What To Do Now?

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Richard Flacks invites progressives to stop quarrelling long enough to act together on a shared program, to focus that program on corporate behavior and the democracy needed to improve it, to think big and go on the offense in their demands and suggestions (in the process, returning to politics from their shrinking PC political ghetto), and to recognize that we no longer live in the 1930s -- a recognition that should displace single-minded focus on the nation state, and inspire more deliberate use of government power to build the competent popular organization, now lacking, on which a working democracy depends.

I agree with all these conclusions, and applaud Flacks' constructive and vigorous statement of them. Still, I disagree with some fundamental analytical and programmatic details in his essay. Because I believe those details are essential to changing progressive program and organization, I concentrate here on my disagreements.

Starting with analytics: Flacks, like many contemporary commentators, overstates the importance of economic globalization. This leaves his proposals for community control without a supporting theory (why should small communities have the power to control their economy when the nation can't control anything?) and tempts unwarranted fatalism. To be sure, globalization has increased capital's exit threats and bargaining power over workers and communities, qualified the benefits of unilateral national reflations, and put downward pressure on the wages of low-skilled manufacturing workers; progressives clearly need some programmatic counter to the levelling-down logic of NAFTA and GATT, perhaps starting with some targeted cross-border solidarity against the slumlords of the global economy. But we should not miss the bigger and more accessible target of economic mismanagement at home. The domestic economy is real. Goods bought and sold in the United States are overwhelmingly produced here, and productive assets here are overwhelmingly owned by domestic residents unable to leave anytime soon. Moreover, across countries with comparable import penetration and export dependence there continue to be huge differences in, for example, wage levels and inequality, environmental enforcement, corporate behavior, and the strength of worker organization. The first fact tells you why the second can be true: the national (and regional and local) political framework and institutional setting within which economic decisions are made matter greatly.

The big issue in US labor markets is not internationalization, but our double failure to foreclose low-wage, high-waste firm restructuring while building the revenue-neutral tax, human capital, industrial modernization, and other systems needed to support high-wage, low-waste
alternatives. Progressives will miss all of this if we accept the "everything moves, place doesn't matter" dogma promoted by our do-nothing neo-liberal leaders.

The flip side of exaggerated globalization is neglect of those changes within the domestic economy -- new technology, firm reorganization, urban divestment, spatial dispersion, a permanent increase in female labor force participation -- that have undermined traditional solidaristic economic strategies by increasing workforce heterogeneity, and changed in consequence the necessary institutional program of an effective democratic politics. Why precisely should the middle class ally with the poor on social spending, and on what terms; what sort of education and training system would appeal both to more and less educated workers; what power can unions and community organizations find in alternative regulatory enforcement strategies also appealing to "we hate big government" déclassé white-collar strata; what is the base within firms and families for new rules governing work-family relations and the division of labor inside the household; what, in this age of inequality and social secession, is the mass normative basis for egalitarian appeals? Left unanswered, these questions will continue to block a mass progressive politics. I believe there are credible answers: among them, metropolitan regional labor market development strategies uniting cities with inner-ring suburbs; advanced productivity bargaining around technology, training, and work organization by unions now as interested in baking the pie as carving it up; the formalization of work standards and sectoral career paths to permit job and labor market transitions; serious commitment to lifelong learning; and new approaches to welfare state transfers and "tax universalism" schemes that, by taxing social benefits to the better off, could restore fiscal stability while universalizing formal citizen entitlements. But Flacks, focusing so much on internationalization and the constraints it allegedly imposes on national policy-making, does not explore these questions.

Coming now to programmatics: though I agree with Flacks' emphasis on the importance of progressive unity, I think his proposals about how to overcome current divisions are inattentive to the forces generating disunity. Progressives are divided for what they, on reflection, consider pretty good reasons of spirit and flesh. Whatever the dysfunctional divisions of single-issue advocacy and identity politics, both (especially the former) arise from felt and objective real difference in position and concern. And whatever the diseconomies of not putting the Greenpeace list together with NOW or NAACP or Citizen Action, those lists are separate now because the organizations controlling them see themselves competing for a limited pool of funds. We need some motivating project to get these folks to cooperate in any meaningful way.

Flacks knows this: hence his proposal for a coalition of all progressive organizations at the national level, united on program, operating apparently largely outside electoral arenas. But the project he sketches is more or less a redescription of what we have already: laundry lists of concerns, agreement that in principle we'll do each other's laundry, no clear motive for doing it, no specific joint campaigns, no organized deliberate mass politics. This pudding lacks theme and necessary concreteness. I fear that it promises continued defeat, with more meetings. Dark times indeed!

Particularly troubling is Flacks' pooh-poohing of electoral politics, specifically the project of building an independent electoral machine. I believe progressives desperately need some sort of electoral organization of our own, for many reasons: for most Americans, politics is voting, and they will not show their support for progressive values unless the ballot box provides opportunity to do so; unless progressives have direct power in the state we will not be able to use it to improve the terms of democratic organizing, including both rules and money resources; unless we have ongoing organizational capacity to reward and punish elected officials, they will not be
accountable to our values; precisely because it has been neglected by progressives for more than a generation and thus does not compete with existing activities, electoral organization is more likely than any non-electoral advocacy organization to meaningfully unite divided memberships; and only an organization disciplined by an interest in actually winning mass support is likely to say anything sensible and believable about program.

Here then is an alternative suggestion. Let's build that machine. Let's build a progressive version of the Christian Coalition, promoting a value-centered politics in those electoral arenas available to ordinary citizens, and simultaneously promoting state and municipal initiatives and referenda, tapping progressive populist sentiments, with laser focus on the uniting (not exhaustive) signature issues of corporate accountability and democratic reform. So, slates of progressive local candidates sharing a national infrastructure on training, program, and money (a "party" if you will), coupled with initiatives and referenda that promote, as natural starters, radical campaign finance reform and "living wage" requirements on all corporations (beginning with those receiving public contracts or economic development funds).

And here is some good news and a question. Just this sort of work -- complementary to existing issue advocacy, providing a specific focus for coordination across groups and between organizers and intellectuals, building the new institutions and rules-changes that we know we need, mobilizing at the grassroots, inspiring discussions of a new program -- is finally beginning to happen through the New Party, the Democracy Campaign, and Sustainable America. At a time when divided progressives need to show that they can agree on something, that they can act in concert on that agreement, and that what they agree on enjoys support beyond their declared ranks, why not support this work, making it bigger and more visible by getting involved yourself, starting now?

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