Evil of Banality, Troubling new revelations about Arendt and Heidegger," *The Spectator* (October 30, 2009) (accessed at:

[www.slate.com/articles/life/the\\_spectator/2009/10/the\\_evil\\_of\\_banality\\_single.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/life/the_spectator/2009/10/the_evil_of_banality_single.html)) quotes Bernard Wasserman to the effect that Arendt ". . . internalized the values of the anti-Semitic literature she read in her study of anti-Semitism. . . ." We also note that although she fled Nazi Germany in 1933, worked on behalf of other Jewish refugees in France, and returned to Germany in the post-war period to assist a Zionist organization, it may not be unreasonable to conclude that she was blind to, or seriously misunderstood, the virulence of Nazi anti-Semitism, very possibly because of her background and early professional and personal associations. We nonetheless value much of her writing as a political theorist, particularly *On Revolution* and *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

<sup>31</sup> See Hannah Arendt, "The Revolutionary Tradition and Its Lost Treasure," Chapter 6, in *On Revolution* (London: Penguin Books, 1963, 1965), pp. 252-3.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* p. 263: Arendt notes: "For the remarkable thing about the [directly democratic town] councils was of course not only that they crossed all party lines, that members of the various parties sat in them together, but that such party membership played no role whatsoever. They were in fact the only political organs for people who belonged to no party. Hence, they invariably came into conflict with all assemblies, with the old parliaments as well as with the new 'constituent assemblies', for the simple reason that the latter, even in their most extreme wings, were still the children of the party system."

<sup>33</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Historical Discourse," in (Edward Waldo Emerson, ed.) *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Miscellanies* (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin, 1904), p. 49.

<sup>34</sup> See Henry David Thoreau, "Slavery in Massachusetts" [essay based on a speech given at an anti-slavery rally in Framingham, Massachusetts, July 4, 1854] (London: Forgotten Books, 2008; and annotated version accessed at: <http://thoreau.eserver.org/slavery.html>).

<sup>35</sup> For the most recent, complete survey and evaluation of New England open (directly democratic) town government, see Joseph F. Zimmerman, *The New England Town Meeting: Democracy in Action* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1999).

<sup>36</sup> See Nancy Shulins, "Vermont Towns Vote to Prohibit Nuclear Plants," *Lewiston Evening Journal* (March 2, 1977).

<sup>37</sup> See David Scribner, "Resistance to gas pipeline spreads across Western Mass.," *Berkshire—The Edge* (July 2, 2014) (accessed at: <http://theberkshireedge.com/resistance-gas-pipeline-spreads-across-western-mass/>).

<sup>38</sup> For an introduction to the "two-tier solution," see Robert L. Bish and Vincent Ostrom, *Understanding Urban Government: Metropolitan Reform Reconsidered* (Washington: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1973) pp. 12-15; and Vincent Ostrom, *The Political Theory of a Compound Republic: Designing the American Experiment* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987).

<sup>39</sup> See Hannah Fenichel Pitkin and Sara Shumer, "On Participation," in (Ricardo Blaug and John Schwarzmantel, eds.), *Democracy, A Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), p. 455.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 454-55.

<sup>41</sup> Richard B. Gunderman, in *Achieving Excellence in Medical Education* (London: Springer, 2006), pp. 147-48, provides a useful definition: "[An] . . . essential feature of excellence in leadership is moral vision. Such vision is moral because it involves the organization's very reason for being, its highest aspirations, and it concerns vision because it involves what the organization hopes to look like in the future. To lead effectively, we must see where we are trying to go. Moral vision encompasses more than just a destination, however. It also includes the means the leader is prepared to adopt to get it there. Moral vision is reflected in the management structure of an organization, the style of personal interaction it fosters, and the incentive and reward systems it adopts. Ultimately, however, the moral vision of a leader is not a means to some other end, but an end in itself, the ultimate mission of the organization. Moral vision may seem a less than vital feature of leadership excellence, until we consider the alternative, a leader who is either amoral or visionless." For faith-based federations that are composed of member-congregations and parishes in the Abrahamic tradition, the Seven Laws of Noah are a primary basis for a shared moral vision.

<sup>42</sup> See Moyers & Company, "Encore: How People Power Generates Change," August 16, 2013 broadcast interview of Marshall Ganz (accessed at: <http://billmoyers.com/episode/encore-how-people-power-generates-change/>).

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<sup>43</sup> The faith-based federations themselves have yet to fully appreciate the necessity for joining together in a “congress of faith-based federations.” As David Walls has written in *Community Organizing, Fanning the Flame of Democracy* (Walden, MA: Polity Press, 2015), p. 40: “Alinsky did not anticipate there would be at least three networks vying for national leadership with little inclination to cooperate with each other, and that his own IAF would be the most reluctant to lead nationally.”

<sup>44</sup> For surveys and evaluations of the major faith-based community organizing, see: Wood, Fulton, and Partridge, “Building Bridges, Building Power: Developments in Institution-Based Community Organizing”; and Mark R. Warren and Richard L. Wood, “Faith-Based Community Organizing: The State of the Field,” a report of the findings of a national survey conducted by Interfaith Funders, Jericho, NY (January 2001) (accessed at: <http://comm-org.wisc.edu/papers2001/faith/faith.htm>).

<sup>45</sup> From Mr. Phillips 1857 Phi Beta Kappa address at Yale College on “The Republican Scholar of Necessity an Agitator.”

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