The present moment should be especially inviting to progressives, if they really understand their commitments to democracy, because the limits of a liberalism not so essentially committed are increasingly apparent. Without organized popular support, liberals cannot do the heavy lifting against entrenched and resourceful actors—almost always corporate interests—that is often needed to enact desired policy outcomes. Without the monitoring, enforcement, and trust-inducing capacities of socially-rooted organizations, they often cannot administer policies effectively. When it comes to fighting opposition, they 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. Popular awareness of these limits creates an enormous opportunity for developing a viable alternative: uniting for a change and building a progressive movement in America. A movement of more popular democratic governance and the organization to support it.

This opportunity must be seized, however, which is where progressive problems start. While progressives recognize more clearly than liberals the need for democratic organization, we face a problem of our own—the right kinds of organizations do not arise naturally. They need to be built, and revised and built again in light of changed circumstances, through political projects of mass appeal that energize and consolidate our own ranks. And the ability to do that has recently been made more difficult by all sorts of developments, from the erosion of neighborhoods to the decline in urban manufacturing to the rise of issue and “identity” concerns different from the class concerns that once unified progressive politics.

To find our way to a new practice, we need to take account of these difficulties and then, recognizing them, figure out what the appropriate projects are today. To a degree and with an urgency that I cannot recall since the late 1960s, there is considerable demand inside the progressive community for some common program of action, and considerable demand outside that community among the general population, most of whom would never describe themselves as “progressive,” for the sorts of demands such an action program might naturally provide. What is needed is some clarity and honesty about our present situation, and a willingness to break with old habits in improving it. Are we up to it?

How We Might Unite

JOEL ROGERS

What follows is based on a talk given at a national meeting of U.S. progressive activists in May 1994. 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 for countless discussions of these themes.

When you look at American society what do you see? 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, more new prisons than schools. The business-dominated media celebrates it all. But for the rest of us, the inventory of destruction and unnecessary pain recalls that current policies fail to “promote the general welfare” or to ensure “liberty and justice for all”—and why we are saddened and outraged by how we now govern ourselves as a people.

What can we do about it?

We can in fact do better. Neither circumstance nor our nature prohibits improvement. 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 arise from how this particular society is now organized, how power within is now exercised, the fact that that power is not now exercised in sufficiently democratic ways. And all these things are within our power to change.

By “we” I mean progressives, a different breed from the corporate liberals with whom they commonly ally. Progressives actually believe in democracy. We believe that people of ordinary means and intelligence, if properly organized and equipped, can govern themselves, and that if we do, the results will be better than if we do not. Liberals lack such confidence in ordinary people, and so put less emphasis on popular democratic organization. They favor the “kinder, gentler” administration of people, usually done through the state, as the best means to social improvement.

WHY WE ARE WEAK

U.S. 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 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 in 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 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 PAC contributions but can’t put 16 million people in the street. U.S. 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 progressive make different appeals?

Two related reasons. On the one hand, the conditions of getting progressive agreement on projects have gotten more demanding. On the other hand, most progressives have just stopped looking; they’ve given up on mass politics.

GOODBYE SOLIDARITY

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.

For example, even in America (which has never been big on working class solidarity), 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 oversee 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.”

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 U.S. 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.

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 U.S. governance was contested abroad by those powers. And if relations between the U.S. left (new and old) and the giant pole of opposition to U.S. 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 anti-war movement, for example, “ho ho, Ho Chi Minh, N.F. 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 United States (a change itself qualified by Sandinista Nicaragua’s), 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, U.S. 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 absence 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.

Current American progressives thus find themselves in a difficult, even unique circumstance. They can neither rely on some particularistic ideology or “found” solidarity nor on any obvious external source of popular mobilization. They need, in effect, to construct solidarities and campaign for issues, since neither are handed to them. And doing this will require that they be more cosmopolitan and deliberate than most of their predecessors about the terms of their coordination that they look squarely at their own fragmentation and construct organizations and projects designed to relieve it. Merely invoking the happy memories of times when the left was more together than it is now will not do the trick, because the conditions of internal left deliberation have fundamentally changed.

GOODBYE MASS POLITICS

Partly for these difficulties in talking to one another, partly because of their shared experience of defeat over the last 20 years, progressives have forsaken even the ambitions of mass politics. They are generally no longer in the business of aiming at truly mass democratic organization, of mounting programs of action speaking to actual majorities (or functioning pluralities) of the people. Abandoning mass politics, they have opted instead for a more or less dignified marginality, or a life of elite “good works.” They no longer really reach for governance.

Just when this change occurred is debatable. It was in any case more process than event. Pressed for a date (mostly, I acknowledge, for the white left), however, I’d pick the first Wednesday of November 1972. Until the McGovern campaign, those manifestly shaped by the upheaval of the 1960s had not fully participated at the leadership level of a national campaign. McGovern’s capture of the Democratic presidential nomination promised in some sense the first “fair” election, the first real test of “our” values against “theirs,” in our lifetime. And we were completely wiped out.

After that, until Clinton, the self-identified left was never really a presence in the campaign of any Democratic nominee. There was the Carter weirdness in 1976. The Mondale shutdown in 1984. The Dukakis fiasco of 1988. There were always unsuccessful candidates favored by that racy Hollywood Democratic elite (Hart the most important). And there remained the still undeciphered, and certainly not “decharismaticized” Jackson, alive (if wounded) after enduring a decade of attacks from Democratic and media elites, and the memory of his spectacular campaign in 1988.

None of this gave much general sense that Democratic Party politics at the presidential level was in any way a metaphor for our generation’s taking power.

Until, of course, our generation did take power, at which point we weren’t running our generation anymore. All progressives voted for Clinton in 1992, with a greater degree of excitement and hope than they liked to admit, but with
the self-understanding of the merely tolerated. Among whites, those who had really protested the invasion of Vietnam had long since lost out; it was time to turn things over to the friendly student government types who had occasionally come to demonstrations and tell us how very troubling they found the whole issue. Time to hand it over to the foundation hands, the FOBs, and an entirely new generation of power-hungry children who had somehow grown up in our absence from the scene. It wasn’t 1972.

Among African-Americans, Clinton offered the possibility of some advance in race relations, and an ease and familiarity in dealing of the sort acquired by successful Democratic politicians in the South. But he did so according to a DLC picture of the world that had room for anti-poverty efforts but not employment, sympathy for the devastation of our cities but no money for urban reconstruction, solid support for anti-discrimination efforts but not economic organization or real political power. The Clintons were people far more comfortable with African-Americans than any previous presidential couple, but no more accountable to their needs, and quite prepared to engage in public humiliation rituals of Jackson to show their “independence” of concern.

The early 1970s also commenced the 20-year decline in American 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 other changes in policy, starting during the Carter administration, that permanently changed the terms of progressive organization (e.g., the deregulation of major unionized industries, exposing them to non-union competition) and increased the immediate needs of progressive constituencies (and thus the time progressive organizations needed to spend on servicing those constituencies rather than strategizing their seizure of power); and so on.

At some point, in any case, the scope of progressive ambitions changed. The fear permanently lodged that they were in the minority. And as a minority they did best to hunker down, hopeful only that the storm might one day (not their day) pass. And as that happened, progressives found themselves increasingly drawn to desperate oppositionism or liberalism, to denunciations of all exercises of public power or to the belief that it could not in fact be popularly exercised. For the realization of progressive values, of course, these are equivalent defeats.

STUPID!

And a terrible mistake. Despite the peculiar organizational difficulties progressives face now (and for the foreseeable future), despite the need, arising from those difficulties, for them to “construct” a future for themselves (solidarity and all the rest) rather than wait to inherit it, the present moment is ripe with opportunity. All manner of forces are now conspiring, as they have for close to a generation, to put on the table of American politics the only issues that make it even more uncomfortable than race: democracy and class. All around us we see the wreckage of an unregulated, not-popularly-controlled economy: falling living standards, families strained to the breaking point, rising inequality. All around us we see the alternating feebleness and corruption of formal government incapable of solving problems, not even trying, in hock to monied interests, almost incapable of rational debate, certainly incapable of doing the heavy lifting needed to put the country right.

These observations, moreover, are not the privileged insights of progressives. Everybody knows this. Everybody—well, almost everybody—knows that “the country’s in a mess,” that government as we know it cannot solve the problem, that “the people” need to get organized, and that greater popular control needs to be exerted over an economy that is killing us. Most Americans are sick to death of “save yourself, not your brother” politics of greed and striving. Most Americans desperately want more control over the lives they see continually disrupted and degraded by current economic governance.

There is, in short, huge demand for precisely what progressives have been arguing for forever: greater social control of the economy and the democracy of which it would be one instance. Not a bad demand to satisfy. Nothing could more readily advance the general welfare, while consolidating distinctive progressive (as against liberal) nostrums for current disorder. And nothing would do more to relieve current progressive organizational difficulties.

But the opportunity must be explicitly seized.

HOW TO GET OUT OF HERE

These truths seem self-evident, or very nearly so.

Progressives will not measurably increase their power in American society merely by working harder at the same things. We are already working desperately hard and getting nowhere.
Progressives will not measurably increase their unity merely by expanding the list of concerns that provide a base for one-time coalitions. Nor will the relevant unity be achieved by getting deeper agreement among themselves that all these concerns are shared by all progressives on an ongoing basis. Such agreement is welcome, but already evident. The question is how to utilize it organizationally—how to get everyone who shares these concerns, however unevenly, to support something together.

Progressives cannot pretend the world has not changed in certain material ways that affect their strategies of organization. The economy is more competitive, and simple redistributive strategies are no longer enough. Unless we are involved in the actual organization of the economy on the “supply” side, we are doomed. The conditions of organizing are less favorable: the dispersion of communities, the lure of privatizing consumer electronics, the increased exit threats of capital, the weakness of political parties, the literal capitalization of electoral politics, the decline of public libraries, schools, parks, streets, business districts, spaces.

And again, progressives cannot make their appeals only to those who already identify themselves as such. We need to accept the discipline of doing something with broad appeal. Not because we are worried about a fight, or think it can be avoided, but because we realize that we cannot win any important fight alone. We need others to join us, many others, if our values are to be realized in any substantial way.

In brief, we need a project, of benefit to our existing base, solving a larger and current problem in the society, that would mobilize those not now moving and organize those already in motion in directions potentially congruent with our own. Given our own divisions, this project must be sufficiently obvious, and obviously of some potential benefit to all of us, that its statement and debate are possible according to some shared terms.

A project. Or several such projects. Here are three that meet these conditions.

PROJECT 1: DEMOCRACY NOW

Some 75 percent 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 the people don’t “own” or “control” their government anymore. Why not put such ownership and control of social governance, such democracy itself, on the table as an issue? Certainly it would be good for us. Certainly we could agree at least on this as a basis of our own coordination.

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 practice democracy under 20th century circumstances.

An immediate goal might be reform of our corrupt system of campaign finance and voter and party rights. Despite the fundamental nature of the reforms proposed, this part of the campaign would appeal to individuals in their more or less conventionally recognized social role as citizen/voters. But the campaign would also include, and from the outset be framed as including, reform aimed at enhancing opportunities for democratic action in other core social roles that is, as workers, consumers, taxpayers, and shareholders of private and public wealth. A democratic toolkit offered, explicitly, as a way of rebuilding the whole of the civic infrastructure on which a vibrant democracy depends. Democracy itself, not just some part of it, being the issue.

How to do this? Perhaps by developing and publicizing and winning some new “Bill of Rights” for each of the “roles” just mentioned. Here’s a brief set of ideas on each offered as a way to get discussion going, not to set the limits of that discussion.

Citizen/Voter Bill of Rights: It shall be the right of each citizen 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.

Enactment of this bill would require universal or same day voter registration, a serious exploration of alternative voting systems designed to represent minority electoral sentiment more effectively than “winner take all” rules currently do, a revival of the “fusion” option in party politics, lowered barriers to third (and fourth) party qualification and maintenance requirements, universal referendum, recall, and initiative rights, a right to “none of the above” ballotting, and no doubt more. Strikingly, virtually all of the above enjoy majority political support.

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, sensible labor market policy, and equality, and rising living standards, are virtually unimaginable.
Shareholder Bill of Rights: Individual and collective shareholders shall enjoy rights of effective control over their assets.

The "owners" of corporations 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 $2 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.

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.

From the experience of the Nader-inspired Citizen Utility Boards, 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. There is no reason why the CUB model might not be extended to the likes of the U.S. 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, and effective as consumer protection.

Citizen/Taxpayer Bill of Rights: Citizen/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.).

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 engaged civic culture; almost infinitely higher rates of voter participation; a significant reduction in corporate and government fraud, abuse, and waste (with certainty, we can say that none of the really major scandals of the last several years, e.g., the S&L fiasco, pension defaults, nuclear weapons cleanup disasters, slum lead poisoning, massive securities fraud, continued redlining of inner-city neighborhoods would have occurred if these sorts of monitoring arrangements were in effect; a more disciplined 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.

Sounds pretty good. How to operationalize it initially? By taking back from the right the control of the initiative process, and running a left-wing answer to "term limits USA" in the 20-odd states with initiative rights. Couple that with legislative campaigns, lots of direct action and citizen petitioning, in the non-initiative states. Again, consider a major coordinated national campaign on campaign finance reform to kick the whole thing off.

PROJECT II: SUSTAINABLE AMERICA

Some 85 percent of Americans think the economy is "moving in the wrong direction." Why not turn it around?

What is most basically wrong with current economic policy is its failure to block (and, in fact, to promote) the "low-wage option" on industrial restructuring the option that seeks profit and increased competitiveness achieve via downsizing, temporary workers, job insecurity, environmental degradation, and cutbacks in social spending, regulation, training, and taxes. Instead of a rising tide to lift all boats, American corporate and governmental elites are draining the pool even while they cling, shortsightedly, to their privileged position on the top of the ladder.

We need a campaign to foreground the low-wage option and to harness the productive energies of workers and communities in a more satisfying restructuring path. We need a "Sustainable America" because we need an economy that will truly support and sustain us, and build for the generations that come, in full awareness of the interdependence of all life on this planet. We need an economy that moves from ruinous low-wage sweating and competition to one marked by greater control of production, exerted with competence and verve, exerted by ordinary citizens.

Flowery rhetoric, to be sure, but the campaign itself could be quite concrete. It would combine national policy campaigns against "low-wage" policies with
a series of local organizing efforts in major urban centers, aimed at actually asserting productive popular control over the economy.

At the national level, a campaign on the minimum wage would be a good fit, or an “our money, our jobs” campaign targeted at “subsidy abuse” by government, or better rules on the use of dislocated worker training monies, or a gigantic summer youth jobs effort, or an attempt to put conditions back on Congressional approval of GATT, all might be ways to tap into natural constituencies. Less important than settling such issues right now is agreeing that we want to settle them in the future. Merely announcing our intention to oppose what we see as this economically stupid and morally stupid low-wage option—making that itself an issue—is enough for the moment.

But we must be more than naysayers, and offer some positive ambitions. We would need as a group to say something like

Diverse as we are, we stand together in declaring that ruinous low-wage restructuring must and can stop, 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. The terms of this contract are...

We would then need to fill in the blanks for a positive alternative to present carnage. There are lots of ideas available about what might be in that alternative. The point here, however, is to see the need to state an alternative, specifically an economic alternative, and to have a variety of groups and constituencies not classically identified with economic concerns declare them as their own.

Whatever is done on national policy on labor market regulation or trade however, 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 for national campaigns and a consolidating, forward-looking, this-is-what-we-want-to-do-right-here force for local economic restructuring.

PROJECT III: NEW PARTY

Some 50 percent 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?

The reasons we would want to have some independent progressive electoral presence are clear enough. It’s a way of mobilizing support that will never be mobilized through direct action. It’s a way of sustaining discussion of positive alternatives. It’s a way of unifying, in the electoral arena, progressives who basically agree with one another, even if they don’t work that often together, and of expressing that agreement in ways accessible to those not already in the loop of movement work. And, of course, it’s a way of pressuring the Democrats and Republicans toward actually representing the interests of ordinary Americans.

Discussion among progressives has always recognized this fact, but also recognized the formidable barriers of entry to third parties in the United States
These typically make votes for independent candidates “wasted” votes or “spoilers,” which reduces support for third parties even among those who agree with what they have to say. The basic position of the non-sectarian progressive community, exercised since the New Deal, has been to avoid third party efforts and instead work for progressive reform inside the Democratic Party. 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 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-centered (standing for something, not just unaccountable candidates); broad in its vision (green, consumer justice, feminist, committed to racial justice, pro-worker, but not exclusively identified with any one of these concerns); and willing to do those non-electoral-campaign things (education of members, support for non-electoral issue campaigns) 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, it simply does not run its own candidates for office where they do not have a serious chance of winning. Instead, it does nothing, or works with the most progressive major party candidate (nearly always a Democrat, of course) it can find. Thus far, this strategy appears to be working. Active chapters are building in 11 states, and their win-rate on candidates is nearly 70 percent. Third party politics 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 built in part through greater national coordination, in part 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. 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 independent progressive politics with a practical intent. The left is not going to be heard inside the Democratic Party until it has a credible “threat of exit” from that party. The relationship between progressives and the Democratic Party is an abusive relationship. They take our votes, and we get little back. As in any such relationship, to end the abuse you need the ability to leave. And the Democratic Party, at least as presently constituted, is simply not the popular organization needed to wage the sorts of battles described here. We need an alternative. We need a progressive version of GOPAC or the Christian Coalition—something to push our values in electoral space.

**Some Sort of A Project: 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, 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) 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 well-funded 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—a hundred Highlanders!—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 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 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. Now, for too many, it means simply going to boring meetings for another round of assignments and abuse. It is not very 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,11 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 (seder and rowdy), for discussion groups, rock bands, softball teams, street theater … or whatever other zany nonviolent things that 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 MOVE?

Imagine that the above organizational suggestions were taken seriously. Imagine that in a few years time we had radical campaign finance and voting reform. 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 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 this mix was organized politically to the point of being politically threatening to those who now only offer cities abandonment—that it did not wait or hope for 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 their 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—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.
Notes

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 U.S. imperialism abroad; the deep sexism of the leadership of the student and anti-war 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.

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 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 Lani 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 analyzing what all parties recognize as reality. “Actually if pressed I would agree with you, but I don’t like the way you’re putting it because it hurts my feelings or makes me worry that on some other point where we might disagree (not that I know yet that we will) you won’t hear my objection clearly, and so I don’t want to talk any more, it’s just too much hassle” is an extremely common move, the frequency of which is partly driven by the ease with which it can be made. Needless to say, it limits the range and depth of conversation.

5. This self-conception was—and this was part of its strength as well as of its eventual vulnerability—often expansively inclusive (at least at the level of cultural referents). In some weird way, even after King got killed, everyone from Cesar Chavez, Frank Church, Jean-Luc Godard, and Jane Fonda (she was learning!) to Wayne Morse, Ho Chi Minh, Fidel Castro, and the Isley Brothers all seemed to be on one side, trying to do some good, against the corporate suits running America, which was trying to run the world.

6. For many, especially among the new left, this was the real thing—an effort not just to throw off neocolonial/neo-imperialist bondage and aggression, but to do so in ways not sacrificing of democratic pluralism. The defeat of the Sandinistas was, for the new left, as depressing as the utter collapse of the Soviet Union was for some sections of the old.

7. To a degree that I think remains uncomprehended among whites, the sheer amount of disrespect shown Jackson in 1988 may have made that election in some ways equivalent to what the defeat of McGovern was to whites. For a group that never had any illusions about its arithmetic “minority” status, the issue in formal electoral politics has always been the degree to which alliances with whites could be genuinely non-racist with regard to leadership—whether whites would ever accept being led by blacks. Vividly, the failure of liberal and even progressive whites to rally around the Jackson candidacy made clear the grounds for doubt on this point. While the temptation to an exclusive nationalism has always, and understandably, been alive in the African-American population, this fueled the temptation in obvious ways.

8. Editorial pages don’t like to admit it, but any genuinely popular program of social reconstruction implies a significant measure of in-your-face conflict between “the people” and “the powers that be.” And that conflict will not just be about values. It will be about power. Most Americans, for example, would like a greener economy, higher and more equal wages, fewer bombs and better health care, some time with their kids, cities that function, and better relations between the races. But you can’t construct an environmentally sound economy without reduction in the sources of pollution inside privately owned firms. You can’t bring more equality to labor markets without some measure of wage regulation, secured either through the state or unions. You can’t convert to a peace economy, or get national health insurance, without eliminating at least some firms entirely. You can’t work out a significantly improved relation between work and family without assigning real value to things that are not now valued in
markets, and getting people some time away from work while continuing to pay them. You can't find the funding base needed to rebuild cities to pay for cops and parks and education without taxing those who have the funds. And you can't get clear of the wreckage of 400 years of racism through love alone. For any of these things to happen, people with power and resources need to accept constraints or reductions in their relative standing. And that is not something that is ever done without some conflict.

9. 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.

10. One glaring deficiency, noted at the meeting, was the quality of present training on how to be more effective in appearances in mass media.

11. True, 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.

12. 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?