

The New Corporatism in American Politics and the Grassroots

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From the Tea Party to the Coffee Party, How Political Parties Grow the Grass and Mow the Lawn

There are moments in history when driven by economic and social conditions, by war, or by political problems, grassroots groups spring up from below, among rank-and-file workers or people in local urban or rural communities. Usually the Democratic Party has succeeded in gathering up such movements, domesticating them, and gathering them into its fold and making them part of its electoral machine, to the benefit of corporate America. Overtime, however, the labor unions and the national African American and Latino civil rights groups became so tame and tired, that they ceased to provide the social base required by the party if it was to be successful in elections.

So today, the major political parties, both Republicans and Democrats, are creating new foundations and non-governmental organizations to expand the base of the parties and attract new voters. Those party think-tanks and NGOs in turn create what could be called pseudo-social movements, often describing themselves as "grassroots," though, in fact, they are created and controlled from above by inside-the-beltway D.C. organizations. These new corporate organizations, now propelled by the internet and social networking, are changing the landscape of social and political life.

The Republican Party and conservative think tanks and foundations summoned up the Tea Party to give the Republicans new life after its defeat in the national election. The Democratic Party has similarly over the last several years inspired or created a number of such group — MoveOn.org, Repower America, Reform Immigration for America, and the Coffee Party — organizations that both work to shape the politics of social movements and win a new base of support for the Democrats. The organizers of these groups, using electronic media, social networking, and creating coalitions that absorb other smaller groups, create organizations that often meet in the local coffee shop, churches, American Legion or union hall, but have an agenda set in Washington by foundations and NGOs which in turn are controlled by the two major parties.

The new corporate movements inspired and controlled by the Republicans and Democrats have the same relationship to a grassroots movement that genetically modified grass imbued with the Roundup pesticide does to a country meadow. The new grassroots is not so much a pasture as it is a modern suburban lawn, seeded, fertilized, watered and mowed by the foundations — ultimately to be enjoyed by the Republican or Democratic Party as the site of campaign barbecues.

A New Corporatism

What we're witnessing is the development of a new corporatism in American politics. Some use "corporatism" to refer to control of our economy and culture, society and politics by the corporations — and certainly we have that problem. I use "corporatism" here, however, as political scientists use it, to refer to government and party control over other organizations and movements. Most important among these are those started by the Democratic Party, its leaders or simply those who share the party's goal of creating a new activist base, while also setting limits of activism and ideological dissent.

The goals of the neo-corporatism are two: First, to be able to mobilize people concerned with social

problems and turn them out to vote for the major parties. Second, to create a series of organizations that can prevent the development of politically independent movements with agenda of their own. The trajectory of these groups is that in the name of political realism and expediency, they become bureaucratically centralized — usually in Washington — and pursue opportunistic and pragmatic goals within the framework set by the Democratic Party and its legislative agenda. The ultimate goal of the Republican and Democratic Party neo-corporatism is to prevent the development of independent political parties which might disrupt the regular rotation to power of the two capitalist parties.

Those who join these new groups are folk looking for a way to influence politics in a progressive direction, well-meaning people, often new to politics, though some of them longtime activists and genuine grassroots groups. They join and participate in these organizations because they seem to have the potential to influence national policy in a good direction, though in the long run the goal of the politicians who conjured up these organizations is precisely to circumscribe the limits of activism and to contain their followers within the ideological boundaries and political programs of their respective parties and of corporate capitalism.

Neo-Corporatism: A New Version of an Old System

Political parties, of course, have always given political expression to other organizations and movements and have always worked to create or to control others groups and developments for the parties themselves. The Republican Party was during the late 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries became the expression of groups such as the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) and the U.S. Chambers of Commerce, and other such employer organizations, or of wealthy capitalist farmers and later of corporate agribusiness. And the party acted in government as arbiter of those various capitalist interests within the capitalist system.

At the same time the Republicans and those employer organizations worked to keep in tow and in check small business associations which were otherwise often at odds with the big corporations. The Republicans fundamentally fought for the interests of finance and heavy industry, while keeping small town merchants and manufacturers and farmers from breaking with big capital and heavy industry. Similarly they fought for the wealthiest farmer groups, while working to keep medium and small farmers from breaking ranks. The Tea Parties of those days were Citizens Alliances, Midwest Grange groups, and nativist associations which rallied and railed against socialists, labor unions and immigrants.

More recently, the Republican Party's economic conservatives, still representing the interests of finance, industry, and oil, also both helped to create the evangelical religious right which acted to draw lower middle class and working class white voters into the party's fold. Perhaps that the starting point of the neo-corporatist organization of politics was with Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority, established in 1979. Falwell's group provided the prototype for other such rightwing religious organizations which simultaneously drew people into the Republican Party and headed off the development of political alternatives on the right.

The Old Democratic Party

The Democratic Party before 1965 was based primarily on the Solid South — the racist white politicians who enforced segregation and disfranchisement of African Americans below the Mason-Dixon Line — and also the corrupt big city machines in place like New York and Chicago which turned out the immigrant and working class vote. At the same time it also always represented finance, industry, and service corporations — though often consumer goods rather than heavy industry. The Democrats, however, found their most important political support through mass

organizations of labor, African Americans, Latinos, and women. Beginning in the early 20th century, the Democratic Party had succeeded in politically subordinating the American Federation of Labor and its craft unions to its corporate political agenda, while also coming under pressure from those organizations to adopt elements of their agenda.

During the 1930s, a powerful, militant, and politically radical labor movement arose that in some states created independent labor parties. The experiment, however, was short lived. After the rise of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in the 1930s, the Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Democrats also succeeded capturing the CIO. With the AFL-CIO merger in the 1950s, the Democrats and the labor unions formed a partnership that lasted, with much better results for the Democrats than for the unions, until today.

Similarly, with the rise and then the victory of the civil rights movement of the 1960s, the Democratic Party, after long resisting African American demands for equal rights, succeeded in drawing in and subordinating the NAACP and other African American organizations, while also becoming the primary vehicle, however inadequate, of the black political agenda. Likewise with the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) and the National Council for La Raza whose leaders and members been drawn into the Democratic Party's sphere of influence. The organized women's movement too succumbed. The women's movement of the 1970s found its organizational expressing in the National Organization for Women (NOW), which also became politically subordinate to the Democratic Party, as did most other women's organizations.

The Movements Ossify

The workers movement of the 1930s, the civil rights organizations in the 1960s, and the women's groups in the 1970s had all been tumultuous movements, but once gathered into the Democratic fold they ossified. The bureaucratization of labor organizations and the growth of a privileged caste of labor officials, together with the routine character of collective bargaining from the 1940s to the 1970s, led the unions to become pragmatic, moderate, and weak. They also grew out of touch with the changing character of the workforce, far more "male, pale and stale" than the membership.

Similarly, the civil rights organizations moved from the period of radicalism to respectability, from militant leadership to liberal leadership, and from real confrontations with power to symbolic reenactments of the past. The women's movement, linked to the labor movement and the democrats, largely shared the same fate of succumbing to the system, ceasing to be a movement in the streets and largely becoming a legislative lobby. Unions, African American and Latino organizations, and NOW and other women's groups became, at the political level, extensions of the Democratic Party and of a liberal establishment which supported the corporations and capitalism — and the actual economic, social and political interests of those groups were largely forgotten.

All of these groups — labor, African Americans, Latinos and women — sought to use the Democratic Party as the vehicle for their political demands, though in that vehicle they were definitely not in the driver's seat, and sometimes they felt as if once the election was over, they were locked in the trunk. The Democrats — and the corporations they represented — succeeded because they held the steering wheel. The labor and social movements, locked up in the party of another social class, could not change the direction of the party, or government, or of the economy. And a crash was coming.

When these groups pressed hard enough, the Democrats would take up their cause, and often even a token effort often proved to be enough to continue winning the votes of workers, African Americans, Latinos and women. Year after year, for example, the Democrats failed to pass labor law reform, including most recently the Employee Free Choice Act, yet labor continued to support the Democrats — because the alternative would mean a social struggle that the labor movement was not

prepared to carry out. While disappointed with the Democrats' jobs of representing them, most of those groups felt that creating an independent party would be too difficult, though they had also learned that taking over the Democratic Party also proved impossible.

A Shrinking Social Base

The Democratic Party, however, was also disappointed with unions and the civil rights groups which by the 1980s were failing to keep voters loyal to the party. The unions shrunk from about 35% of all workers in the 1950s to just about 12 percent by the 1990s, losing power and influence. The Republican Party made gains among Hispanic voters. The historic African American civil rights organizations, such as the NAACP, passed through a series of organizational crises which made them less useful, though most black voters continued to vote for the Democratic Party seeing no alternative in the Republicans. While some new social movement had appeared — particularly the environmental movement and the gay and lesbian rights movement, and while the Democratic Party had gained most from them — they had not proven large and strong enough to rebuild the party's base. So by the 1990s the Democrats stumbled upon another strategy, the creation from above of new organizations that could both conjure up and control a mass following for the Democratic Party. The Democrats went into landscaping; time to plant the grass.

MoveOn.org

The Democrats' new corporatism might be dated from the establishment of MoveOn.org in 1998, originally as a group calling upon Congress to censure rather than impeach President Bill Clinton and then "move on." MoveOn.org opposed President George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq and became for one of the country's most important anti-war groups. MoveOn.org created Action Forums as local discussion and action groups and worked with MeetUp.com to organize street demonstrations and other events.

MoveOn's fundamental strategy and method was to act both on the Democratic Party and within the Democratic Party. MoveOn became involved in the 2004 election and issued its Call for Change in the 2006 election, always with an eye to moving the Democratic Party to the left, but without moving to the left of the Democratic Party. The desire to serve the party gradually supplanted the responsibility to serve the movement. By the end of middle of the century's first decade it had become clear to many anti-war activists that MoveOn's fundamental commitment to the Democratic Party had become an obstacle to effective anti-war activism.

MoveOn.org, though it had not exactly been created in Washington, provided the prototype of the a group created and commanded by Democratic party loyalists who wished to use the organization to both create and contain a social movement, a movement which might otherwise have found its way into other more independent channels, in the case of the anti-war movement into United For Peace and Justice (UFPJ). MoveOn also provided the first model of organization for the new corporatism: an organization led by Democrats organizing from above, through an electronic apparatus which they controlled and reaching down into the social soil of America.

MoveOn used the new electronic media and social networking as no other group had used them before, reaching out to millions with its ideas and its actions. MoveOn did provide many people with their first experience of activism, and set them in motion around issues such as the war in Iraq, and for many this was a politically important and personally meaningful experience. But the goal was always both to create that movement and to contain it within the political parameters of the Democrats.

Eventually MoveOn, moved on to deal with all sorts of economic and social issues, becoming a broad

liberal lobby that claimed five million members, more than twice as large as the country's largest labor union. MoveOn urged its members to vote, and to vote for Democrats and to support the Democratic Party agenda. MoveOn would provide the model for other groups — Repower America, Reform Immigration for America, and the Tea Party — which were more directly created and controlled respectively by the Democratic or Republican Party.

Reform Immigration for America

A similar process took place around the issue of immigration reform. Back in 2003 immigration national advocacy organizations, mostly based in Washington, D.C., and labor unions came together to create the Coalition for Comprehensive Immigration Reform (CCIR) also known as the New American Opportunity Campaign (NOAC). The founders of CCIR were four immigration advocacy groups — The Center for Community Change, the National Council of La Raza, National Immigration Forum, New York Immigration Coalition — and two labor unions, SEIU and UNITE. The groups organized the Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride, modeled after the civil rights freedom rides of the 1960s, and then went on to create an umbrella organization for all immigrant rights and immigrant organizations.

When in 2005 Senators John McCain (R-Arizona) and Ted Kennedy (D-Massachusetts) introduced the Secure America and Orderly Immigration Act (or "McCain-Kennedy Bill") — involving legalization of a majority of the undocumented immigrants in the U.S., stricter border enforcement, a large guest worker program, and plans for the orderly control of future flows of immigrants — the CCIR became its principle organizing vehicle. CCIR worked on building support for the bill in immigrant communities throughout the United States. Well-funded and professionally organized, CCIR staff worked to convince local immigrant groups and regional coalitions, though local immigrant groups often objected that both the organization and the bill had been foisted on them.

Many independent immigrant groups wanted *all* immigrants living and working in the U.S. to be legalized, objected to the heavy costs and penalties in the proposed bill, opposed guest workers, and rejected the idea of building more walls on the borders. Every major city or immigrant community saw tense arguments not only over the bill's content but also over the CCIR's top-down organization for it.

Then, under the pressure of genuine grassroots groups — hometown clubs, soccer teams, local radio disc jockeys, church congregations — a tremendous movement developed in Los Angeles, Chicago, New York and many other cities and towns. In the spring and summer of 2006 that movement took to the streets, not controlled by CCIR and not in support of any particular bill, but rather a social explosion of immigrants demanding the right to live and work in America. Those massive demonstrations, some as large as one million people — the largest social movement demonstrations in American history — threatened in some places to become a kind of general strike of Latino workers.

Still, the movement could not overcome the backlash — fanned by conservative Republicans and some Democrats — that had developed among many whites. The Kennedy-McCain Bill failed to pass the U.S. Congress, and the CCIR went on to support other versions of "Comprehensive Immigration Reform" proposed to the Congress over the next few years. The Washington-based immigration advocacy groups held together around roughly the same program for immigration over the next several years.

From CCIR to RIFA

After the election of Barack Obama, the same core group that had created CCIR founded a new

group, Reform Immigration for America (RIFA), to support another "comprehensive immigration reform" bill. Under the pressure of immigrant communities, RIFA created a program somewhat more progressive than the former CCIR's, calling for more visas, rather than for guest workers programs. While RIFA's program puts forward more humane values, it is not without its problems. It would not legalize all immigrants now working in the country and would deny undocumented immigrants an opportunity to work legally, driving them into the underground market. More important, RIFA and the advocacy groups at its core are prepared to accept a far more conservative compromise bill in order to pass immigration reform in one version or another.

Genuine grassroots immigrant groups and their allies will have little if any voice in the political process of passing some sort of immigration reform, which will remain in the hand of the Democratic Party. The Democrats will subordinate RIFA to their aims, and RIFA will keep local immigrant groups in line. Ultimately the Democrats will further weaken an immigration bill to please the Republicans. Neither RIFA nor the Democrats are prepared to organize the power of immigrant workers, which would in turn revitalize the labor movement.

Repower America

In 2008 multi-millionaire and former Democratic Party presidential candidate Al Gore created Repower America, an extension of his organizations the Climate Protection Action Fund and the Alliance for Climate Protection, which claim five million members worldwide. The group's home page says, "Founded by Al Gore, Repower America is dedicated to revitalizing our economy, strengthening our national security and solving the climate crisis through clean energy."

Well funded and staffed, Repower America has put organizers in the fields in states throughout the country, and they in turn have hired young people to distribute literature and circulate petitions on environmental issues. The website invites "grassroots supporters" to engage in "grassroots" lobbying for the environmental agenda. Recently the group also created Inconvenient Youth to involve teenagers from 13 to 18. That site has a social networking to allow members to connect with others near them, cultivating the young shoots of the neo-corporatist grassroots.

Founded by Al Gore, one of the Democratic Party's most important and, since his failed election campaign, most successful leaders — winner of both the Nobel Peace Prize and an Academy Award for his film "An Inconvenient Truth" — Repower America is clearly a Democratic Party project. Clearly Gore's goal is to build a top-down movement that will support the Gore's environmental policy within the Democratic Party.

Interestingly, when the Obama administration recently decided to permit the oil companies to engage in drilling along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts, Repower America created a petition where its members and others could appeal to President Barack Obama to reconsider and change that policy. One should not take that as a mark of political independence from Obama and the Democrats. While Repower America may be willing to criticize some particular administration policy, no one should expect it to fundamentally criticize Democratic Party policy or come to an independent position.

Operation Free

Gore's isn't the only neo-corporatist environmental game in town. The U.S. Department of Defense has created Operation Free, a "coalition of leading Veterans and national security organizations," to promote green environmental policies. The DOD sends veterans traveling around the country to speak on the need to "Secure America with Clean Energy." Locally sponsored by groups such as the League of Conservation Voters, the Sierra Club, the National Wildlife Foundation and Environmental Defense Fund, Operation Free tours the country in a big blue bus emblazoned with a military-style

service patch displaying wind turbines and solar panels.

Operation Free's veteran spokesmen and -women, talk about their service time in wars overseas, their commitment to the country, and to environmental policies. Sounding like liberal sheep in conservative wolves' uniforms, they tell environmentalist audiences that they oppose the oil companies and that they can better reach conservative voters and win them to support green policies. "We've won health care reform, and now we can win green environmental policies," one veteran told an audience in Cincinnati, Ohio. The carefully orchestrated meetings are dominated by the veterans' prepared statements and they permit only written questions, and most audiences hesitate to raise the issue of war and its environmental consequences.

The Obama Campaign

Barack Obama's brilliant 2008 campaign for the U.S. presidency drew upon the experience of groups such as MoveOn.org and Gore's Alliance for Climate Protection, creating an attractive website and logo, using electronic social networking that eventually involved millions, and then turned that electronic network into a campaign organization that mobilized tens of thousands to do precinct work. Many young people in particular, who had never been involved either in politics or a genuine social movement, experienced the Obama campaign as what was for them a social movement.

The sense of excitement, the meetings and rallies, the door-to-door canvassing, though orchestrated from Washington, D.C. were experienced regionally and locally as the nearest thing to a movement that many of the participants had ever known. When the campaign was over and Obama was elected, he then turned his campaign organization into Organizing for America. OFA invites those who visit its website to join "grassroots OFA campaigns to support the President's agenda."

OFA represents perhaps the largest and broadest of the neo-corporatist organizations, a "grassroots" group controlled by the Democratic Party President who is the head of the U.S. government and commander-in-chief. After Obama's election, however, interest in OFA declined, revived only briefly, sporadically and spottily by the campaign around health care reform. OFA called upon Obama supporters to engage in lobbying for his health care reform — without single-payer (Medicare for all) or a public option. Disappointment with the President on the left and the right, had left the door open for the Republican's neo-corporatist Tea Party.

The Tea Party

The stunning victory of Barack Obama in the 2008 election devastated the Republican Party. Not only did Obama win, but the Democrats also won a majority of both houses of Congress. At the same time, however, during his first year in office Obama failed to provide strong, clear leadership to the Democratic Party majority, to his supporters in the Democratic Party and to his followers in Organize for America. Enthusiasm waned, support dwindled, and the grass dried up. Then the crab grass came.

Rightwing Republicans with strong support from conservative foundations such as Freedom Works and from FOX News and other conservative media, stepped into the vacuum created both by the lack of leadership from Obama and by the disorientation of mainstream Republicans. Beginning in 2008, rightwing Republicans and some Libertarians began to call for a Tea Party to protest against Obama's administration and its policies. By January 2009 the Tea Party had been born — with many claiming to be the fathers, mothers or midwives of the movement. Tea Party activists took a lead in opposing Obama's call for health reform, arguing that it was the first step toward socialism and the end of America as we have known it.

While the proliferation of Tea Party websites, organizations, political programs, and ideological orientations gave the impression of a genuine grassroots movement, in fact the Republican Party and its most conservative think-tanks backed by the corporations had quickly taken command of the group. True, the Tea Party has its racists and fascists, its cranks and screwballs, but it's the Republicans who have paid the bills and provided the direction. Dick Armey, former leader of the House Republicans, lobbyist, and chair of Freedom Works, emerged as the principal party leader of the Tea Party, while Sarah Palin, Republican vice-presidential candidate in 2008, became one of the group's favorite spokespersons. The Tea Party organizers increasingly promoted an anti-government and free market position, claiming that Obama was leading the nation toward socialism and the brink.

By the spring of 2010 Tea Party organizations were active principally in Republican Party primary races supporting more conservative candidates than those wanted by the Republican Washington establishment. In a few places the Tea Party and its rightwing activists wrecked local Republican Party election plans. Such a development could threaten the Republican Party leadership and even the future of the party, still the Tea Party remains for now part of the party, not a genuinely independent political movement. Whether or not the Tea Party will be able to sustain momentum after the November 2010 elections remains to be seen, but we can be sure that the Republican Party will remain in place.

The Coffee Party

With the Tea Party garnering much of the media's attention, two Barack Obama supporters, movie makers Annabel Park and Eric Byler, decided to create the Coffee Party, with the motto "Wake up and Stand up!" in January of 2010. Using the kind of electronic media techniques developed by MoveOn and by the Obama campaign, they created a website, and then quickly called meetings in some 370 coffee shops throughout the country and a few overseas. The group claimed 150,000 members within six weeks. The initial meetings were followed a second round of meetings, often with a different group of participants.

The Coffee Party, while clearly intended to be the Democrats' answer to the Tea Party, presents itself as non-partisan. The group's website explained itself this way:

"The Coffee Party Movement gives voice to Americans who want to see cooperation in government. We recognize that the federal government is not the enemy of the people, but the expression of our collective will, and that we must participate in the democratic process in order to address the challenges that we face as Americans. As voters and grassroots volunteers, we will support leaders who work toward positive solutions, and hold accountable those who obstruct them."

The group's organizers failed to inform participants that the movement had been formed by Democratic Party loyalists, though that was obvious from the discussions that revolved around the Democrat's key issues, such as health care reform, with a clear intent to minimize calls for single-payer. Discussions of the wars abroad were generally off the table.

Some of the Coffee Party's initial announcements asked people to turn from the extremes and to "meet in the middle." Local leaders explain that the group rejects the political extremes of left and

right. Cincinnati's principal Coffee Party organizer speaking to a class at the University of Cincinnati said, "We won't want to be like those people out in the streets carrying signs with hand-written slogans." Sounding like an American Progressive of the 1910s, he said, "We want our discussion to be based on facts. When we have a question we go to the experts and read academic papers that have been peer-reviewed."

Rather than taking to the streets, in Cincinnati at least the Tea Party has organized a meeting to thank a local Congressman for voting for Obama's health care reform. So, while the Tea Party has been in the streets winning a following by challenging the government, the Coffee Party has so far remained cloistered in mostly middle class coffee shops, eschewing the streets and rejecting confrontation.

Grassroots Redefined

All of these organizations talk about building "grassroots movements," but in a way that gives a new definition to old expression. Grassroots originally meant a movement with roots in local concerns and suggested the notion of a local group democratically controlled by some local community and the people involved in it. Grassroots suggested a kind of authenticity, a genuinely homespun movement of local people, even if concerned with regional and national issues. It also suggested a movement from below, in local communities or one sort or another that then reached up to try to influence the centers of power. These neo-corporatist movements, however, mostly have their origins in Washington, D.C., though, even if conceived outside of the beltway, they have been created by people loyal to the Republicans or the Democrats as the case may be.

While mostly created from on high by the parties, party leaders, NGOs or foundations, there is no doubt that in many cases they have successfully reached down into the grassroots. Whether we talk about MoveOn, the Obama campaign, The Tea Party or the Coffee Party, almost all have found constituencies in communities across the country. None of them, however, really originated there, with the possible exception of some of the first manifestations of the Tea Party. Controlled by the parties, foundations, and NGOs, well-funded and usually with professional staffs, they have reached outward and downward — principally through electronic media and social networking — to attempt to build a local base. They are planting the grass they want, and view other things that pop up as weeds.

Most of these groups do not have a democratic membership structure with an elected leadership, nor do they usually have local chapters with any degree of autonomy. Organizational directives and political positions move from the top to the bottom, from the center to the periphery, though some of these groups create some semblance of local autonomy. The Tea Party may be if not the most democratic, at least the most chaotic. While Dick Armey, the Republicans, Freedom Works, and FOX provide much of the real direction for the Tea Party, local chapters do their own thing from holding meetings, and demonstrations, to issues proclamations and manifestoes.

The Democratic Party organizations create the regional and local structures and establish quite clear if not always publicly stated political parameters. And they may also offer a lot of space for local discussion and debate of the sorts that is either about high minded and abstract ideals — "How do we promote real democracy in the United States" — and therefore does not affect political policy, or is about organizational matters — where to hold the meeting — and therefore does not touch on any matters of substance. Generally, members have no way in a local chapter to make decisions that might affect the national organization, while the national organization makes all the substantive decisions for the local chapters.

Still, both the Tea Party and the Coffee Party, and the other organizations, find followers looking for

like minded folk with whom to socialize, commiserate, and chat (both actually and virtually). The success of these models has a lot to do with creating partisan substitutes for what were once more diverse and democratic town hall meeting, or with building new forms of party precinct and ward organizations which went out of business with the growth of radio and television.

The Independent Left and the New Corporatism

How should the independent left, that is people to the left of the Democratic Party, anti-capitalists and socialists, relate to these neo-corporatist organizations and pseudo-movements? Our goal in approaching this question should be to understand that we want to join people in action and while working with them, win them to our point of view. With that in mind, each of these organizations presents a different set of problems or questions.

With regard to the Tea Party, while most of its members may simply be exceptionally conservative Republicans, there are within it various sorts of ultra-conservatives, some of them racist and some potentially violent. The more radical right-wingers often dominate protest demonstrations and put forward slogans and demands, and sometimes carry racist posters, which would make it impossible for us to participate in good conscience. We will probably not be able to even converse with much less influence people in the centers of these movements, though we might draw away people in their penumbra.

Organizations like MoveOn.org, now that it has become a kind of generic liberal lobby, and groups like the Coffee Party call meetings in which we would want to be present, both to understand liberal arguments, and to meet some of the many fine people who participate in these meetings. We may through conversations with them be able to identify some who share our more independent views. When they call demonstrations, we may want to participate, though perhaps with our own slogans, signs and chants which raise a more independent political position.

Similarly with Repower America which has put so much money into creating an apparatus to organize young people, one might want to participate in the movements without adopting the politics, while offering critical perspectives. Where Repower does draw young people into the environmental movement, we would want to argue, for example, for the need to socialize energy resources and to create socialized green production. We should look for opportunities within Repower to challenge the capitalist, liberal, and ultimately Democratic Party parameters set by the group.

With Operation Free, on the other hand, we should take a different position. This is after all an organization of the Department of Defense — better called by its historic name the War Department — and we should try to rip off the green mask which covers the bloody red of imperial wars, occupations, mass murder, environmental disasters in victim nations, and the dislocation of millions, together with the drone missiles and the horrifying civilian deaths they cause. If we are members, we should insist that the Sierra Club, League of Conservation Voters, National Wildlife Foundation and Environmental Defense Fund cease to work with the War Department.

Reform Immigration for America (RIFA) has to be approached much as we would approach some of the labor unions which founded and support it, that is, as a bureaucratic organization with reformist politics which has some degree of organizational and ideological influence over millions of workers. When RIFA calls meetings and demonstrations such as it has which involved thousands of workers, we must be present, but we should not accept the RIFA program which does not speak to immigrants' real needs. Where possible, and this depends on local conditions, we should introduce a critique of RIFA's immigration program, such as denying undocumented workers in the U.S. the right to a job and increasing border policing. Just as we do in the labor unions, we should work in

the movement, but without accepting its politics, working to represent the interests of all the immigrants and of the broader labor movement.

With regard to the anti-war movement, while keeping informed about MoveOn.org activities and participating when possible with independent signs and literature, one would perhaps rather work to build United for Peace and Justice (UFPJ), though at this point most independent anti-war activists are working to build a new independent anti-war coalition of some sort. Certainly the continuing war in Iraq, the expansion of the war in Afghanistan, and the shameful and horrifying drone attacks on Pakistan which have killed civilians demand that we build a new anti-war movement, and MoveOn.org, with its commitment to the President and the Democrats cannot and will not provide leadership.

Ultimately, for those of us work in the grassroots, the point is this: We need no condescending gardeners. We will rather work to cultivate movements at the real grassroots, the diverse garden of self-managed organizations independent of both the Democrats and Republicans.

Note: In writing this article, I have found it helpful to refer to the Wikipedia articles on the various organizations discussed, from which I have taken some of the accounts and descriptions of them.

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