[**What’s Our Brand Name?**](http://www.socialpolicy.org/latest-issues/920-what-s-our-brand-name.html) **Mike Miller. *Social Policy.* Summer, 2018.**

My activist friends bemoan the presence of so much corporate, financial, developer, real estate or other business interest group money that bought the election. From my perspective that is a given, part of the terrain, and not worth complaining about.

That we remain in the same bemoaning, victimhood position need not be. Let me sneak up on why with some of my own story, and then get to how.

**Why?**

When I was a boy of about seven, I was already interested in politics. I grew up in a left-wing family, so politics and the news were part of our nightly dinner conversation. And it went on year-round.

When the Allies landed in Normandy during World War II, I went running out of our Sunnydale Housing Project apartment yelling to my friends, “They’ve opened a Second Front!” Many years later, a slightly older friend of mine who lived next door remembered that incident with me.

When I went to junior high school, I spoke in class in favor of unions, and called strikebreakers “scabs”—even though my teacher said, “Why you must be a Communist, Michael.” (Luckily, I was quick enough to say that I was the Denman junior high school president and a friend who supported my civics report, was the vice-president. My fellow students all laughed.)

When elections rolled around, my parents (and I) would look at the endorsements page of the *The Dispatcher*, the International Longshoremen’s and Warehousemen’s Union (ILWU) newspaper, to see who and what it endorsed. (Memory being a tricky thing, it may have been the CIO-Political Action Committee’s endorsements.) It was rare that we read beyond that—my parents to see how to vote, I to see what I would support and argue for with my friends. This was 1944 to 1948—before McCarthyism took deep hold in the country.

The Dispatcher (or CIO-PAC) was enough because they were part of a community, one of which we also were a part even though no one in our family was a member of the ILWU or the CIO. The Dispatcher/CIO-PAC was the “brand name” that we trusted, and it didn’t earn that trust by spending lots of money advertising. Rather, they earned it because they were an extension of us, of who we were, part of a larger social movement.

While I grew to distance myself from some of the politics of that union and my parents, I also increasingly came to appreciate both the value of such a community, and the difficulty in building one.

Why was the word of the The Dispatcher/CIO-PAC enough, and can we re-create an equivalent rooted in the values of democracy, freedom, justice, community, responsibility, interdependence, solidarity, security, equality and others that are dear to us?

**Community Defined**

Politicians invoke “community” as a feel-good-about-the-country term. Often it is used by those in power to oppose the “divisive” organizing of the have-nots when they strike, boycott or engage in civil disobedience. As a community organizer, it seemed useful to me to have a more precise notion of what community meant. After a number of years, this is what I’ve come up with: “a group of people sharing a common bond or tradition who support and challenge each other to act powerfully, both individually and collectively, to affirm, defend and advance their values and interests.”

My family was part of such a community: the Communist-led left in the San Francisco Bay Area. What did that mean?

Some of the people in it were our friends. We saw them regularly; invited them to dinner as they invited us; went on outings like picnics or to the zoo with them; talked politics with them (I listened for the most part). There were others who weren’t friends, but they were comrades. In the world, we knew that they and we stood for the same things.

A larger web of relationships connected us with people in this community. We shared discussions with them at educational events. A labor school offered continuing education to adults and was sponsored by highly respected “notables” and trade union leaders in the area. Special lectures were offered, as well as more advanced seminars for those who wanted to delve more deeply into Marxism-Leninism. Sidney Roger was a daily newscaster (initially on a major AM network station before anti-Communist pressures drove him off) whose version of the news we knew was the correct one.

Various mutual aid organizations offered benefits, including insurance and burial payments. There were consumer cooperatives that were linked to this community, one of them close to the housing project where we lived.

Celebratory, social and cultural activities, such as May Day, the Fisherman’s Union Annual Festival, Paul Robeson concerts, the annual People’s World (the west coast Communist newspaper) picnic, film showings and more, connected us with a broader tradition of which we were a part.

And of course, we were engaged in continuing action for political, social and economic justice, world peace, and “in defense of the Soviet Union.” These actions ranged from circulating petitions on international issues to walking the picket line of striking department store employees; from passing out flyers to “Save the Rosenbergs” (Ethel and Julius Rosenberg were executed for stealing atomic bomb secrets and giving them to the Russians) to fighting racism, or “Jim Crow” as it was then widely identified, both in our local area and in the Deep South. As a boy, I knew about lynchings, poll taxes and denial of the right to vote. I knew that one simply didn’t cross a picket line. Period.

When election time came around, if our community said, “Vote yes on ‘x’”, we knew that was the way to vote. Ditto for “Vote for so-and-so” for anything from dogcatcher to president. Publications listing those endorsements had our “brand” on them—the name of an organization that was an expression of this community.

Common to all of these activities, particularly the importance of the endorsements of issues, causes and candidates, was that brand name. But this wasn’t a media-generated brand. On the contrary, it was generated internally from the deep web of relationships that bound us all together and created a sense of “us” versus “them”.

Of course, there had to be organization. A community that acted powerfully on its values and interests has to have a vehicle—i.e. an organization—in which to do so. For the most part, no one did better at mass organization in those days than the Communist-led left. Unions led or influenced by Communists, special interest organizations (ethnic, women’s, youth and more), ad hoc campaign organizations and others were all part of this world.

In organizational terms, to be part of this community meant there could be specialization: writers, researchers, publicists, policy experts, organizers and others who brought the community’s perspective to particular issues. Money that was raised from dues, events, subscriptions and voluntary contributions paid for all these things—or at least so we thought at the time. (Accusations of Russian funding were dismissed, though later Soviet archival research showed they were true.)

Even in my childhood there were cracks in the unity of our community. ILWU and other labor leaders told me in subsequent years that despite the Communist Party and their own public endorsement of 1948 third party presidential candidate Henry Wallace, in the privacy of the voting booth they voted for Harry Truman as the lesser of the two evils. And, of course, the anti-Communist hysteria of the Cold War destroyed the Communist Party, most of the unions it led or influenced, and most of the left—whether communist or not.

As I progressed in junior high and high school, I became increasingly critical of dimensions of this community. I read *The Loyalty of Free Men* and concluded that civil liberties were indivisible; you couldn’t have them for our side and deny them to the other side. By the time I’d reached college, I concluded that there was more centralism than democracy in “democratic centralism,” that “scientific socialism” was less science and more dogma, and that “vanguard parties” soon became more interested in their own power and prerogatives than in making a revolution that liberated the masses.

As I developed as an organizer, I learned the importance of the voluntary associations that are the expressions of everyday people’s beliefs and interests. I also learned that within most of these associations there is a stated commitment to freedom, justice, democracy, equality, security, community and other values that are important to me. Look at the preamble of almost any union constitution; look at the bylaws of most civic association; look at the social justice statements of most religious faiths, and read their foundational texts. Wherever you look you will find material to work with, to challenge people to act on their own proclaimed beliefs. A free society organizer does not try to replace these organizations; rather, she finds ways to make them live by their own rulebook.

My mom told me I was becoming a “bourgeois reformist!” It took Khrushchev’s revelations and the Russian invasion of Prague to shake her out of her belief that the Soviet Union represented the future of mankind. (Fortunately, she lived to see Gorbachev, and came to have deep regard for him; indeed, it is too bad for all of us that he failed.)

While the values that were instilled in me as part of my mother’s milk still are at the core of my beliefs, the means for realizing them are different from those of my parents.

**Learning the Pieces of Community**

In SLATE, a campus reform political party I was involved in founding in 1957/58 as an undergraduate at the University of California, I learned about forming and maintaining coalitions, developing a lowest significant common denominator political program, reaching out to others on the campus to seek their support, and working inside a multi-million dollar bureaucracy.

After a year at Columbia graduate school, I became a community organizer for a settlement house on New York’s Lower Eastside. My job was to support a tenant association that existed in one of the high-rise housing projects there. My childhood and UC experiences came together, and for about six months I thought I’d found a home. But I was fired for being too militant and found that the very big city of New York was actually small: my name was known in the social work world, and I couldn’t find another job doing what I’d begun to learn was “organizing”.

Back in Berkeley, I spent two more years in graduate school. But graduate school seemed a pale choice when the opportunity to join the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) came my way. There, particularly in the version of SNCC that was practiced by Bob Moses in Mississippi, I learned about being an “organizer” whose role was to listen, to challenge (or agitate) others to act, to think through with them what might be done, and to train them in skills required to get from point “a” to point “b”. We did all that by the seat of our pants, with the benefit of guidance from Ella Baker, an unsung heroine of The Movement. But that direction—the idea that we weren’t building something for ourselves but, instead, were assisting other people to build something that was theirs—made a deep impact.

In 1962, a couple of dozen, mostly southern, black students dropped out of school to become full-time organizers. They abandoned campus based direct action to see if they could activate the Deep South black community that for the most part was a passive, though supportive, observer of their sit-ins and freedom rides. They began the task of learning how to organize.

After SNCC, I went to work for Saul Alinsky. I’d tracked him down because after I was fired from my settlement house job I was called “a little Alinsky.” When the opportunity to meet the big one came my way in 1961, I took it. When he invited me to come to work for him, I choose SNCC instead. But in October, 1966, when he repeated the invitation, I went to work for him as project director of a black community organization in Kansas City, MO. With Alinsky, I put flesh, sinew, and muscle on the skeleton I’d learned in SNCC, and came to a deeper understanding of what exactly was involved in building people power. I also learned some of the differences between Ella Baker organizing and Saul Alinsky organizing, and the fact that they have more in common. I also concluded that SNCC knew some things about community-building that Alinsky didn’t. Putting all this together is the path on which I’ve been ever since.

In this emerging me, these substitutions in my ideological framework took place: for Marxism-Leninism, I substituted a vigorous understanding of democracy in which all people actively participated in shaping their neighborhoods, cities, regions, state and nation, as well as their workplaces. For vanguard party, I substituted a cadre of full-time organizers whose job was to assist local people to build their own people power organizations. For scientific socialism, I substituted small “d” democratic values and the moral, social and economic justice teachings of the world’s great religious traditions. “Socialism” was reduced to socialist proposals that asked whether ‘x’ particular industry should be owned by the government. That was not a question that was answered “a priori”: rather, it was one that people power organizations ought to ask, and decide for themselves. I understood myself as creating the public space, or the forums, that could discuss, discern, debate and decide that question, and then act powerfully on their answer.

I concluded that while there is a science of power, there is not a science for its use. That is a contested terrain in which people make choices. A blurred vision of a fully democratic society seemed to me to offer the best choice. Building such a society is a constant struggle—both against our own demons (the “isms,” ego, the organizational rivalries for turf, funding and recruits are examples), and against incumbent economic, social and political power structures that seek to maintain their own riches and prerogatives. This struggle was well summed up in the 1930s by Supreme Court Justice Louis D. Brandeis: “We must make our choice. We may have democracy, or we may have wealth concentrated in the hands of a few, but we can’t have both.” Since World War II, with minor blips along the way, concentrated wealth has been winning despite whatever other important victories in civil rights, diversity struggles, social welfare and other issues may have been won.

**In The Absence of Community**

Today, for the most part, those who fight for a fuller democracy and social and economic justice lack a brand—in the sense that I have used the term—that has the confidence of significant numbers of the American people.

This is despite the fact that survey after survey demonstrates that the ideas for which they struggle generally have the support of a majority, and sometimes a large one at that, of the American people. There is no organization about which the majority who respond to these surveys says, “They speak for me,” or, “That’s my voice.”

Today’s activist modus operandi is to go from demonstration to demonstration with no organizing in between, and then wonder why big money is able to beat it at the polls. An activist counter-culture has been built, but not one that is rooted deeply in the lives of everyday people. With sometimes more and sometimes less success, that counterculture’s organizations mobilize everyday people on issue campaigns; but it does not make them co-creators. Those mobilized are, as a result, a market rather than a public. Publics discuss, debate and deliberate among themselves. What they resolve from such a process has a deep meaning to them. When these processes are part of deeply rooted and self-funded communities, they have access to the researchers, policy experts and others who can help them shape their own point of view. When they are able to do that, they are relatively immune to what mass media tries to sell them at election time.

The election victory in California of the Richmond Progressive Alliance (RPA) offers a rare example of what this might begin look like. Outspent by Chevron and its local allies by 20:1, RPA won every seat it contested, and contributed to the election of those candidates it endorsed. Their analysis of why is quite simple: we’ve been around now for 10 years and people trust us. They know we are fighting for the interests of everyday people in Richmond. RPA has a long way to go, but it is on the right road. It is developing trusting relationships with the people of Richmond.

Without a counter-culture that looks to sources other than the mass media for guidance on the issues of the day, big money/big media is rarely beaten at election time. Social media can reinforce a community’s message; they cannot substitute for it. When the community is weakened, so is the body politic. When its interests are limited to the “private sphere”, public life, the common good and the public interest are damaged. (Nothing better expresses what has happened to our body politic than George Bush’s post-9/11 statement, “go shopping.”

**How?**

We have instances in American history when such counter-cultures were built: the Populists, the industrial union movement, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee’s organizing work in the Deep South, Saul Alinsky’s community organizing and parts of the tradition that has emerged from his Industrial Areas Foundation. These examples need to be the subject of intense scrutiny by a new generation of activists if they are to achieve the transformational results that our times require.

Organizing takes place between mobilizations. Its core elements are listening, challenging, thinking through and training. It expresses itself in internal education that uses the experiences of action on issues and the problems of everyday people as its curriculum. And it emerges in reflection connecting deeply held values to the action of the day. Organizing also expresses itself in celebration, by creating a new story of everyday people making history — one that challenges the idea that only big-name leaders are the creators of the nation’s legacy.

Organizing emerges through training that develops and enhances the civil skills necessary for self-confident action in the public arena and through social activities like dances, dinners, athletic competition, picnics and the like. Most importantly it emerges through evaluation — through the asking and answering of such questions as, “What did we do in comparison to what we said we were going to do? — in relation to turnout, discipline and focus, testing of new leaders, making new allies and evaluating media coverage. It asks “Are we getting the reaction we wanted?” and “Why did ‘x’ work and ‘y’ not work?” and “What accounts for the results?” “What can be done differently and better next time?” Finally organizing emerges in interpretation, by asking “What do we tell ourselves, our friends, neighbors and co-workers about what was accomplished today?”.

I think full-time, professional, organizers are a key element to creating this counter-culture. Find out what they think. Learn from them. Tip: most of the people who call themselves organizers are really mobilizers. They may make the turnout larger, media coverage better, and take care of a lot of the details, but they don’t build the counter-culture and organizational depth I’m talking about.

The creation of a democratically-rooted counter culture, connected to the majority of the American people, is the pre-condition to creating the democracy Justice Brandeis warned we were losing. That connection can be built in two ways.

The first is through the people’s own institutions and organizations—ranging from congregations and union locals to small merchant and business associations to athletic teams and garden clubs to senior, tenant, homeowner and interest groups, to widely diverse identity groups. The second is through newly-created structures that combine the elements I discuss above to create new strong communities of people whose other affiliations are either non-existent or shallow.

These two approaches can combine mutual aid and institutional change activities to bring about change. Historically (at least in recent times) the first is associated in with the Saul Alinsky-tradition; the second is connected with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee’s work in the Deep South and the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN). In whichever traditionthey are anchored, if they  are to build deeply, they must include elements of reflection, internal education, training, evaluation, interpretation, social activities and other “community-building” activities.

Finally, we need some mechanism, I think of it as an annual or biennial (every two years) event—congress, convention, assembly or whatever you want to call it—that brings together in a one-half to two-day gathering all the groupings identified above. It resembles a political party or union convention. The core-values framework for such a gathering is to be found in the small “d” democratic tradition, and in the religious teachings of the world’s great religions: freedom, justice, equality, security, community, personhood. I think that captures the essentials but add more if you think they’re needed. This gathering adopts a platform, elects organizational leadership and establishes priorities for the forthcoming period. Its delegates, in the compromises they make among themselves, create a “lowest significant common denominator” program and balance conflicts among their core values.

In all the cases I know of where there are such groupings, some full time organizing staff is essential to making such a gathering happen.

How will corporate interests and their allies respond? With astro-turf organizations that cannot beat the real thing—if the real thing is present. Their central problem is that they want to control outcomes to conform to their pre-defined interests, so they won’t build something with deep, democratic roots. But if the real option isn’t available, then in the desert that is now American politics what they do will look real.

The proliferation of “community-based alternatives” funded by foundations and corporations and taking the form of unaccountable non-profit organizations, charter schools, for-profit training programs, universities and colleges, and more is another national expression of the Astroturf alternative. Overcoming pseudo-citizenship is the on-the-ground strategic problem all of us now face in this country.

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*This version of “What’s Our Brand Name?” has slight revisions from the published one.*

July, 2018