**A DISCUSSION PAPER FOR SLATE:**

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Thoughts On Obama, Progressives, the left, The Left and The Future.

Mike Miller. 2/17/13; updated 3/10/13

In the following I make: (1) an analysis of Obama that proposes critical support for the new organization (OFA) that is being built from his election campaign staff and volunteers; (2) an analysis of American progressives, the left and The Left, and why they continue to be on the margins of American politics, and; (3) a proposal for a new functional equivalent of “church” for the left.

Progressives

Let’s begin with a look at how progressives are responding to Obama’s OFA. Here's what Tom Hayden wrote in his January 18, 2013 newsletter about Obama's legacy (read it carefully as Hayden is careful and precise in what he says):

Obama Launches Legacy Conference. Tom Hayden

President Barack Obama’s campaign organization is launching a new drive to secure a progressive legacy on gun control, climate change and immigrant rights, issues dear to grassroots activists where a major push against the main drift is needed. Eight thousand Obama volunteers will convene over the Inaugural weekend to commit themselves to the work.

The new Obama project was predicted in *The Nation* on October 2, “[Obama’s Legacy Is Our Leverage](http://www.thenation.com/article/170302/obamas-legacy-our-leverage).”

Consistent with its origins, the [Legacy Conference](http://obamalegacyconference.com/) will not be aimed at pressuring Obama so much as changing the political climate in the country to force whatever change is possible from resisting institutions. There will continue to be movements to pressure Obama – for example, on his drone policy – but linkages with the Legacy Conference could amplify existing actions by gun control, environmental and immigrant rights, particularly if Obama calls for such efforts in Monday’s inaugural address and pours organizational resources into the overall effort.

Hayden is the consummate insider from the left. He pays careful attention to what’s going on outside and inside, and understands how progressive outsiders can press insiders to be better than their instincts tell them. Here's what I find particularly interesting in what he writes, and well worth watching as the news behind the news:

His formulation is:  "...changing the political climate in the country to force whatever change is possible from resisting institutions"—the key phrase being, "whatever change is possible."  Translated:  in the present era of corporate dominance, you can only bring about change when there's a division in the dominant corporate world to be exploited or when your target is small enough that the rest of corporate America doesn’t care.  (All the issues that are going to be selected by this new Obama formation will be those with majority public opinion behind them, or well on the road in that direction, and targets not-too-big to be overcome.)  How does that apply to the three issue areas described?

(1) Gun control only attacks a narrow sector of corporate America--the gun manufacturers (dealers are for the most part small businesses), and is supported by a growing majority of the American people.  But the important point is that, despite the popular base given it by the NRA, the gun industry isn't a major one.

(2) Climate change makes use of a division of interest between the newly emerging green industry--something Obama has championed for some time--and old oil, coal and gas.  This is a bigger target, but not like Wall Street, the medical-insurance-pharma complex, or the military-industrial complex.  (You can bet that Obama’s staff will engage in careful research to see just which of the older energy sectors/corporations are dominated by financial interests—and these may well be left for a future day.) Further, with the dramatic climate of 2012, Obama has the weather on his side. But even here it appears he giveth with one hand, and taketh with the other (as I think will be the case with Keystone).

(3) Immigration reform.  A huge new electoral constituency is at stake, and the Republicans know that--so they are going to be divided.  Add to that: agribusiness, Silicon Valley and other corporate sectors want the influx of immigrant labor, and know that immigrants in the workforce present problems for union organizers. Further, this Obama effort isolates anti-immigrant sentiment within the Republican Party, forcing Republican pragmatists to contend with their own right-wing that will oppose them.  It's always a good idea to divide your opposition.

Note however there is nothing in this agenda that major unions are particularly interested in--a comment on their weakness these days. Nothing on mortgage, tax, Wall Street or other reform that head-on challenges dominant centers of corporate power.

Note additionally:  Hayden thinks, "but linkages with the Legacy Conference could amplify existing actions by gun control, environmental and immigrant rights [activists]."  I doubt it will happen unless other things happen first. This is where progressives need to re-think their usual way of doing business.  Obama is not interested in "linkages" with activists whose votes he can count before the election (except for the marginal few enamored of third parties), and whose ability to organize is demonstrably weak. Until this problem of people power weakness is addressed, these groupings will be trying to tie their tail on someone else's kite but won’t find a knot that works.  The result will be a conversation among spectators in which they bemoan what happened in yesterday's game, but are unable to influence how it is played today, or evaluate outcomes tomorrow so that adjustments can be made to the next game plan.

Obama

Here’s what Jon Carson, the new executive director of Obama’s Organizing for Action (OFA), writes after describing the new organization as a “grassroots movement,” and how he joined because he “was inspired by [Obama’s] belief that ordinary people have the power to change our country if we work together to get it done -- and that belief will be at the core of this new organization as it unfolds.”

[T]he way we'll get it done can be summed up in one word: local.

That means each city or region will have its own OFA chapter, and you'll decide the issues your community cares about most, the work you want to do to make progress on them, and the kind of support you'll need to get it done.

At a neighborhood and regional level, OFA members will grow their local chapters, bringing in new leaders and helping train a new generation of volunteers and organizers to help fight for the issues at stake.

There'll be times when we pull together at the national level to get President Obama's back on passing major legislation, like reducing gun violence or immigration reform. And we'll all work to help transform Washington from the outside while strengthening our economy and creating jobs.

But for the most part, the direction our work takes will be completely in your hands -- with the support of this organization behind you every step of the way.

In the next few weeks and months, I'll be asking for your input on putting together an OFA plan for 2013, we'll be holding online briefings about the issues we want to tackle, and we'll start organizing on those issues as they're debated in D.C.

From dozens of offices across the country, I imagine this new OFA will be engaging in what presents itself as bottom-up lobbying efforts.  These are young, pretty idealistic people.  I think respectful approaches to them that asked for a meeting to discuss some current project would create "win-win" situations for independent groups. Here's the sequence I imagine:  “X,Y,Z” group asks for a meeting. Two possibilities:  you get it, or you don't.  (1) If you get it:  you propose working together in some form that is mutually acceptable, and might even include working under their banner—with the recognition that your group has a more “radical” program or militant tactical approach. If you win, and the victory solves the problem it claimed to address, fine. But if not, you are now in a relationship with people with whom you can have a conversation about program and tactics.

Any serious community or labor organizer, or any serious organizer of anything for that matter, will be skeptical of OFA’s, “But for the most part, the direction our work takes will be completely in your hands -- with the support of this organization behind you every step of the way.” But hold the doubts in abeyance for now.

I wish this effort well. Nothing quite like it has been done by a president before, but maybe this president will do something very, very different. But I’m not holding my breath. Something started by, and paid by, a president who is interested in his legacy and is primarily focused on electoral politics…is likely to be…controlled from the top. There’s a lot of evidence for that proposition.

The policy areas Obama’s effort plans to address all have winnable issues within them.  That's exactly what they need at this stage in order to sustain and build an organization.  My prediction:  Obama sees a significant part of his future with what is put on the ground by OFA.  What will be interesting to see is if it makes an impact on the 2014 congressional elections--usually the mid-term is when the incumbent president's party loses congressional seats.  If this effort can unseat some Republican members of the House, it is likely to have an important electoral future in the 2016 presidential race, making it a potent force in determining who gets the Democratic nomination as well. What will be further interesting is whether, in the crucial state elections of 2018, ’19 and ’20, the forces gathered in this formation can refocus their effort on state government because 2020 will be the next census, and redistricting will follow. Remember: 1,000,000 more Americans (there are different estimates as to what the actual number is) voted for Democrats for the House of Representatives than voted for Republicans. Yet the Republicans control the House because of how district lines were drawn in the recent reapportionment that was determined by Republican state legislatures.

Illusions

The interesting and lively San Francisco writer and activist Randy Shaw headlines an article in his daily *Beyond Chron,* “Obama’s Organizing for Action: A Boost for Progressives.” Beware of illusions. If one typical progressive error is carping from the outside, another is the illusion that “this time will be different.” Here, from Shaw’s own words, are some of the dangers, though Shaw doesn’t intend describing them that way:

…First, Obama has been much more effective selling his proposals on the campaign trail than he has as President. Organizing for Action boosts the President’s campaign mindset, and its clear … that Organizing for Action will be far more ambitious than the limited Obama for America that emerged in 2009.

Second, the Obama campaign has activist lists whose numbers dramatically exceed those of Move On, the AFL-CIO, and other external progressive mobilizing groups. In order to win on big issues like comprehensive immigration reform, it will take such an all hands on deck mobilization.

Obama’s support for Organizing for Action shows that he is serious about taking the momentum from November and immediately applying it now…

…As I urged when the President was trying to get his stimulus package through in early 2009, the best way to win these legislative fights is through the [strategy pioneered by Neighbor to Neighbor](http://www.beyondchron.org/news/index.php?itemid=6617) in the Congressional fights over military aid to El Salvador in the 1980’s.

This means high profile targeting of representatives who can be made to feel so uncomfortable about their pro-gun position that they will flip. Enough House Republicans can be won over to pass strong gun controls, but this will not happen absent strong public pressure in their home districts…

Organizing for Action can dramatically increase the grassroots pressure on wavering legislators by bringing new resources and a broader base into the struggle. …

Obama increasingly sounds like someone who feels he missed opportunities in his first term and does not want to repeat past mistakes. We will know by the spring if his efforts on gun control and immigration reform have moved beyond past attempts, and this will also tell us whether Organizing for Action has made a difference.

Since Shaw doesn’t want MoveOn, NAACP, ACLU, AFL-CIO or others to fold up their tents and join OFA, it is unclear what he would have them do. What does an “all hands on deck mobilization” mean?

Nor is it accurate to say that an Obama-led mobilization is necessary to move things forward, though it will be powerful for those things he wants pushed because he will be using his presidential leverage to push them. Powerful, but not necessary. Indeed, the immigration-reform mobilization during the just-past election season that included targeting Obama’s campaign offices and parting ways with the inside-the-beltway immigration reform coalition was quite successful, thank you. And please note that those who engaged in it have been marginalized by the inside-the-beltway, foundation-funded, “progressive” coalition on immigration reform!

Note also that Neighbor-to-Neighbor, which Shaw properly heralds as an exemplary approach to building fires under recalcitrant members of congress, was an independent organization also capable of building fires under the president. It successfully did that in relation to American policy re: El Salvador. With its method of organizing house meetings that, amoeba like, reproduced themselves in a congressional district, Neighbor-to-Neighbor could generate enough heat from below to change votes—both in the House and Senate.

None of these problems are noted in Shaw’s discussion. While he is surely correct to celebrate the positives, he shouldn’t omit discussion of the co-opting possibilities or the limits OFA might impose on broader reform. Thus the problem: how to be a friendly critic.

Organizing

The job of organizing the constituencies that could provide a base for a frontal assault on corporate power is not the job of the president or the new enterprise upon which he is embarking. That is the job of labor and community organizing, and of identity and issue organizing groups and movements whose values, vision and interests cannot be realized without that challenge.

There is little evidence to suggest that the AFL-CIO and its affiliates are up to the task, though they might support someone else who is. There is hope in what some individual international unions are doing, and there may be possibilities in newer independent workplace formations as well, though I’m not close enough to them to have an opinion on the matter.  But these are still on the margins of affecting dominant corporate power.  The fight for decent wages, hours, benefits and working conditions for the majority of working people will not be won until there is a labor movement adequate to the task.

There is a question about whether the world of community organizing, most broadly defined, is up to it either.  There are hopeful signs in what I broadly call “the Alinsky tradition” (which now numbers millions in its combined membership), but it is really too early to tell. Some of these groups are raising important issues, but it remains to be seen what they can do with them in the face of significant opposition. Will they be willing to lose their seat at the table of inside-the-beltway coalitions—as the immigrant rights activists lost theirs when they won? I don’t know.

Despite all kinds of efforts for mortgage reform and against predatory lending on the part of these community organizations, the dominant financial and corporate players in this country continue to pretty much do as they please--with maximization of profit the goal. Hundreds of victories are claimed by community organizers, but the war is being lost. Newly-elected Senator Elizabeth Warren has correctly summarized this fight: the financial institutions count the cost of penalties in the cost of doing business; they pay millions but make billions. If your bottom-line is profit, it’s a no-brainer what you’ll do. She cross-examined regulators in a recent Senate hearing asking them why they weren’t bringing anyone to trial with the possibility of doing jail time. None of the regulators had a good answer.

Nor does it appear that any of the narrower identity and issue agenda groups can do much on their own.  Can AARP stop the president from making concessions on social security or other elderly benefits that are expensive to maintain and can best be financed by progressive tax reform and/or cutting the military budget? (I doubt AARP even wants to; it is too beholden to the insurance industry.) Can quality public education for all be made a reality without similar financing so that, for example, we could have good salaries for competent teachers, and class size of 12 - 15? (It appears that Democratic Party venture capitalists have the president’s ear on this question, and he’s ready to abandon what we have historically thought of as public schools in exchange for very problematic charter schools.) Can decent jobs be created at home without fundamental changes to tariff, trade, off-shore investment, and other laws and regulations that will be fought tooth-and-nail by dominant corporate and financial power? Can various financial manipulations such as those that led to the mortgage crisis and that are evident in other forms of predatory lending be ended without breaking up into smaller units, or replacing present financial institutions with some mix of community banks, credit unions and public banks like the one in North Dakota?

I do not believe any of these questions are going to be asked by OFA. Someone else has to ask them, or lay the groundwork for asking them.

To return to Hayden:  "The new Obama project was predicted in *The Nation* on October 2, '[Obama’s Legacy Is Our Leverage](http://www.thenation.com/article/170302/obamas-legacy-our-leverage)'."  If progressives depend on Obama's considerations about his legacy, their leverage will remain that of the unattached tail on the kite. They need to organize themselves so that he can’t fly without them.

What the last election demonstrated is that the American people are generally ahead of the politicians—on both the issues Obama wants to address and the economic justice issues that, at least for the time being, he wants to ignore. The new Obama organization is an effort to tap public sentiment for a common good/public interest/general welfare program, and to channel that energy into issue campaigns he thinks can be won. If he is initially successful, he will create an opening, a space, for action on the more difficult agenda of breaking now-dominant corporate power and ending the plutocracy that now defines the parameters of what is acceptable for the democracy. That’s why our future on the more recalcitrant issues is related to his success. In the absence of some success at beating corporate power, all the talk of economic recovery will ring hollow to people who are finding that seven of ten newly created jobs in the economy fail to pay a living wage, and that the living wage jobs that used to exist are in ever-shrinking supply.

What is hopeful, or what might be done, on the second, and more difficult agenda?

(1) Someone should be trying to figure out how to break the white working/lower-middle class from the grip of the Republicans. The ideas swirling around the Tea Party, and Ron Paul and the Libertarians may offer some opportunities here.  I don't think unions can do it because they are now too unwilling to play the outsider roles required to "talk to" this deeply alienated white working and lower-middle class. While it is true that many obstacles are now in the way of union organizing, it is also true that when the talent and money are allocated to the task, workers can be organized—even in right-to-work states.

I think most of the community organizing world has failed to maintain the strategic balance in issue development that would be required to persuade this alienated group that they’ve been sold a bill of goods by conservatives, and that they need to rethink who their friends and enemies are.  Is anyone thinking about how to tap into "white" anger and give it a liberal, progressive or radical direction?  I don't see it, but I hope so. Everything I know about organizing tells me that groups now captured by the right can be loosened from its grip--but you have to have a realistic and patient agenda in order to accomplish this.

(2) On the world scene, American military interventionist policies just aren't working.  The empire aspired to by George W. Bush's neo-con friends is shrinking. Let us hope it continues to shrink, and that the shrinkage forces constraints on whatever military adventurism may exist in the Obama Administration.  Whether new opposition forces to neo-liberalism in the rest of the industrialized world are able to make a dent in their own nation's politics remains to be seen.  In Latin America, the trends toward standing up to the U.S. seem to be strong.  Despite my own reservations about some of what Hugo Chavez does, I hope he lives on to continue the role he plays South of the Border.  *(Update: now Chavez has died. I hope the organizational dynamics now working in Latin America that he had a lot to do with creating continue in their direction of autonomy and self-development. There are positive signs; there are negative ones as well. Both are beyond the scope of this discussion.)* But it is important also to note that truly independent, democratic, development at home is not on these nation’s agenda—as is testified to by the experience of Brazil’s Movement of the Landless in relation to Lula.

Arab Spring wasn't what some hoped for reasons analogous to what I've said above--the more "progressive" forces within it didn't have the legs on the ground to realize the benefits that come after toppling dictators. Sub-Saharan Africa is deeply troubled; hopes progressives had for the ANC in South Africa are not to be realized. It, like Obama, is unwilling to challenge the centers of its own power elite even though (unlike Obama) it would have a natural majority base for such a challenge, and it is now deeply enmeshed in political corruption.

The Future

The major question on my mind has to do not with Obama's legacy, but with my legacy to my grandchildren.  As far as I can tell, the negative environmental and economic forces now at work in the world remain in the ascendancy.  Can they be constrained?  If Obama's effort demonstrates that they can, I hope that will either open the door to those who might want to move beyond his caution, or lead him to abandon that caution as he sees greater possibilities.  A part of me continues to be hopeful about him, though I don't put my eggs in that basket.

Whatever one’s personal reading of the President, as we know from history moderate success opens the door to more radical approaches: the Girondin gave way to the Jacobins; Kerensky to the Bolsheviks. When the former can’t address the problems plaguing the people or move quickly enough to satisfy the aspirations they unleash, then new voices come to the fore. Hopefully the new voices in the U.S. will learn from the failures of self-styled revolutionaries of the later 1960s (and the Thermidor of the French and Russian revolutions) and continue on a radical democratic path that draws its inspiration from the democratic social movements of our country’s past—including the Abolitionists, Knights of Labor, Suffragettes, early Populists, industrial unions and civil rights. Failure to do so will lead to another reaction—such as the conservative one that began in 1965, and appears to be ending.

Is it ending soon enough? A bleaker picture is the one that now appears to be more realistic:  environmental disaster and domestic economic decline are the dominant trends of our time, and support of the worst regimes in our sphere of influence seems to be the government’s foreign policy.  Ecological disaster and economic collapse appear to be likely outcomes. I hope I'm wrong.

What can each of us do to support a more hopeful future? Strengthen the independent forces that are outside the Democratic Party. At the same time, work with those that are inside to insure adoption of the initial reforms that Obama offers. The precondition to moving people to the left who think a significant reform agenda can be pursued within the Obama organization is developing trusting relationships and engaging in constructive work with them. Within those relationships it is possible to challenge people to press for more radical change when solutions don’t come from moderate tinkering. But to be successful, there must be independent organizations that offer realistic opportunities for accomplishing goals. Serious on-the-ground organizing can offer those options. Working papers, manifestos, ad hoc marches and demonstrations, internet-click politics, and the other now-familiar tactical arsenal of most of the progressive world are not sufficient to the task.

How is that to be done? It is far beyond the scope of this paper to offer lessons, but they are there to be learned (and a beginning step is offered below). During the 1930s, the CIO’s John L. Lewis did just this in his relationship with President Roosevelt. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers did just this in their relationship to Gov. Jerry Brown. Study those, and contextualize to current times their lessons. Saul Alinsky’s on-the-ground organizing and broader philosophy offer lessons as well—if people who should know better abandon their dismissal of him as a “mere reformist.”

The Left

Here I use “the left” and “The Left” in a narrower sense than that of, for example, FOX News. I mean people who are most likely to be socialists, whether Marxists of one shade or another or not, anarchists, pacifists and their ilk. I am a child of this left who is deeply alienated from its expressions in its more official version that I capitalize: The Left. Years ago, I stopped spending a lot of time in this world. I concluded that my central commitment was to a radical understanding of small “d” democracy, and that this left wasn’t a place where I could really learn how to put that commitment into practice. I drew that conclusion from my experiences in SLATE, where it was a struggle to keep The Left from adopting policies that were almost guaranteed to isolate us from both our own liberal faction (Young Democrats and their supporters), and from the broader liberal and morally committed sections of the student body whose support we wanted to engage. From my days in the early student movement at Berkeley (1956-58, 60-62), to four+ years on the staff of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, to directorship of a Saul Alinsky organizing project in Kansas City’s black community, to an additional 40 years as a community organizer this radical commitment has been my calling.

But there are things about the left that need to be part of the conversation in this country if we are to realize anything remotely approaching democracy. So I hope there is a re-birth of the left, and that it is a left that is patient with, respectful of, and without arrogance toward everyday people, engaged with them where they are, connected deeply in their places of work, play, prayer and the neighborhoods where they live and hang-out, able to speak in the language of both the street and the university, and committed first to democratic values and processes before specific policy outcomes, analytic frameworks or resolutions on issues of the day so that all those who come in contact with it understand that.

As Occupy Wall Street initially demonstrated with its bold “1%” slogan, there is an important role for this kind of a left. Who else will raise the questions of economic equality, the possibility of common ownership (whether in coops or public forms), the necessity to fully and completely break-up concentrations of wealth and power? People of the left demonstrated by their action—whether defending Loyalist Spain, organizing industrial unions or fighting deep south racism—that they are willing to put their bodies on the line. (So did others, both religious and secular, but the left’s presence and importance in each of these significant movements and times is properly understood as important.)

Here’s the problem: The Left is an obstacle to the left. In my work, I have come to have deep regard and respect for evangelical, Pentecostal, Holiness and Catholic religious leaders for whom abortion is murder. From their religious premises, they also oppose capital punishment, assisted suicide, and militarism and war (though some of them believe in just wars and are not pacifists). They join in organizations that include Unitarian/Universalists, members of the United Church of Christ, reform Jews and others who disagree with them on the individual morality aspects of their “seamless garment” view of being “pro-life”. They work together for decent jobs with adequate pay and respect for workers, racial justice, immigration reform, a halt to foreclosures, ending predatory lending, quality education for all, sustainable development, and a truly democratic society. And they work with one another on a basis of mutual trust and respect.

Building at the Base: A Proposal for the left

Most of the people with whom I have worked now for the past 40 years are in congregations of some kind—communities of faith in which people support and challenge each other to act on their interests and values. In addition to their action in the world on the issues and problems of the day, they pray, play, reflect, study and cry together; they support each other in difficult times and celebrate together in joyful times. I have a vague idea there was a time that some union locals had this quality; I know of none now. I have a vague idea that the left, and even The Left, at one time had this quality.

We need that kind of a left. Here’s how I think it would begin (and here I draw upon a lecture by Princeton theologian Richard Shaull about Catholic “Base Christian Communities” in Brazil. I will present a language of the left that I think can be substituted for the formally religious language he uses.

Let me begin with a specific meaning for the word “community.” By “community” I mean a group of people, sharing a common bond, faith, tradition or set of values, who affirm, support and challenge each other to act powerfully on their values and interests. The values are freedom—both the absence of external and imposed restraint and the opportunity to realize one’s full human potential; equality—no great disparities in wealth, income or status; democracy—as both means and end, majority rule and minority rights, and highly participatory in character; justice—fairness, due process, absence of arbitrary and capricious action by those in authority; solidarity or fraternity or interdependence—the understanding that we are our sister and brother’s keepers. Except for a narrow understanding of freedom, these values are under attack, and have been on the defense for some time in the United States and other “advanced” industrial countries. Yet their power with everyday people manifests itself whenever there is a believable option for action on their behalf.

In summary, “community” refers to a group of people who understand that their destinies are interdependent and intertwined.

Community is built at the base of society where people can engage in ongoing face-to-face relationships. Whatever might be said for the internet, it is not a substitute for community. We are so estranged from a meaningful understanding of community that we have to look elsewhere to see what it would look like. To do that, I want to use Base Christian Communities in Brazil when they were at their peak of development in the 1980s and 1990s because nothing we have done in this country quite approximates what they achieved in the period of emancipatory Catholicism that once characterized large parts of Latin America. Here I am going to extrapolate from what Shaull said, and use a language that would fit in the United States. For this purpose, I will rename them simply “base communities,” and speak in the present tense as if they exist—even though I know they don’t.

Base Communities, are face-to-face meetings of a group neighbors, friends, co-workers or people sharing some other bond and interest who support and challenge each other to act on democratic values and a common good/public interest/public welfare agenda for their community, city, workplace, state and country. Typically, they meet weekly, and sometimes more often. In a BC meeting, the agenda has some combination of these elements:

* Stories about life experiences and problems told by attendees. These might be problems with a landlord or employer, spousal abuse, drinking, difficulty with a child, or something else on the mind of the participant.
* Stories of resistance to oppression by those present. Someone may have stood up to a landlord, a bureaucrat, an employer or an abusive husband. A group might have gone to a person in charge of agency or company that is doing “wrong” and seek a change. These are examples of action in behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world.
* Reflection that connected the life stories of the people and these engagements in action to passages from their tradition that are meaningful to them. These could include the Bill of Rights or Declaration of Independence, the preamble to a union or civic association, religious sources of something else.
* Reports and/or business items on mutual aid projects (a buying clubs, support group, credit union, small producer coop, baby-sitting pool, volunteer neighborhood tutorial, etc).
* Plans for future group action—in the form of mutual aid or efforts to change “the system.” If the latter, people deal openly with fear of retribution if that might take place, or embarrassment at engaging in such action. Responsibilities are assigned, leadership determined, action plans adopted, etc.
* A concluding “reflection” that could be religiously or secularly based.

These are communities more than they are social action groups, though social action is a constituent element of what they are. Action comes organically out of participant’s lived experience, and the issues that arise from living in today’s world, and is contextualized in shared values.

A BC creates what we imagine was once the character of the extended family or the old neighborhood or an earlier workplace in a new form—perhaps building on the old, or perhaps not; it offers a meaningful way to establish community in a world of isolation, isolation that is not overcome by the pseudo-friendships of Facebook.

In a BC, participants discover more and new dimensions of their humanity; there is an increased realization of self-worth. People discover or elaborate their talents; they shift from a fatalistic view of the world—the passive recipients of whatever was given or done to them—to become people who challenged injustice, whether in the world at large or in their own family, and who seek to bring about change. The process of empowerment that goes on is one in which people conclud that society must be restructured from the bottom up. The BC is the new society in embryo—“prefigurative” in its character

The Base Christian Communities of which Shaull originally wrote were religious communities, not social action groups. Action came organically out participant stories and shared values. The “expert” (priest, nun, deacon) who was present facilitated a discovery process and was a resource, perhaps supplying historical information. The people discovered the meaning of the Bible for themselves. Fundamentally, then, a new community emerged out of the poor people participating in the BCC.

BCCs recreated in the city the community of the old village or rural area that previously existed for most participants, one based on kinship and extended family structures. The kinship structure was no longer able to function as a mutual aid society because of changes in the economy and technology. The BCC recreated the extended family in a new form—perhaps building on the old, or perhaps not.

Lay people became “pastoral agents.” That is, they became organizers. The laity accepted or adopted a new vocation of training for mutual empowerment. Priests and women religious “walked alongside the people,” sharing experiences with them, offering support and assistance, but were not hierarchically “over” them.

This community of faith as a humanizing experience was an alternative to violence against the oppressor as a liberating experience—as postulated, for example, in Franz Fanon’s The Wretched of The Earth. Implicitly this approach challenges the notion of the vanguard party and a transitional stage in which victims of oppression are freed by a dictatorship of the proletariat. The BCC was a profoundly democratic expression.

Shaull noted three reasons for there being radical political implications or consequences from the Base Communities:

* First, they were a new form of social organization; other forms might be created as a result of the experience of people in the Base Community as, for example, the Workers Party in Sao Paulo from which Lula later emerged to become President of Brazil, or from which The Movement of the Landless emerged, now perhaps the largest social movement in the world with hundreds of thousands of members. But these latter formations are not themselves BCCs though many of their leaders received their most important formative experience in them.
* Second, mutual aid, or communal self-reliance, is a powerful tool that emerges from the Base Communities. People move from this tool into politics and action, in part because the system—in Brazil the military dictatorship that preceded democratization—wouldn’t even allow for the creation of mutual aid institutions. BCCs supported strikes and other efforts at change.
* Third, BCCs became politically powerful when people took their reading of the Bible into the world.

Note that the development of the BCC was a slow process. The typical early communities were formed after a priest or nun lived in the barrio for four-to-six years developing trusting relationships with the people there. A first “core group” might have been only four people, and it is likely that the group grew very slowly. This group might have involved itself in simple mutual aid/support activity and Biblical reflection for a couple of years before moving into “direct action” or anything directly challenging dominant political and economic institutions.

In discussing the application of the BCC experience to the United States, it is important to note two things that make Brazil of that period qualitatively different from us:

(1) There were, of course, clear cultural differences.

(2) The need to choose sides was more apparent in the Latin American context, though that is changing as people in the U.S. are increasingly willing to view our present system as a plutocracy.

But it is not differences, but this application of BCCs that I want to call forth: to be sustained, social, political and economic action must come out of vital experiences of community, mutual support, history and bond, and a sense of vision, faith (which, by the way, can be secular faith as well as religious faith), and deep values that create a belief in the possibility of a better world—a world without exploitation and oppression.

While the first two points indicate the differences between Latin America and the United States, the last might help explain the failure of many US movements for change to reach deeply into low-income, working class and middle class constituencies, and to create the counter-dominant culture that is required if we are to slow, halt and reverse the present concentration of wealth and power in the hands of the few, and the path they have undertaken toward environmental or military destruction.

Building a left of this kind would mean beginning with house meetings, conversations and discussions that could lead to a new institution—the functional equivalent of a church. It would have a spirituality based on a sense of appreciation for the wonder of the universe. I would imagine that to be successful it would have to have some kind of a geographic boundary such that people could attend at least weekly, if not more often, that it would have the equivalent of a pastor paid for by substantial membership “dues” ($25 - $100 a month), and that it would have a program that addressed the concrete living concerns of elderly, near-elderly, middle-age, young, youth and children—in the case of those over about 15 years of age both those who were in relationships with significant others, and those who were not.

Such left functional equivalents of church might be welcome in “institution-based” community organizations that are now largely comprised of religious congregations, at least I hope that would be the case, where they could act upon and influence the action upon, the larger issues of the day. And when their members wanted to do so they could act independently.

What then?

I hope for the sake of my grandchildren that in some form or other new lights are on the horizon, that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr was right: “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” I fear for them that the lights are too dim, and the arc is frozen in space. But I am confident that, as we once discussed in SLATE, we need to begin with a “lowest significant common denominators;” that as we used to sing in “Snick,” “freedom is a constant struggle…;” and that if we do not act we will insure the worse of the outcomes.