Among us progressives, most discussion of domestic politics is taken up with descriptions of social problems—falling wages and rising inequality, retreats from racial justice, destruction of inner-city neighborhoods, environmental degradation, violence against women, the agonizing problems of urban youth. The inventory reminds us that current policies fail to ‘promote the general welfare’ or to ensure ‘liberty and justice for all’, and why we are saddened and often outraged by how we now govern ourselves as a people. But it does little to advance our understanding of how progressives might organize themselves to improve this state of affairs. It leaves unanswered the question: What is to be done?*

In asking that question here I assume that we can in fact do better—that neither circumstance nor nature prohibit improvement. At some abstract level, this is self-evident. America remains blessed with abundance, free of external military threat, and populated by a spirited and resourceful people
no more stupid or corrupt than any other. Our problems are political and admit political solution. They arise from the way this society is now organized, the way power within it is now exercised, the fact that power is not now exercised in sufficiently democratic ways—all things that can be changed. Less abstractly, I do not believe current political circumstance bars such change. While business evisceration of popular democratic forces and domination of popular culture are as advanced as at any time since the 1920s, those forces are still alive and that domination is still contested. We have room for manoeuvre. Indeed, as I'll argue in a moment, we have something like an open invitation to advance.

I also assume an audience of progressives, not liberals. Without putting too fine a point on it, the difference is that progressives actually believe in democracy. They think that people of ordinary means and intelligence, if properly organized and equipped, can govern themselves, and that if they do the results will be better than if they do not. Liberals lack such confidence in ordinary people—like Neibuhr in his ‘Marxist’ phase, they believe in the essential stupidity of man—and so put less emphasis on popular democratic organization. To achieve social improvement, they typically favor the ‘kinder, gentler’ administration of people, usually through the state.

Given this liberal strategy, often, improvement never comes. Without organized popular support, liberals cannot do the heavy lifting against entrenched and resourceful corporate actors required to enact desired policies. And without the monitoring, enforcement, and trust-inducing capacities of socially-rooted organizations, they commonly cannot administer those policies effectively. When it comes to fighting opposition, liberals often don’t have the troops; when it comes to solving problems inside schoolrooms or communities, their government programs are all thumbs and no fingers. As problems of both kinds become more evident—as they are today, in everything from health care reform to education and public safety—so too do the limits of liberalism.

It is popular awareness of these limits that provides the opportunity for progressives alluded to above. A generation of economic decline and failed government response have forcibly put social control of the economy and the democracy of which that is one instance—the very issues conventional liberalism is least capable of addressing, the signature concerns of progressive movements for two hundred years—back on the table of American politics. All around us is the wreckage of an unconstrained capitalism—falling living standards, families strained to breaking point, rising inequality. Right before us is the alternating feebleness and corruption of a government devoid of any organized base, in hock to monied interests, uninterested in rational debate, incapable of the heavy lifting needed to put the country right, unwilling even to

* What follows is based on a talk given at a national meeting of US progressive activists in May 1994—i.e. before the spectacular Republican victory in November. No effort has been made to revise the May talk in light of it, since nothing in the argument is changed by it. Thanks to Noam Chomsky and participants in the May meeting for comments, and to Josh Cohen and Gerry Hudson for the same, as well as countless discussions of these themes.
speculate on what sort of lifting might be required. Reflected in public opinion surveys showing sky-high rates of alienation and disgust with government and deep distrust of business, in ‘out-of-nowhere’ mobilizations like that against NAFTA, in the growth of independent and third-party candidacies and formations—what is new (though this too is now getting old fast) is that these things are now widely recognized. There is mass discontent with politics as usual, a mass hunger for some alternative.

Progressives need not fear, and cannot hope, that conventional liberalism will deliver a democratic one. The reason why is that doing so would require challenging corporate power and mobilizing outside the state. Thirty years ago—given the US military position in the world, the strength of the US economy, the character of popular expectations about race and gender justice or the environment—it was perhaps possible for the bulk of the dwindling voting population to expect security in their liberty and prosperity, absent such challenge and mobilization. Of course the luxury of that expectation never extended to those on the receiving end of US military force, nor to those at home whom our politics had always tended to forget. Whatever the case then, a transformed political economy now leaves open no way of defending domestic living standards, reducing inequality, making jobs safe for families, escaping the legacy of four hundred years’ racism, saving our cities, or greening our economy, without putting serious constraints on capital and without recruiting citizens to their own administration. And this is just what liberals are loathe to do.

The preferred liberal response to current calamities, instead, is to back even further off democratic commitments. In the last twenty years, on matters of class and popular organization in particular, the leadership of the Democratic Party has moved steadily to the right. Most recently, on every major issue of popular contest with the business community—minimum wage, NAFTA, labor law reform, domestic investment, health care, environmental regulation, campaign finance reform—the Clinton administration has been from the start hopelessly compromised, when not proudly ensconced on the wrong side. Along with a little welfare bashing here, a little ‘toughness on crime’ there, acquiescence to business is nearly the sum of the current liberal program. Not democratic, it is also no more likely to revive liberal political fortunes than a simple-minded defence of the status quo. Liberalism is not just corrupt, but dying, sustained by a life-support system of electoral inertia and government patronage.

And, of course, the Right is mobilizing to pull the plug. Unlike liberals, the Right is quite willing to take its own side in an argument—to organize, to target, to wield state power in ways that build its ability to disrupt. Plundering during the catastrophe, it fuels its anti-statist populism with liberal failure, promising Christian perfectionism along the way. Mass shenanigans aside, its program is quintessentially elite and secular: to repeal the New Deal, dismantle the affirmative state, destroy all non-business-dominated secular organization, and thus complete the corporate domination of American public life.

Our present circumstance then is this. A dying liberalism, now a pale shadow of its New Deal self, no longer delivers the goods. An insurgent
corporate Right aims squarely at democracy’s destruction. A mass discontent understands itself in terms at least amenable to progressive appeal. This is the unstated invitation to progressive action, our opportunity to do some good.

But that opportunity must be seized, which is where progressive problems start. If progressives recognize more clearly than liberals the need for popular democratic organization, the right kinds of organization do not arise spontaneously. They need to be built, and revised and built again in light of changed circumstances, through political projects of mass appeal that also unite progressive ranks. Today ‘changed circumstances’—from the erosion of neighborhoods to the decline of urban manufacturing to the rise of issue and identity concerns orthogonal to those class concerns that once unified progressive politics—have made identifying and acting on such projects more difficult than at any time in living Left memory. Taking measure of those disenabling changes, I want to ask, What are the right projects today? While of a different form, this question about organization is equivalent to the ‘What is to be done?’ question asked earlier.

My answer proceeds in two steps. Step one (‘Why We Are Weak’) inventories some of the sources of progressive fragmentation and incoherence—the reasons why it is difficult to identify and act on projects of the right kind. Step two (‘How to Get Strong’) suggests some specific projects that can work to overcome this disunity, and do some good for the country, in ways that build the longer-term strength of progressive forces.

Why We Are Weak

US progressives today are organizationally and ideologically fragmented. And so they are weak—missing opportunities for mutual gain, scale, and public coherence only available through coordination. Weakness confirms their fragmentation, and thus further weakness, by inspiring a narrow and defensive politics, particularist in the extreme and lacking popular appeal. In the limiting case, widely reached today, the self-identified ‘progressive community’ does not even aim at such appeal. It does not mount broad programs of social moment, much less aggressively compete for power based on them. It seeks not to rule, but only to be tolerated, as a hodgepodge of essentially single-issue groups possessed of more grievances than ideas. For some, the resulting isolation from ‘the people’ confirms illusions of saintliness. Its most immediate and obvious effect, however, is to guarantee political irrelevance.

How did this sorry state of affairs come to pass? Why are progressives so divided when it is clear they would be stronger together than apart?

One obvious answer is that progressives have legitimate differences of opinion and emphasis; different groups simply respond to the needs or interests of different constituencies. Only slightly less obvious is the fact that differences beget differences. An institution that forms to address X because it feels X is not addressed well by existing organizations often comes over time to be less capable of addressing the related issue Y—
because of turf considerations, the natural hardening of institutional arteries, or the narrowing of activity, given scarce resources, to ‘signature’ concerns. Also obvious, if rarely stated, is that the past practice of the Left itself plays a constitutive role in present division. Many of the groups and movements that now find it hard to talk to one another originally formed because their members were not heard in conversations with the broader Left.¹

None of these observations is very satisfying as an answer to our question, however, since all of them basically just redescribe the problem. A better answer, I think, begins by looking at what progressive movements and organizations need to do to flourish, and then indicates how the conditions of their doing that have eroded in recent years.

**What Progressives Need To Do To Flourish**

Progressive organizations/movements advance when they put forth practical programs of action that benefit their members or potential members, solve problems in the broader society (often, perhaps surprisingly, problems for capitalists, on whose well-being the rest of the society unfortunately depends), and by doing both these things get the political and social respect needed to advance their own interests as general and to secure supports for their own organization. Projects of this kind, uniting the particular with the universal, are at the core of stable progressive politics; they give progressive organizations something to do other than complain. Unions in the postwar period, for example, redistributed income toward their members, thereby helped stabilize mass markets for consumer durables, and thereby inspired investment, which increased productivity, which lowered the real costs of consumer goods for everyone. By doing something for their members that also, distinctively, helped the broader society, they gained social respect.

One problem for progressives today is that most of their old projects of this sort have run out of steam. The claim might be argued in different ways, most directly perhaps by considering the relationship between progressive organizations and their members. With rare exceptions—and suggesting that whatever it is that their organizations are doing, members don’t find it very compelling—this relationship barely exists. Of course, members may give their organization a little money—because they are forced to, or out of nostalgia, or even conviction. But they usually won’t

¹ Among other examples... despite its vital leadership support for civil rights, the labor movement of the 1960s (not to mention the 1950s, 1940s ...) was a profoundly unwelcome place for most black workers—not to mention women, those concerned about the environment, or those opposed to US imperialism abroad; the deep sexism of the leadership of the student and antiwar movements of the time had to be experienced to be believed, and the general Left was almost as homophobic as the rest of society; the environmental movement was for a long time almost wholly indifferent to (if not exacerbating of) race and class distributional concerns; the intolerance of any number of Left sects and the devolution of much Left practice toward sectarianism are too well known to require comment. For many good people who’ve at one point or another found themselves on the far side of any of these lines of exclusion, ‘the Left’ is not an unambivalently appealing, or sometimes even useful, source of identification.
use their own energies to build the organization and they are not readily mobilized by its leaders. Unions are able to collect dues money and some political action contributions but can’t put 16 million people in the street. US Greenpeace has 1.4 million members but can get only a tiny fraction of them to do more than contribute. And so on.

But if members or potential members aren’t really turned on by current progressive appeals, why don’t progressives make different appeals?

One answer is that intervening changes in the structure of society have eliminated new projects with the structure just described. Internationalization and new technology, for example, are commonly thought to preclude not just simple-minded Keynesianism, but any egalitarian economic program. Greater social heterogeneity and a more expansive range of political interests is thought to preclude not just a mass politics organized exclusively along lines of class, but any mass politics at all. And so on.

But this answer is as unsatisfying as the one that ‘explained’ dysfunctional progressive division by describing lesser legitimate differences. Unless one is prepared to argue, and live with the consequences of arguing, that there really are no general interests in the society at all, and no way of motivating those with more particular interests and capacities to advance them, it only amounts to another announcement of failed imagination.

The real problem, I think, is less the empirical availability of projects of the right kind than the difficulty of getting agreement on what should be done and critical mass in moving it forward. This owes partly to a decline in solidarities—of either an organic or ideological kind—among the activists that would provide the core of such a project, partly to resource constraints and the unfavorable terms of organizing, partly to changes in the privileged vehicle (at least since the New Deal) of progressive political aspiration, the Democratic Party; partly to the habits formed during a long period of abstaining from mass politics.

Social projects, especially oppositional ones, require some measure of solidarity among their members—and then of a sufficiently encompassing kind that it can provide the fuel for mass action. Sometimes this is supplied by ‘organic’ solidarities—arising ‘naturally’ from common race or ethnic background, common neighborhoods or friends, or common conditions of work. Sometimes it is supplied by a shared ideology—a common view of the world and one’s place in it. Most often it is supplied by both, through ideologies that connect the organic with some general theory—usually elevating the interest attributed to that organic group to some universal status. For generations, working-class solidarity was fueled both by the fact of a distinctly working-class life marked by spatial proximity, common employment, intermarriage, and shared formal restrictions on mobility, and by the view that workers had shared interests as a class which also happened to be the true universal interests of society.

Today, however, progressives cannot rely on encompassing organic solidarities, and certainly cannot rely on agreement to elevate any single interest, connected to any particular solidarity, as the universal interest.
They also lack a common ideology or framework for discussion, which makes it hard to settle disagreements or set new directions.

The Decline of Organic Solidarities

America has never been big on social solidarity, especially among the white population. But even in America, even among whites (who have always been, well, white), there was until recently at least some civic culture, rooted in relatively stable face-to-face communities, relatively stable jobs (located near the home), and an array of local public goods (schools, libraries), political organizations (local political machines, party clubs, good government associations), civic associations (churches, trade unions, PTAs, Kiwanis Clubs), sources of information (lots of local newspapers, even a little labor press), and diverse quasi-public meeting places and practices (sports leagues, taverns). Within the working class proper, moreover, shared interests were spotlighted by the institutions of mass production. In a vast assembly-line factory churning out cars or refrigerators, with each worker doing some numbingly simple task overseen by layer upon layer of oppressive management, it wasn’t too hard to figure out which side you were on.

But this world is long since lost. Today, most people commute several hours to work. They work in relatively small organizations that are far more heterogeneous (if no more satisfying) than those of old, and that often (sometimes only rhetorically, sometimes in practice) blur the lines between managerial and non-supervisory personnel. When they get home from work, they don’t talk much to their neighbors, and aren’t much involved in local community life. Shopping and watching TV are their principal leisure activities, usually pursued alone. The quality of their local neighborhood life seems to be—largely is—decided somewhere else.

Even among the non-white population, where the level of solidarity and community feeling generally remains immeasurably higher than in the white population, there is obvious fraying. The last generation of African-Americans, Asian-Americans, and Chicano/Latino/Hispanic-Americans, for example, have seen major changes in their lives in part because of progress made in civil rights. As a consequence, their communities are more fractured than they once were—fractured spatially, with members no longer living exclusively in racially-defined areas; fractured in terms of class, because with new opportunities has come greater class stratification; and increasingly fractured by intense ethnic and cultural divisions within communities which only white progressives casually lump together as undifferentiated ‘people of color’.  

2 In the group properly most identified with the civil rights struggles—African-Americans—these conditions yield three very different impulses in contemporary politics. One is a straightforward continuation of the civil rights strategy, though again its past success, and the fractioning that has followed on that, undermine it as a unifying theme for further advance toward racial justice. Another is toward a more or less nationalist, exclusivist politics, particularly among those who didn’t reap the material benefits of strengthened civil rights. This has deep cultural appeal, but under current electoral rules, and the class, spatial, and other
The Decline of Ideology and Analysis

If encompassing organic solidarities have declined, only the sectarian are prepared to elevate any one progressive interest—in race, or class, or gender, or the environment, or whatever—to the status of universal interest. Progressives deal with this ‘decline of the universal’ by making lists and assuring each other of their sincerity in embracing all these values and concerns. But ideology is not about lists or civility. It’s about giving different people enough of a common view of things that they are willing to do things with each other. And at this level, the Left sorely lacks a common ideology.

Indeed, progressives today seem even to lack a shared framework for discussing problems—a common sense of relevant facts, conventions on evidence, and so on—out of which a new analysis and strategy might come.

One consequence of this is that the sheer quality and distinctiveness of Left discussion, as compared to the general population, is lower than it once was. Ask the typical hardened Leftist in 1970 what the US was doing in Vietnam, and you got a whole rap on imperialism, offshore oil leases, geopolitics, and the rest. It may have been rough in parts, but at least it was news to the consumer of the mainstream press and TV. Ask the same person today if she thinks the deficit matters, if training is the solution to the country's economic problems, whether single-payer is really more efficient than other health insurance systems, what unions should be doing, and whether community policing works, or what to do about public housing . . . and you usually get warmed-over opinions from someone else, maybe even the editorial board of the New York Times.

But the more immediate consequence of the absence of a shared framework is simply to make common Left discussion more difficult. Adding to the fact of very different organizational concerns and the imagined fact of differences arising from innocent differences in language, the absence of a shared framework makes discussion hard to get going and easy to abandon before substantive engagement.

fractioning just mentioned, it is ultimately a dead end as a viable mass politics. A third is some sort of race-conscious class strategy. This is directed toward broad economic benefit, but insistent on the core prominence of racism in disabling the American working class from getting that. Structurally (given all that was said above about majoritarian politics, and all that we know about the need for an economic program), this last approach seems most promising in the long run. Given the decline in white working-class fortunes, it is also increasingly possible—at least if some sort of white proto-fascism doesn’t beat us there first. At present, however, it doesn’t have anywhere near the organizational base or leadership focus of the other two.

3 Or, in Lam Guinier’s wonderful phrase, as the certified winner of the ‘oppression sweepstakes’.

4 I know . . . language is never innocent. But people often are. Without disputing the importance of language, we can mourn the fact that too many discussions today run to ground on differences in what only amounts to linguistic style—different ways of describing or analysing what all parties recognize as reality. ‘Actually if pressed I would agree with you, but I don’t like the way you’re putting
If shared ideologies help underwrite shared projects, projects help underwrite shared ideologies. The lack of a common project here in the United States is part of what we’re trying to explain. In explanation of it, however, we should note the collapse of foreign projects that have in the past helped orient domestic discussions.

In the 1960s, the Left here (old and new) in some measure saw itself as precisely what the Right accused it of being—the agent of a global revolutionary struggle. While it did not, contrary to the Right’s fantasies, draw actual material support from foreign powers, it drew political capital from the fact that current US governance was contested abroad by those powers. And if relations between the US Left (new and old) and the giant pole of opposition to US global dominance—the Soviet Union—were at best deeply ambivalent, there was little ambivalence about the importance of revolutionary struggles—including those relying heavily on Soviet support—to our own practice. During the antiwar movement, for example, ‘ho ho, Ho Chi Minh, NLF is gonna win’ was not just a chant. It was a fact offered as evidence for the plausibility of our convictions, as well as a source of inspiration for the task of defining their local application. And long after Third World revolutionary struggles ceased to be seen as appropriate evidence of much of anything of relevance to the US (a change itself qualified by Sandinista Nicaragua), progressives looked to the functioning social democracies of Western Europe as models of what they were about at home.

Today, this world too is gone. The Soviet Union has collapsed. Third World revolution appears as a thing of the past. European social democracy, while hardly dead, is in deep crisis. Today then, US progressives from very different perspectives share the absence of any ‘model’ they can point to. This makes getting a common framework of analysis that much more difficult.

Nor is the absence of a solidaristic presence or ideology relieved by the presence of some issue of compelling importance for a critical mass of people. While there are many issues that are important and even
compelling (not to mention fatal) for one population or another, there is nothing that similarly affects a critical mass in ways manifest to those in it. There is no Great Depression or Vietnam. Our depressions are now ‘silent’, our wars are ‘bloodless’. The sources of our degradation are complex, obscure, distant . . . and thus not easily identified and contested.

Finally, and oppressively familiarly, we live in the midst of a cultural revolution, based on telecommunications and consumer electronics, which privatizes entertainment while linking us all as co-participants in a new world culture of which we are not authors—thus reuniting us in powerlessness. The forms of suffocation are familiar and consenting. The universal power of cultural referents (Madonna in New York, LA, Madrid, Rome, Paris, Tokyo . . . Petaluma, Teaneck . . . Alphaville) crowds out innovation from below; what innovation survives is immediately repackaged and sold as pabulum entertainment (rap music now being consumed, for example, largely by white middle-class suburbanites); cultural artifacts from more adventurous ages are continually sifted and recycled as spurs to private consumption (‘Revolution’ as a Nike commercial, ‘For What It’s Worth’ as one for Pepsi). With 64 channels and nothing on, we flip the channels anyway because no other form of entertainment and (one-way) communication is comparably available, distracting, or high in production ‘values’. And so, the ‘society of the spectacle’ thus proceeds to self-fulfillment. Reality is trumped by appearance, while the detachment of appearance from the truly real reduces politics (along with everything else) to another consumer sport. Hard in this world to keep the edge—to maintain a distinctive point of view. Not to mention—bearing on the ‘socialization’ question for the next generation of progressives—hard to raise a kid with some critical values.

Current progressives thus find themselves in a difficult, even unique circumstance. They can rely neither on some particularistic ideology, nor on any found solidarity or model, nor on any obvious external source of popular mobilization, and they operate in a culture so confident in its victory that it chews them up as entertainment. They need to construct solidarities, issues, and an arm of criticism, since none are available off-the-shelf. And in doing that, they need equally to construct a self-consciously pluralistic and democratic understanding of their own governance and practice. Worth emphasizing again is that internal conditions of Left deliberation have changed as fundamentally as external ones. Even if they were materially available to us, the particular practices and projects that made the Left more together in the past are generally not morally available, since they premised forms of ‘togetherness’ in interest and governance that were more restrictive or exclusionist than those we would accept today.

7 Of course, the complaint is an old one. Said Ludwig Feuerbach: ‘And without doubt our epoch . . . prefers the image to the thing, the copy to the original, the representation to the reality, appearance to being . . . What is sacred for it is only illusion, but what is profane—is truth. More than that, the sacred grows in its eyes to the extent that truth diminishes and illusion increases, to such an extent that the peak of illusion is for it the peak of the sacred.’
Scarce Resources

Politics—even the most oppositional, popular, romantic, revolutionary of politics—is materially conditioned. In addition to shared interests and convergent enthusiasms, it takes time, information, organizers, media, communications, meeting places, transportation, fed troops. And all these require, somewhere, some cash or its equivalent. Traditionally, progressives have looked to unions or the state to provide that support, while relying on an ample base of volunteers and individual contributions. But today unions are in deep crisis, state programs are constrained, access to both is limited by unfavorable organizing terms, the time budget of most working adults is in deficit, and much of the working class is suffering real economic calamity.

Consider the past two decades, during which we’ve experienced a sharp decline in working-class living standards (the ‘silent depression’), which inevitably gnawed at general impulses to radical action; a sharp drop in union density, which removed all sorts of resources from potential progressive use; the defunding of the Left by conservatives actively funding a radical Right; all manner of policy changes that worsened the terms of progressive organization (e.g. the deregulation of transportation and utilities, exposing union strongholds to non-union competition) or (through social service and wage cutbacks of all kinds) forced their attention to servicing the rising personal needs of members and their families rather than plotting the next great advance; the . . . well, why go on?

In this context, traditional Left answers to the resource question—most prominently, perhaps, the ‘let’s get it from the unions’ or ‘let’s get it from the latest anti-poverty program’ answers—have become less plausible. In response, progressive organizations have come increasingly to depend on a few wealthy individual donors or (about the same thing) foundations. Inevitably, however, dependence on such donors qualifies the political independence of supplicant groups. In the most common case, in which foundation cash is at issue, organizations must by law turn their activities away from the sorts of overt political actions that would most probably expand their reach. Thus constrained in their own program, they soon find themselves madly competing with one another for a fixed and quite limited pool of resources. This compounds their initial fragmentation even as it reconfirms them in dependency.

Nowhere to Party

Since the New Deal, US progressives have relied on the Democratic Party to carry their demands in public places and the competition for state power. They have always been junior partners to the party’s more powerful business constituency, and this was reflected in the party’s action even during the heyday of New Deal Democratic power. The US welfare state was always a laggard; taxes never soaked the rich; labor law was never particularly favorable to unions; the after-tax distribution of income was always strikingly uneven, and essentially uncontested. Still, progressives legitimately saw the Democratic Party (particularly struggles within it) as the natural site of their electoral practice. And in selected
cases or arenas (big union towns, for example), they were able to deal with the leadership of the Democratic Party if not as a real ally then at least as an accountable accomplice or agent in popular struggles.

But today, while most of the Left still plays out the practice justified in those happier times, it does so with less and less confidence. The reason is that the Democratic Party, while always dominated by business and never particularly friendly to the Left, has gotten significantly worse on both fronts.

As the familiar story goes . . . in the 1970s, owing both to increased competitive pressures and the failure of labor and the Left to block a destructive response to them, most business tolerance for meliorative Democratic programs disappeared, and business widely abandoned a party still at least nominally committed to such. In the 1980s, Democrats labored to reposition themselves, away from the needs of their traditional mass base, to lure business back into the party. Many began what has since become standard practice—a more or less mindless aping of Republican policies and appeals.

After several defeats at the Presidential level, and various dispirited see-saws between defenders of failed policies and proponents of the truly malign, ‘New Democrats’ were the eventual result. New Democrats are corporate liberals—generally okay on middle-class social issues (abortion, gay rights) but certainly not great on race; stern with the poor, most of whom are thought to be more or less undeserving and in any case in need of instruction on their responsibilities to society; hard on the working class, whose lack of education (among many other things) is thought to make them a bit of a joke, and profoundly hostile to working-class organization; resolute in their commitments to ‘free’ trade (i.e., and this is the only criterion, trade beneficial to their corporate sponsors); lambs before the bond market; chiefly interested in using government power (this is the advertised ‘revival of activism’) to help at least some business compete effectively; New Age in their commitments to corporate environmentalism, anti-discriminatory entrepreneurship, and Internet surfing.⁸

Whatever the ambiguities in this, it is unambiguously not us. It is not a vehicle for the Third Reconstruction, or any democratic reconstruction at all—but something approximately the opposite.

All these problems, finally, helped create a particularly disabling new one—progressives have forsaken even the ambitions of a mass politics. They have generally given up on the hope of building truly big democratic organizations or movements, at mounting programs of action speaking

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⁸ As has often been remarked by the Right, within this conformist view Clintonian New Democrats are also profoundly self-congratulatory about their own success and smarts. They see themselves as the first American generation that had something like free and competitive access to elite education and the ruling class, and take their success in that competition to mark them as Jefferson’s long-awaited ‘natural aristocracy of talent’. Accepting the boundaries of the possible to be legitimately set by business, their view on equality follows: they want just enough to keep the peace and to identify their successors in administration.
to actual majorities (or really big, functioning pluralities) of the people. They have opted instead for a more or less dignified marginality—a life of ‘purity’ in opposition or selfless (and almost inevitably, given the detachment from interest, elitist) ‘good works’. Though the alchemy of defeat has many residues, the key transformation is this: progressives have turned into liberals. They no longer trust the people. And they have therefore made a decision not really to reach for governance, especially popular governance rooted in mass democratic organization. Not to bother thinking about the sort of program that might be able to capture mass support. Not to pool resources and target advance of that program through electoral and other action. Not to think of themselves as standing for something more than themselves that has a future. Not therefore to accept any structure of mutual accountability in their actions, responsibility to the next generation of activists. Not to build a movement.

Just when just that is needed and entirely possible.

**How to Get Strong**

So far I’ve argued that the Left grows through its leadership of projects of a certain kind—those that deliver benefit to our members or ‘potential members’ (i.e. the popular forces we wish to assist) and that in doing so deliver benefit to the broader society. I’ve also argued that the conditions of Left success in devising projects of this kind are more demanding now than in the past—in part because of our own moral progress, in part because of external changes in the conditions of our organizing, in part because of changes in the structure and feasible solution strategies of major social problems, and lately because of the habits we’ve all learned through repeated defeat. In this world, to offer credible affirmative answers to the standing questions of popular progressive politics—the is it good for us and the people we want to assist? and the is it good for the broader society? questions—means doing so in a way attentive to the present conditions of our own division and weakness (i.e. the very things that make finding the ‘right’ projects difficult).

Regarding division . . . being credible probably means that any contemplated project must promise fairly obvious benefit to all of us (despite our differences), and show respect for (at least not contradict any element within) the range of our concerns. Regarding weakness . . . being credible probably implies special attention to the sorts of project that materially improve the conditions of our organizing in a political economy quite different from that of the 1930s or even the 1960s. Ideally, this improvement would be registered not only in lowered individual (group, movement) costs of organizing for particular values, but in lowered costs of coordinating our efforts. Indeed, the real ideal—the funky universal—would be for it to give vision and organizational life to new forms of the ‘general interest’ that showed how our diverse interests could be reconciled in something stronger and more appealing than the sum of their parts and that showed how doing that was the key to realizing the ‘good for the broader society’ promised above.

Nice work if you can get it.
Here are three projects that claim to get it—that meet these conditions. Each is ‘large’ in the absent sense just explored—reaching for broad popular support, visibly informed by confidence in ordinary people. At the same time, none is likely to be led by anyone other than ourselves, and each thus highlights our distinctive contribution to ‘the general welfare’. Each can be done in a way respectful of our differences, while moving us to a higher and more effective unity of purpose and action. None, I think, relies on fantasies about the current state of our organizing or our ability to think through it to something better. Each points toward a possibility for the broader society good in itself and realized through our greater unity. Each facilitates that unity by cutting below or above our particular issues—and thus requiring less jostling among those issues to get agreement—while building, in the absence of found solidarities, some commonness and capacity in joint practice. Each, more particularly, invites us to talk and act together on some things we should all be able to agree on now, with an eye—gazing both at the specific content of the projects, and the fact that they are joint—to advancing our general capacity and disposition to work together in the future. Each, finally, is not really doable—at least not on anything approaching its real appeal and force—unless a large number of us in fact work together. Each, that is, has a certain ‘critical mass’ character in which the dynamics of a lot of people doing the project make it qualitatively different and more likely of success than the dynamics of organizing by a few. The obvious benefit of the projects, their low threshold for participation, and the need for a critical mass to make them fly combine to jab back at us the question: Are there no conditions—however low the costs, however great the gains—under which we are prepared to unite?

Project I: Democracy Now

Some 75 per cent of Americans think government is ‘run by a few interests that don’t care about me’. Made clear by the mobilization of Perot, evident among middle-class liberals as well as progressives, is widespread popular concern that that which we have always claimed—that the people don’t really ‘own’ or control their government (or the rest of their lives)—is in fact true. Why not put the absence of such ownership and control of social governance, the absence of democracy itself, on the table as an issue?

Imagine a ‘Democracy Campaign’—initially targeted to states, eventually providing the basis for federal reform—that would aim to equip all citizens with the tools (rights, remedies, organizational resources) they need to practise democracy under twenty-first-century circumstances. Taking account of the ways in which the material conditions of our lives together have changed, the broad goal of the Campaign would be (hey, why aim small?) a new, refurbished, truly democratic civic infrastructure for life in these United States.

An immediate focus for the Campaign might be reform of our corrupt system of campaign finance and voter and party rights, to permit citizens free and fair exercise of formal self-governing powers. But the new infrastructure also needs to support us in other important secular social
roles—as workers, consumers, taxpayers, and shareholders in social and private wealth—in the effective exercise of power on which we know that any working democracy depends.

To speak to the American understanding of democracy (and help defeat rightist objections), our toolkit should promote liberty as well as equality and address in its own structure scepticism about the ‘excessive costs’ of sovereign self-government. Thus it should be structured in a way that chiefly facilitates voluntary association and democratic will-formation and should in general be self-financing. To make this a coalition from hell, it should also be explicitly open to everyone and not directive (beyond basic allegiance to the democratic conviction that justifies it) regarding the exercise of the power it devolves. In this campaign at least, we should self-consciously avoid the substantive policy commitments that divide people (vouchers vs non-vouchers, loggers vs spotted owls, single payer vs managed competition) and instead focus on a plausible potential basis for popular unity—building democratic capacity itself.

Would an increase in such capacity be good for progressives? Yes, immediately and certainly. We who believe in democracy are the ones most advantaged by the capacity to exercise it. Whether we wish to form unions, organize communities, create new producer coops, launch feminist solidarity councils, ‘green’ the use of federal lands, limit corporate abuses, hold politicians accountable to promises, mobilize our own scattered resources in economic reconstruction, get our views expressed in the media, or do almost anything else that’s worthwhile, some increase in our capacity to do democratic organizing would obviously be welcome. We all know that the rules of the political game we currently play by are nearly hopelessly crooked. Given an opportunity to change the rules for the better—and thereby, in effect, to respond to the unfavorable changes in background conditions or policy inventoried above—we should grab it.⁹

Would an increase in democratic organizing capacity be good for the broader society? Yes again. After all, our basic analysis of what’s wrong with current American governance is right. The great ills of American society owe to the fact that power within this society is not now organized or exercised in sufficiently popular and democratic ways—to the fact that it is concentrated, removed from those in whose name it is popularly exercised, insufficiently contested by an organized and informed people.

⁹The biggest ‘rule’ and barrier to democracy, of course, is capitalism—private ownership of the means of production, private control of investment out of the surplus of production—and what follows does not seek to change that rule directly. But that by no means makes the reforms trivial, or even not reforming of capitalism itself. Capitalism is a system of property rights; the content of those rights varies, chiefly depending on the strength of popular organization; the reforms proposed would immensely facilitate such organization; in doing that they would permit the qualification of capital’s property rights and a demonstration—essential to mobilizing support for more stringent democratic efforts—of the gains from such qualification. Also, the reforms facilitate greater popular control of capital itself, which would permit experimentation with different forms of ownership and production—worker coops, regional production authorities, etc.—than the traditional firm.
With problems owing largely to an absence of democracy, increasing
democratic capacity is key to their solution. This is easy even rhetorically:
‘This was supposed to be a government “of the people, by the people, for
the people” but at present “the people” do not rule, which is basically
why things are a mess. Let’s talk about what we need to do to get “the
people” back in power.’

How might the Democracy Campaign’s reforms be framed? Perhaps as a
series of new bills of rights for each of the roles just mentioned, with the
explicit background expectation throughout that the state encourage the
exercise of the rights elaborated. Here’s a brief set of ideas on what those
rights and facilities might be—offered again as a way to get discussion
going, not to set the limits of that discussion.

For all of us as citizens/voters:

Citizen/Voter Bill of Rights: It shall be the right of all voters to
participate freely and equally in an electoral system in which
candidate access is not determined by money, party competition is
open and fair, and rights to referendum, recall, and initiative are
secure.

What would this imply? Among other things... universal or same-day
voter registration, making election day a holiday, voting systems
designed to weigh more accurately minority electoral sentiment, a revival
of the ‘fusion’ option in party politics, lowered barriers to third-party
qualification and maintenance requirements, universal referendum,
recall, and initiative rights, and, of course, democratically-financed
elections. Strikingly, virtually all of the above enjoy majority political
support.

For all of us as workers:

Worker Bill of Rights: It shall be the right of each employee to form
associations at the workplace free of the interference of employers.

Without a genuine right to organize on the job workers cannot form
independent organizations. Without independent worker organizations
democracy is a joke. Sensible labor-market policy and increased equality
are also virtually unimaginable—as is, for that matter, a revived Left.
Through ‘card check’ certification, penalties on employer interference
with organizing, explicit supports for benign industrial relations practices
by employers (e.g. more explicit conditioning of eligibility for govern-
ment purchasing contracts on such), protection of the rights of members
of ‘minority unions’, and other means, we should aim explicitly at
building independent worker organization. In all likelihood, I think and
hope, such organization will take a variety of forms, extending beyond
the ‘exclusive bargaining representative’ model of present. Again,
democratic organizations need to be continually reinvented in light of
changed circumstances. What is important within this variety is that the
organizations be truly ‘worker-owned’ organizations—that they be
independent of employer domination. What is important for all of us is
that unions in this sense—indepedent worker organizations, dealing
with employers, taking a variety of forms as suited to local circumstance and the needs of their members—grow wildly again.

For all of us as consumers:

*Consumer Bill of Rights:* All consumers of goods and services shall have the right to form associations to monitor, bargain over, and lobby for the regulation of the integrity and sale of such.

Here's just one example... From the experience of the Nader-inspired Citizen Utility Boards (CUBs), established in a few states in the 1980s, we know that it is possible for consumers to be organized very effectively on a mass scale—distribution and purchasing networks of producers can be used to organize consumers. There is no reason why the CUB model might not be extended to the likes of the US Post Office, Social Security and Veterans administrations, public housing authorities, insurance companies and banks, and other government agencies and private producers. The model is voluntary, self-financing (what is added to the distribution network is simply information available to consumers of the good or service), and effective as consumer protection.

For all of us as taxpayers:

*Taxpayer Bill of Rights:* Taxpayers shall have convenient facilities for banding together in order to shape the priorities of the public purse and the management of public assets, including the public lands, airwaves, public works, government data, and other common assets of our heritage and creation; the information necessary to exercise their sovereignty; and the access to government decision-making necessary to implement it.

Establishing these rights would entail such things as set-asides of public revenues from private use of public lands to fund citizen watchdogs on such use; the requirement that all data collected by the government be made available, for free and in accessible form, to citizens; vastly increased taxpayer standing rights in administrative and judicial proceedings bearing on the disposition of public assets or monies; a restoration of public regulation of the airwaves (particularly with regard to citizen access, more diversified ownership, etc.).

For all of us as shareholders:

*Shareholder Bill of Rights:* Individual and collective shareholders shall enjoy rights of effective control over their assets.

The actual owners of most corporations generally have very little control over them, and this separation of ownership and control has a good deal to do with the lack of corporate accountability. The most pointed and immediate case is that of private pensions—$3 trillion in assets beyond the control of its worker-owners. We need to give workers, consumers, local communities, shareholders and other stakeholders some say in corporate decision-making. Reforming current pension law to permit greater control and direction by those who want it would be a natural
place to start. ‘It’s our money, why can’t we invest it?’ could be the not-so-catchy slogan for the effort, which would drive the bankers crazy. (This might be coupled with more adventurous efforts to popularize the truly arcane—the always ignored public responsibilities of the Federal Reserve to act as steward of the national economy and promote equitable development within it. That would drive bankers insane.)

If Americans had these rights and supports, what might be the result? The honest answer is that nobody knows for sure, since they have never had them in the past. But it seems likely that the results would include: a much livelier and more engaged civic culture; very substantially higher rates of voter participation; a significant reduction in corporate and government fraud, abuse, and waste; a more disciplined and programmatic approach to problems affecting the public welfare; a stronger and more effective party system for the processing of citizen demand into effective governance; and better enforcement of statutory commands, with less bureaucracy.

**Project II: Sustainable America**

Some 80 per cent of Americans think the economy is ‘moving in the wrong direction’. Why not turn it around? Instead of assuming economic catastrophe as the backdrop or occasion for our organizing and only mopping up after the carnage, why not put the organization of the economy itself on the table? Even on the assumption of ‘realist’ constraints in that organization—markets, motivational problems, and, for the foreseeable future, overwhelmingly private ownership of capital—surely we could do much better than what is now being done to us. We can build an economy that is fairer in the distribution of benefit; more supportive of individuals, families, and communities; less hell-bent on exceeding the environmental carrying-capacity of our bodies or the Earth; less wastefully consumptive of our time—far too much of which, as everyone knows, is spent in a rat-race to gain income for more consumption to glitter the lives we’ve emptied out to income-producing work. We can build an economy with much greater stability, much less stress, producing much higher living standards (if no more physical consumption) for virtually all people.

Would building that economy be good for us? Yes, nothing would more fundamentally change the terms of our own organizing, or more forcefully advance us as those truly interested in ‘the general welfare’. And nothing would, along the way, better force us to talk to one another about how, concretely, we can reconcile our different issues of concern, and thus achieve greater unity. We do indeed want an economy that is red and green, racially just and attentive to the changed work patterns of women. Now that we know something about what each of these reasonable demands requires, let’s put them together and show how the satisfaction of each can be made to support the satisfaction of others. Which in fact they can be, under conditions of greater popular control.

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Would reorganizing the economy in ways that improved the general welfare be good for the broader society? To ask the question is to answer it.

So, where might we start?

What is most basically wrong with current economic policy is its failure to block (and in fact its positive crime of promoting) the ‘low-wage option’ on industrial restructuring—the option that seeks profit and increased competitiveness achieved *via* downsizing, temporary workers, job insecurity, environmental degradation, and cutbacks in social spending, regulation, training, and taxes on corporations and the rich.

We need a campaign both to foreclose the low-wage option and to harness the productive energies of workers and communities on a more satisfying restructuring path. We need a Sustainable America to limit certain options for capital and simultaneously indicate an alternative, more democratic restructuring route that is viable under realistic competitive conditions.

**A Common Objection**

Before describing the project corresponding to this ambition, one objection to its possibility needs attention. I’ve just suggested that we can take control of our own economy. But many doubt that is any longer possible. Leaving aside questions of political will and organization, the view that we can’t meaningfully direct the economy is most commonly fueled by notice of the internationalization of American product and capital markets. With products and money sloshing freely across borders, it is thought, no government or other popular authority has much control over the economy within its borders.\(^\text{11}\)

Typically, this picture is contrasted with that of government policymaking during the generation after World War II. At that time, imports and exports claimed only a tiny share of US Gross Domestic Product,\(^\text{12}\) and most countries were subject to more or less explicit controls on their movement of capital to the United States. The task of government management of the economy was thus easier than at present. By relaxing fiscal or monetary policy, it could stimulate demand for new products, confident that demand would be satisfied domestically. Responding to it, firms would invest in increased capacity. Again, investment led to

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\(^\text{12}\) In fact, the additive share of imports and exports, as a percentage of GDP, was small and relatively stable for the half century before 1970—generally under 10 per cent. In the 1970s, that share doubled, introducing qualitatively new competitive pressures into the US economy. As noted in the text, however, since the early 1980s the combined import-export share of GDP has hovered around 23 per cent. While competition within the US economy has certainly increased since that time, it is driven as much if not more by factors—technology, deregulation—other than internationalization per se.
increased productivity, and lower real costs for goods—which benefitted the general population. The effectiveness of this Keynesian policy was further enforced, or left undisturbed, by the fact that within the ‘mass production’ system of the time firms increased productivity rapidly without extensive training of their workforces.

Today, however, international competitors stand ready to beat domestic firms to the market, qualifying the usefulness of simple fiscal expansion. Monetary policy is weakened as a tool by some of the same forces, and by the emergence of an ‘international investment community’ that regularly bets against domestic expansion by speculating against the currency of the expanding country. And a vast pool of cheap labor stands ready to take unskilled US jobs.

As commonly offered and interpreted, this analysis leads to the familiar liberal prescription—unable to control the economy, government should restrict its role to helping train labor for skilled jobs, and hope that multinationals will come here to offer them—or even less ambitious suggestions.

But while the analysis contains many germs of truth, its common statement and interpretation are in relevant part wrong. In part it overstates the actual degree of internationalization, and in part it simply misunderstands the institutional bases of modern production that still permit guidance through politics.

Savings and investment rates still correlate closely by nation, a correlation that seems unaffected by speculative money flows. This suggests far from complete integration of capital markets. Moreover, the bulk of goods and services traded internationally are raw commodities and capital goods, not the consumer goods or services that take up the vast bulk of national income. To be sure, the US economy is more exposed to international competition than it used to be. About 20 per cent of what Americans consume is now imported, about double the figure of twenty years ago. However, that figure has been reasonably stable since the early 1980s. With the cheap dollar since 1987, there is also more investment by Europe and Japan in US industry. Indeed, much of the increase in both exports and imports is the result of the movement of products in and out of these foreign-owned operations in the United States. Moreover, when the business conducted by foreign-owned plants in the US is excluded from the accounting, and we look only at wholly US-owned companies, they export about as much as they import.

The other 80 per cent of the economy remains highly domestic in orientation. Many firms sell nothing to, and buy nothing from, other countries. Those that export typically sell no more than a few per cent of their output beyond US borders. In only a few cases—consumer electronics, apparel, and metal-cutting machine tools—does foreign production satisfy more than one-third of US consumption.

Even if the ‘internationalization’ thesis were fully correct, however, the conclusion that political guidance of the economy is impossible does not
follow. The reason is that highly productive firms are no longer, if they ever were, self-contained islands. They are parts of complex webs of shifting interdependence—involving sometimes rivals, sometimes suppliers, sometimes workers, sometimes banks. Highly productive firms benefit from a reservoir of productive inputs and possibilities of recombination described by these linkages. They also rely on a wide range of public institutions and social supports—in training, technology diffusion, and other things that they cannot supply on their own. This ‘institutional infrastructure’ of advanced production is what is really lacking in the United States, and is what accounts for the superior performance of some other economies. More immediately, however, it is vital to firm health, and does not and cannot slosh across borders in the way that products and capital can. And that creates the possibility for politics.\footnote{This possibility is realized more effectively in other countries than in the United States. Faced with the same pressures of internationalization, other countries have been more willing than the US: 1) to impose wage norms on their economy (through increases in minimum wages and extension of collective bargaining agreements to non-union firms); 2) to seek directly to improve the human capital of low-wage workers (in the US, most training goes to managerial employees); and 3) to provide firms, in regional locales, both the physical and institutional infrastructure needed to support high-wage economic performance.}

In brief, internationalization makes life harder, but it should not stand in the way of the economic alternative contemplated here. If anything, it only underscores the centrality of popular democratic organization in defining that alternative.

This is so not just for the political work that needs to be done (the ‘heavy lifting’ against resistance), but also for the actual organization of productive forces themselves.\footnote{These are actually inseparable, since the political work is necessary both to organize our capacity to make the productive contribution (e.g. necessary to help us form new-age unions and economically competent community groups) and to that contribution being seen as such—something that won’t happen until it’s in demand, which won’t happen until certain ways of making money are foreclosed (requiring better harnessing of popular energies) and certain standards are imposed (requiring monitoring and enforcement mechanism rooted in those energies).} Without forsaking our interest in redistribution, we as a Left need to get beyond economic programs that consist merely in that. If the Left once benefitted from a Keynesian regime that transformed particular interests in higher wages into the general interest in effective demand, Keynesianism is now heavily qualified. Now we need to be at least as attentive to effective supply—of the productive inputs (human capital, our own investment funds, the institutional infrastructure needed to realize gains from the right kinds of economic cooperation inside firms and communities); and of the political constraints (moral rules on the treatment of people, standards on the ‘greenness’ of production, the use of state purchasing power to advance both, the use of popular organization to administer throughout) needed to secure those inputs and assure the reproduction of a sustainable economy. The liberal solution to current economic problems is to send everyone to school and hope that some multinational
corporation will eventually hire them. Our solution should be to assert popular control over the forces of production themselves, and to make that viable through the gains from cooperation and administration that only popular organization can secure.15 Instead of only trying to prepare people to survive in a runaway economy, we want to put some controls on the terms of economic production itself, assist those willing to comply with them, punish those who are not. We should seek and accept greater responsibility for as well as control of the economy, confident that both can be exercised and achieved by strengthened democratic organization.

Back on Track

Imagine, then, a Sustainable America campaign. We begin by announcing a shared intention to oppose this economically and morally stupid low-wage course:

Diverse as we are, we stand together in declaring that ruinous low-wage restructuring must and can be stopped, and we hold our elected officials and ourselves accountable to stopping it and starting something better—a high-wage, low-waste, more democratically controlled economy. We oppose anything—NAFTA, GATT, etc.—that furthers current destruction. We support policies aimed at raising social standards—on wages, production conditions, environmental sensitivity—and developing popular capacity to enforce them. We want public policy to support a new social contract, with supports for firms complying with its terms and punishment of those defecting from it. We seek and accept responsibility and control in the administration of this contract. Its terms are . . . .

We need then to fill in the blanks of a positive alternative to present carnage. Again, there are lots of ideas about what might be in that alternative—from new institutions for wage-setting to better programs for manufacturing (and service sector) modernization, from new forms of domestic regulation more heavily reliant on citizen watchdogs to social tariff regulations of international trade, from suggestions on shortening the working day, week, year and redistributing employment to allied suggestions for increasing the social wage or ‘citizen dividend’ available to all citizens. Consider the following three suggestions—exemplary of the sorts of new institutions, or thinking about new institutions, we should be encouraging.

15 For example, it is virtually impossible to get an effective system of training going unless it is tied to wage norms, and hard to get either going unless we have both a) very good knowledge of what is happening inside industries and firms, and b) the capacity there to insist on compliance with training and wage standards. And what is true of training is true of most other standards or requirements on production (e.g. occupational health and safety, source reduction, appropriate use of new technology, etc.). For their negotiation, monitoring, and enforcement in numerous, dispersed, and heterogeneous firms or communities, these will require popular competence and power within those sites. Government alone cannot do the job.
On trade... a social tariff regime takes measure of cross-national differences in production costs owing to differences in labor protections, social benefits, or public-spirited (e.g. environmental) regulation, captures those differences in trade flows, and directs them so as to reduce inequalities. If, for example, country A has costs 30 per cent lower than country B owing to such factors, exports from A to B might be subjected to a 30 per cent tariff (or some negotiated portion of 30 per cent), with the money gained from the tariff repatriated to country A to fund projects of sustainable economic development. This idea is subject to endless refinement and variation. The basic point, and one with which I think most progressives agree, is to build institutional mechanisms into the world trade regime that tend worldwide: a) to level up rather than down on wages, benefits, and environmental health and safety, and other protections; while b) preserving the possibility of trade; and c) facilitating the exercise of democratic control over economies. A social tariff regime would tie the welfare of the working classes of the North to those of the South, while redistributing large amounts of capital from North to South, and limiting corporate incentives to relocate from more to less democratically organized economies merely because of the increased costs to capital implied by more democratic control. For emphasis: the social tariff option does not amount to national protectionism. Rather, it is a way of encouraging trade on moral and equalizing terms, in an internationalist frame.

On working time... there seems to be little prospect of assuring employment for all, given the current pace of technological change (and the productivity explosion that is about to be released with progress in learning about new technology use), without either a) a truly massive increase in world demand and consumption or b) a deliberate effort to shorten working time and redistribute employment opportunities. Given environmental degradation and the current ‘time squeeze’ on most employed individuals and their families, the second path seems far more attractive, especially among the developed countries that already far exceed, in their share of global consumption, anything like an equitable share.

On the social wage or citizen dividend... we know that all manner of socially useful activity is not now (and will not anytime soon be) rewarded in markets, but is (will be!) performed by people who need to eat; we know too that popular support for generic social entitlements is greater than for means-tested programs; and we know that the fiscal capacities of welfare states operating under competitive capitalism and ‘real world’ constraints on domestic political support are now exceeded by the provision of untaxed generic entitlements sufficiently generous to assure all a decent living standard. The solution is to have a generous dividend, coupled with an employment requirement (itself coupled with a full employment guarantee), but to integrate it as ordinary income in a progressive tax regime. So, everyone would get a standard ‘social wage’ supplementing their private income, but the cost of providing such to those who don’t really need it would be recouped in the form of taxes. Done with a little care, this can improve the material well-being of super-majorities of the population (extending well into the ‘middle class’ now
defecting from public responsibilities toward the poor) in fiscally stable ways.

With these last two sorts of reforms we could have an economy that provided for all, at full employment, with much more time for each other, at present levels of aggregate consumption and vastly increased aggregate welfare, in ways that would be fiscally and politically stable under competitive conditions—i.e. the beginnings of a serious progressive economic alternative. Combined with the first reform on North-South dealings, they would provide the beginnings of a global progressive alternative.

My aim here is less to state the details of such an alternative than to draw attention to the need to state one, and to have a variety of groups and constituencies not classically identified with economic concerns declare it as their own. All of us, not just those who think of themselves primarily as workers, are materially conditioned. None of us can make much progress on our particular issues unless we exert greater control over the economy itself, and make clear at the national level what promoting that now needs to look like.

Whatever is done in national economic policy discussions, moreover, needs legs—organizing projects on the ground that both carry the national message locally and act constructively in local arenas to show what taking it seriously would mean there. What might this look like?

Consider Milwaukee. There, the labor leadership of Progressive Milwaukee, joined by environmentalists, housing activists, women's groups, black ministers, and local elected officials, has initiated a process to develop, publicize, and then implement a program for a Sustainable Milwaukee—a plan for the metro area that would produce family-supporting jobs, invest heavily in low-waste production and transport, generate popularly controlled investment, and more. Most fundamentally, the project is about declaring and enforcing a new social contract, with double-barreled support for 'good' firms that comply with the terms of the contract and punishment for 'bad' firms that do not.

The planning process is itself understood as an organizing, educating, and outreach effort. Issue groups on each of the above issues have formed, led by community leaders with special expertise in the area, doing outreach complementary to the overall planning effort. The bus drivers’ union leads on transportation concerns. Low-income housing organizers pore over mortgage data. Inner-city manufacturing unions consider how to prevent firms from even thinking about relocating, and how to bring young people into union apprentice programs. And so on. Real people, actual organizations, beginning the process of defining their own vision of what the economy of southeast Wisconsin should be.

The kinds of people who are driving the Sustainable Milwaukee project are to be found in every major metro region in the country. If encouraged and supported, they could provide both the local face of national campaigns and a consolidating, forward-looking, this-is-what-we-want-to-do-right-here force for local economic restructuring.
Some 50 per cent of voting Americans (and, presumably, more non-voters) say they would like to have a ‘new political party’ in the United States. Why not give them one?

Building a progressive new party would be good for the general population. The reason large portions of the general public say they want a third party is that they think the two they have are hopelessly corrupt and wedded to special interests, that some wider choice among alternatives would be good in general, and that in particular at the moment the sorts of policy choices we need to make in America—choices about getting the economy under more democratic control being at the top of the list, followed shortly by concerns about restoring some general decency, civility, and fairness in our culture—aren’t easily made along a conventional liberal–Right spectrum. Don’t we agree? A party defined by its commitments to democracy and to the social control of the economy that is one instance of it—one that compromised with no one on race while moving the address of America’s problems with pluralism beyond liberal inclusionism to the pursuit of shared power—would be very good for the country indeed.

A new party of this kind, however, would be of most immediate and striking value to us, for it would provide a way of uniting a presently divided Left while vastly extending its reach. Some organized, independent, progressive, electoral presence, more particularly, would be a way to mobilize support that will never be mobilized through direct action; to sustain discussion of positive alternatives; to unite in the electoral arena progressives who basically agree with one another, even if they don’t work that often together, and to express agreement in ways accessible to those not already in the loop of movement work. And, of course, it’s a way to pressure the Democrats and Republicans toward actually representing the interests of ordinary Americans.

Discussion among progressives has always recognized this, but also recognized the formidable barriers to entry by third parties in the US. These typically make votes for independent candidates ‘wasted’ votes or

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16 Super-majorities of those saying they want a third party, interestingly, believe that the essential tasks at the moment are to ‘clean up government’, ‘save our jobs’, and ‘save our country for our children’. They strongly support radical campaign-finance and other democratic reform to give citizens direct say in government, more directive trade and industrial policies to improve working-class jobs, and much more government accountability in the stewardship of public resources (monetized and not). Their views don’t exactly spring from a sophisticated class (and race, and gender, and environmental . . .) analysis, of course, but then we haven’t exactly been offering one to the general public in recent years. What is important is that the issues of democracy and class are central to this constellation, and that most of these people are not punitively conservative on social issues (they don’t like abortions, for example, but certainly don’t want government to ban them) or hopelessly racist (they are suspicious of affirmative action, but strongly support substantive equal opportunity for all children). It’s something to work with, and perhaps lead, by showing how a non-liberal (they hate liberals) program of social reconstruction might work to deliver general benefit.
'spoilers', which reduces support for third parties even among those who agree with what they have to say.

The basic response to this problem by the non-sectarian progressive community, offered since the New Deal, has been to avoid third-party efforts and instead work for progressive reform inside the Democratic Party. Jesse Jackson is the most important recent example of this, but there are many, many others.

Such work should certainly continue. But the time is ripe—made ripe by the more or less wholesale decomposition of the Democratic Party as a progressive force, the more or less wholesale domination of it by business interests opposed to any new democratization of American life—for diversifying the portfolio of progressive strategies to include independent politics, i.e. the establishment of a political party structure distinct from the Democratic Party.

It goes without saying that this structure must be internally democratic (the party should be governed by members, not money); value-centred (standing for something, not just unaccountable candidates); broad in its vision (green, consumer, feminist, uncompromising on racial justice, pro-worker, but not exclusively identified with any one of these concerns); and willing to engage in those non-electoral activities (education of members, support for non-electoral issue campaigns, building of internal organizational culture through all sorts of means) needed to give electoral efforts real context. Most immediately, however, it must have a way of avoiding the wasted-vote syndrome that destroys most third-party efforts.

The New Party is/does all these things. On the last, most vexing, issue, its general solution is only to run its own candidates for office on its ballot line where they have a serious chance of winning. Where they don’t, it generally does nothing, or informally endorses the better of the major candidates, or, where the law permits, formally endorses the major party candidate (the candidate willing, of course) on its own ballot line. At this early stage in the party’s development, thus taking the wasted-vote problem seriously drives our independent efforts down to the local level. We are not running people for President or senator—at least not yet!—but for city councils, county boards, water commissioner, school boards, the occasional state assembly seat. Only after having established ourselves at this local level will we try to move up the electoral greasy pole.

So far, this strategy appears to be working. Active chapters are building in eleven states, and their win-rate on candidates—after 100 elections—is nearly 70 per cent. Third-party politics again appears possible. It just takes some patience and time and self-restraint.

As a broad progressive third party that doesn’t waste votes, and that works both inside and outside the Democratic Party, the New Party is a natural electoral vehicle for a more consolidated progressive movement—a movement that itself should be built in part through greater national coordination and presence, and in larger part, in terms of organizational energy, from the ground up. It offers a natural outlet, at the
local level, for consolidating an electoral presence around a common progressive agenda. It thus gives national campaigns local bounce. And it gives local efforts at independent electoral politics a connection to a national effort at the same, in part through the medium of shared non-electoral work.

But I care much less about the New Party per se than the idea that it stands for—indeed independent progressive politics with a practical intent: i.e. that wants to win with its convictions, not just declare them in defeat.

Bottom line are two considerations—one about influence, the other about real progressive power (taking American politics to a much higher level of possibility than we seldom now dare even conceive). Either is sufficient to make the case for a viable third party of the sort described.

Regarding influence . . . the relationship between the Left and the Democratic Party has become an abusive relationship. Now almost completely dominated by business, Democrats take our votes but abandon our principles in governance. As in any abusive relationship, to end the abuse you need the ability to leave. To be heard inside the Democratic Party, the Left needs a credible threat of exit from that party. A third party that is willing to go inside as well as outside, and that in going outside doesn’t waste votes or spoil—that is real both in its eye toward practical constraints and its ability to operate as a party despite them—is exactly the sort of threat needed.

Regarding the big play—actually institutionalizing a progressive politics in the United States . . . even if it wanted to move a progressive program, the Democratic Party, at least as presently constituted, is simply not the popular organization needed to wage the sorts of battle described here. It doesn’t show the accountability of leaders (elected officials) to voters that is needed to make constructive choices about the future, and doesn’t have the organized connection to non-electoral coalitions and forces that is needed to give elected officials real popular weight as well as discipline. It doesn’t have any of the organizational ingredients for what we need (a need underscored by the fragmentation and decline in solidarities discussed at length above)—something to provide, over time, a coherent vision of governance, an arena for constructing and revising that vision, and an ability to act on it. For both reasons, we need an alternative. Since it can be built, let’s agree to build it.

Investing in Ourselves

All the projects just described look outward—to a possible mass politics inspired by but not confined to the Left. Getting serious about them,

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17 It will be asked: ‘But why not build such organizational ingredients within the Democratic Party?’ The two-step answer is a) that they will not be built within the party until the Left has a threat of exit from the party—there’s just no incentive among existing politicians and funders; but b) given the availability of that alternative, the project of institution building itself has alternative sites for enactment, and a new party would be a more promising site than an old. Given a choice between fresh land and a toxic waste dump, where would you like to build your new house?
however, recommends that we also look inward, to the infrastructure and culture of our own organization.

Just as a modern economy relies on all sorts of public goods—roads, sewers, telecommunications networks, etc.—a modern Left (even more than the Left of old\(^\text{18}\)) needs to make investments in organizational infrastructure to facilitate its own coordination and impact. We need, for example, to be more self-conscious and ambitious in the use of electronic communication among ourselves; to harness the energies of what are now highly scattered and largely inaccessible sources of technical expertise through shared networks of information diffusion and technical assistance of use to activists; to establish our own financial intermediaries and common sites of deposit; to take care of our own through explicitly sheltered labor markets (keeping people in bread as they move from one project to another, rather than throwing them onto the external market), and common (permitting transfer across projects) retirement and benefit plans that we control; to organize our recruitment and validation of our values (while giving parents a break) through summer camps and other sorts of shared recreational activity; and more. Above all, perhaps, we need to train our activists in more advanced ways than the usual 'here's how to run a meeting' leadership training. We need shared schools that teach people the arts of practical politics in this age, and give them a safe place to talk about and puzzle through the meaning of their activism.

In the 1970s the Right got together and said, 'hey, let's run the country.' They invested millions in their own coordination, including just such infrastructures of training, policy analysis, technical assistance, TV schools, and more. Their destructive project continues to bear fruit today. If we ever expect to run the country, we too must invest directly not just in projects, but in our own coordination and capacity.

As some of the examples may suggest, some of this recommended infrastructural investment would contribute to the development of part of what we now lack—a shared analysis or ideology. It would do so by building a more common organizational culture, with more possible points of entrance by more people, and better supports for conversation among them—conversation that would plausibly go somewhere constructive and common. The character of our shared culture itself, however, needs to be directly attended.

As already suggested, I think it is important that the culture of the Left should be a learning culture—one that supports wide-ranging discussion, rewards attempts to advance understanding, is resolutely non-dogmatic in its willingness to confront changed circumstances, and to test any

\(^{18}\) Not to split hairs or reinvent the wheel...much of what is recommended in what follows could, with slightly different referents, be said of much successful Left practice in the past, which was almost infinitely more sophisticated in its targeting of projects and in the richness of its cultural life than the Left at present (although, again, commonly in ways that by current moral sensibilities would be offensively exclusionist). The 'more' in the text is meant only to reprise what has already been said regarding the decline of organic and other solidarities. So split apart are we that the need to pay attention to common terms is greater.
theory of what we’re about by its ability to define viable projects of our advance. But both as a good in itself, and to be this, our culture must also be kind, forgiving, and fun. At a time recent enough in everyone’s memory to be recalled, to be ‘Left’ meant—if again, often only within too narrowly defined communities of interest—to be associated with the most loving, funny, informed people around.¹⁹ Now, for too many, it means simply going to boring meetings for another round of assignments and abuse. It is not real informative. It’s not much fun. As a result, it’s not very inviting to any but those whose principles already bar them from not participating.

We need to correct this. We might begin simply by better accommodating within our own practice the demands of our lives outside it,²⁰ but we can get more adventurous than that. As remote a prospect as this may sound, we need to find ways of genuinely enjoying, not just respecting, each other’s company again. That doesn’t require that everyone do the same thing in common—a giant Left sing-along—though common activities also have their place. It does require that we build into our organizational plans some explicit space for quiet, for informal get-togethers, for family activities and parties (sedate and rowdy), for discussion groups, rock bands, softball teams, street theatre . . . or whatever other zany nonviolent things political people might like to do together. This isn’t rocket science. We need something other than heavily structured meetings, something that’s fun and rewarding, that involves us but doesn’t require that we always be ‘on’. Just as solidarity now needs more to be constructed than found, culture needs to be aimed at. We need to take more care, beginning with ourselves.

So What’s the Movie?

Imagine, then, that the above organizational suggestions were taken seriously. Imagine that in a few years time we had radical campaign finance and voting reform winning in a dozen states. Imagine that we targeted states with significant urban populations, and that within those populations we had mass projects of reconstruction up and running. Imagine that those projects, as they naturally would, hit head-on into local power elites, and that they decided not to stop at protest but to establish themselves as the base of a new independent politics. Imagine that all this were done while articulating a credible economic alternative to the ‘neoliberalism with a human face’ propagated by the better of the major parties. Imagine that, in our cities in particular, this mix was organized politically to the point of being politically threatening to those who now offer cities only abandonment—that it did not wait or hope for

¹⁹ I know, I know. There were always humiliations, unnecessary fights, sectarian stupidities, and more. But there was also a fairly deep sense of something at least available to people—before they chose to muck it up with any of the above—that was pretty inviting to those initially accepted by those communities.

²⁰ For example . . . well into the third decade of the modern women’s movement, well after all that we have learned about the ways different organizational practices are ‘gendered’ and how resistant the division of labor inside the household is to formal labor market and political freedom outside it, how many organizations have a rule that membership meetings will not be held without provision of child care?
but effectively required their attention as a practical matter of their own survival. Imagine that while all this was happening the Left was busy getting sharper, tighter, and more enjoyable.

All this is more or less immediately within our reach, and would change the face of American politics. Presidential hopefuls as soon as 1996 would need to take account of the weird development. A vast array of progressive forces would find a new organizational lease on life. They would be joined by millions of others, newly awakened to the possibilities of a more benign, hopeful, and rational politics. A Left pole on national policy discussion, rooted in actual mass constituencies, finding voice in many movements and campaigns but also speaking between them, would be established.

Within our reach, but not yet grasped. Progressives can again emerge as a powerful force in American national politics, but our doing so will require a real decision, a choice against habit. Politics as usual—most immediately the sectarian politics of ‘wreck and split, divide divide, soon we’ll have nothing!’ or our increasingly liberal politics of ‘let’s all agree to love one another but do nothing serious together’—will not save us. And nothing on the horizon promises to force salvation on us. We are all long past any fantasy of making history under circumstances of our own choosing. The question before us—best answered after a bloodless gaze at the failures of our present organizing as well as the depravity of present policy, the uniqueness of our historical position as well as our discomfort with one another, our own worried faces as well as the ignorant beauty of our children . . . the fires of this world no less than the stones of our regret—is whether, knowing that to do so requires a break from our recent divided practice, we are prepared to make any history at all.

We should be. Let’s get to it.