

Unleashing our power Reflections on process and power in the progressive movement

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Two days after N30, the big action day during the WTO Ministerial in Seattle, a couple of thousand people marched through the city to the King County Jail in support of our brothers and sisters inside. Heading down Fourth Avenue, the crowd encountered a menacing wall of riot police determined that the procession take Second Avenue instead. For some, the idea of capitulating to the police, whose contempt for democracy in the streets was so enthusiastically revealed throughout the mobilization, was intolerable. To others, the urgency of supporting the arrestees made the small detour a no-brainer. Then the group spent more than an hour trying to reach a collective decision about which way to go. In the end, the get-there faction headed toward Second Avenue, drawing almost everyone else in their wake. Well, make that everyone who was left—the march lost at least half its mass.

In most progressive movement circles, talking about “process,” the methods we use to work together, is generally about as enticing as getting stitches. The standard defense—that process itself isn’t bad, it’s just that we often have bad process—makes much sense. Yet without some deeper context, the wisdom of the process wonks simply isn’t that compelling.

Democratic collective action

How does progressive social change happen? One key part of the answer is that, apart from the dynamics of capitalism and other structural forces, remaking the world is fundamentally about taking collective action. Progressive change is not essentially about luck, the weather or god, nor unstoppable ideas, enlightened politicians or remarkable leaders. It’s about *us*, movements of us.

More than just collective action, most of the worldwide progressive movement is committed to participatory, democratically-determined collective action. “Democracy later” arguments (e.g., Cuba survives imperialism, while revolutionary and highly democratic Sandinista Nicaragua could not) arguably have some merit. Yet democratic participation is essential in creating truly collective visions and building movements that are broad and powerful enough to achieve them. It helps us combine diverse constituencies, perspectives and expertise, identify needs broadly, craft solutions and strategies that are widely

supported, balance autonomy and community, and address the sexism, racism, classism and other barriers that separate us.

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Democratic collective action can move decision-makers, overcome physical force and create new societies. It is a fundamental basis of our power.

Process, mmm

A useful way to think about process is that it is the way we work toward unleashing the power of democratic collective action. Even today, good process can unleash a lot of power.

Take the case of the six-day jail solidarity during the 2000 Democratic National Convention protests in Los Angeles. With only about 50 people inside (split between the men’s and women’s facilities), a prosecutor determined to make the protesters pay, and the brutality of the L.A. County system, activist process was remarkably good. Ongoing consensus meetings of jailed protestors allowed such a high degree of confrontational unity that eventually the Sheriff of Los Angeles County, reportedly the highest paid public official in the U.S., personally came to meet with the movement inmates.

In the men’s jail, facilitator John Doe ran the meeting. Meeting spokesperson number one, John Doe, reiterated the protesters’ seven unified demands. Yet another John Doe had been authorized to communicate the protesters’ unbending resolve to remain in jail, most of them fasting, until all demands were met. The Sheriff, when called upon, spoke at length and then ask a question. Dutifully, spokesman number one said, “I’m not authorized to speak to that on behalf of the group, but if you would kindly wait outside in the hall, we’ll discuss it and call for you when we are done.” The Sheriff then began to talk about sports.

After later negotiations between the prosecutor and the Janes and Johns Doe, all seven demands were met, including that the entire Doe family emerge from the jail together to greet support teams and the media. After quick media trainings inside the jail, there was an excellent media event and victory celebration in the courtyard out front.

Sadly, in many cases our process is feeble and ineffective, clogging the pathways of collective power. Meetings make us age prematurely. Volunteers lose their volition. In

direct action, we find it hard to regroup and make quick contingency decisions. In mass mobilizations, spokescouncils break down. We're challenged on action day by working in the trenches with unfamiliar comrades. What can we really expect as products of an individual-gain culture that provides little more cooperative training than elementary-school collaboration exercises and workplace team-building workshops?

What we cannot do is opt against process. Process is always present in group behavior, just as writing has structure of one kind or another. It may be explicit or unspoken, but it's there. Sometimes unspoken process can be good process, but (as Jo Freeman pointed out almost 30 years ago in "The Tyranny of Structurelessness") more often than not unstructured meetings are canvases for elitism, inefficiency and morass.

More power

Good process can be based on consensus decision-making, that unnamed inclusive decision-making style that many of us practice by default, or on some other participatory model. It can be subdued or utterly jolly. Good process can be formal or remarkably casual (especially when participants are process-savvy). To unleash our power, however, it just has to be good.

We need more facilitators and facilitators need more skill in balancing real participation with effective and timely decision-making. We especially need facilitators from less-privileged communities.

Just as much, everyone needs to play an active role as process-aware participants. It's easy to spot the uncooperative wing-nut. It's much harder to recognize that how we participate in meetings is at least as important to the quality of the journey as is the facilitator, the difficulty of the agenda and circumstances, or the size of the group.

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Put it all together and we can beautify power. When the marchers finally arrived at Seattle's King County jail, movement attorney Katya Komisaruk, then of the Midnight Special Legal Collective, took the bullhorn and informed the crowd that the legal team was in negotiations with local authorities, but had a very weak hand, and that the protestors needed to "do something" outside the jail to raise the ante. A facilitator offered to help the group reach a consensus. There were 800-1000 people assembled—too many for all to hear, even with a bullhorn. Speakers deposited short sentence fragments into the bullhorn and the majority within earshot repeated them aloud in unison so that everyone could hear. The protestors came up with 27 proposals, formed 40-50 spontaneous affinity groups to discuss them, and held a spokescouncil to create an action plan. The result was a four-part program that birthed a high-spirited, creative, nurturing and effective encampment outside the jail, a people's support and action community which endured days of cold and rain until every arrestee was released.

The *Seattle-Post Intelligencer* wrote of that meeting that unlike the WTO process, "the protestors offered a picture of democracy." One trade unionist who took part said, "I've learned more about democracy in past few hours than I have in the last 20 years."

Of course there's a long way to go, but imagine a vibrant movement for ecological sustainability and social justice, globalizing on the heels of capital and organizing campaigns and actions so effective that the apologists of the global order become nauseous. Better process is mostly a matter of giving it the focus it needs to help us unleash more of the power of our collective action. Don't mourn, organize good meetings!

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