



CIVIL LIBERTIES

How the New Civil Rights Movement Can Build on the Lessons of the Old

Creating change requires understanding the power you have, and building a movement goes beyond protests.

BY MARSHALL GANZ | JULY 20, 2016





The Dec. 1, 1955 arrest of Rosa Parks on this Montgomery, Alabama bus — after she refused to give up her seat to a white person — launched the civil rights movement. The bus is now on display at the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn, Michigan. (Photo by Jeff Kowalsky/AFP/Getty Images)

We asked a number of contributors to share their reactions to a [post by activist and author Michelle Alexander](#) that we published earlier this month in the aftermath of the police shootings of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile. Here is a response from political organizer [Marshall Ganz](#), a senior lecturer in public policy at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. You can view all other responses by clicking on the [“Building a New America”](#) tag.

Sixty years ago, the African-American bus riders in Montgomery, Alabama, recognized that they could turn their dependency on the bus to get to work into the bus company’s dependency on them for bus fare if they used a resource they had — their feet — to walk to work instead of getting on the bus. But it only worked when they

all acted together.

There's a lesson here about power that could be of value for participants in Black Lives Matter, the Dreamers and supporters of Bernie Sanders' economic justice campaign, all movements that are welcome, long overdue and promisingly rooted in the moral outrage of a rising generation.

A major challenge for any social movement is equipping that energy with the strategic capacity and organizational structural that enables it to build the power it needs to achieve its goals — which would be of benefit all of us. These are lessons I was privileged to begin learning as an organizer with SNCC in Mississippi and UFW in California, both movements in which many of us benefited from excellent mentoring, coaching and training.

Social movements have expressive, instrumental and organizational dimensions — story, strategy and structure. In their expressive mode they begin to tell a new story that gives voice to moral claims at the heart of a movement: demands for dignity abused, injury unrecognized, hurt unhealed, justice denied. Because movements combine fresh understandings of oneself, of the conditions requiring change and of the values at stake, questions of identity, cultural resources and voice

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loom especially large. Movements that achieve success, however, are those in which participants have grappled successfully, at least for time, with those latter dimensions as well: strategy and structure.

Translating energy into outcomes requires strategizing on how to turn what you have into what you need to get what you want. In the political world this means understanding power — not only as a way of describing how things are, but also in creating the capacity we need to get what we want — or, as Dr. King described it, “the ability to achieve purpose.”

At one level, our understanding of power is intuitive: if you need resources I have more than I need resources you have, who’s got the “power?” I do. Turn it around and you do. But if we each need the other’s resources equally, to create a co-op day care for example, we can create more “power with” each other than we can access on our own. In the UFW for example, we first organized a credit union, a cooperative bank, to begin building the “power with” each other — interdependence, solidarity, confidence — to be able to take on the power that the grape growers exercised “over” us.

So the power question requires asking: First, who holds resources to effect the change we want, whether it’s changing a law, policy, practice, language? Second, what resources do our people have, whether it’s time, commitment, money, courage to go to jail, discipline? Third, how can we combine our resources to influence what those in power need, whether it’s business as usual, getting elected, staying out of court, keeping a reputation or just minimizing cost?

Who decides the policies and practices that shape the behavior of the local police, for example? Who hires them? Who appoints him or her? Who makes the rules? Who's on the city councils? Do they have businesses? Do they need customers?

The fact of the matter is, when resisting change becomes more “costly” than accepting change, change happens. This is not to say that working for greater mutual understanding, having lots of “conversations,” and developing our capacity for empathy doesn't matter. It does. But to create the conditions that enable real collaboration we have to find ways to balance the power. To change this world as it is into the world as it ought to be we have to be clear about how it works as it is. As Jesus said to his disciples in Matthew 10:16, “If I am to set you as sheep among wolves, you must be innocent as doves AND wise as serpents.”

Structure is the other major challenge because most social movements are born in resistance to the structure participants have experienced as oppressive. So movements at least as far back as the Exodus begin by fighting for “freedom from” oppressive structure. But then they discover a big difference between “freedom from”

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the oppressor, a kind of negative freedom, and “freedom to” create a new world, a positive kind of freedom. This freedom requires agreement about how to work together: how to make decisions, how to honor commitments, how to hold ourselves accountable.

Otherwise, and this will not be unfamiliar to anyone, constant internal struggle with these questions consumes much of the energy, imagination and determination needed to devise the strategy to turn the resources they do have into the power they need to actually change the world. Feminist sociologist and activist Jo Freeman described this as the “tyranny of structurelessness:” Opaque, unaccountable, personalistic, informal — and often — counterproductive structure appears in the absence of transparent, realistic and accountable structure needed to move forward.

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MAY 10, 2013

This is critical in the US where political power is radically fragmented into the local, state and national in which local elites tend to dominate local power. But if a movement can overcome its fragmentation to learn, strategize and coordinate so as to combine national purpose with local action, it can leverage state

fragmentation into real power. But it won't happen without creating the structure that makes it possible. On the right — the Koch Brothers, for example — have been very effective at leveraging local and state successes into national power and vice versa. During its heyday, the civil rights movement of the 1960s created this capacity as well, operating through five national organizations which, even though they had their fights with each other, knew what each other were doing. They could coordinate support for critical local campaigns — e.g., Mississippi, Selma, Birmingham, and nationally focused mobilizations — e.g., the 1963 March on Washington. SNCC and CORE, for example, disagreed with SCLC and the NAACP about the Mississippi Summer Project. The next year, however, everyone converged to support of the Selma campaign.

In the youthful energy of Black Lives Matter, the Dreamers and the Sanders movements — as well as in the possibility that we may elect the nation's first woman president — there's hope, especially if we come to realize that when it comes to the deep racial, gender and economic inequalities that cripple our country, none can really be eradicated unless they all are — in housing, health care, employment and education as well as criminal justice. Each has its own roots, history and power dynamics, and each requires its own focus, leadership and capacity. But the danger of exclusive focus on offering unique opportunities to particular individuals to ascend into the elite, while leaving whole communities behind, is that the former becomes a substitute for the later, often turning those who remain in need of change against each other rather than on those responsible.

When Dr. King was assassinated in 1968 it was when he was

planning for the “Poor People’s Campaign.” In the end, we cannot hope to change the deep power inequalities that increasingly divide our country unless we recognize the need to change all of them for all of us.

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MARSHALL GANZ

Marshall Ganz worked on the staff of United Farm Workers for 16 years. A political organizer, he is a senior lecturer in public policy at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

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