

Multiracial Coalitions and Transformation with Manuel Pastor and Marqueece Harris-Dawson

Manuel, in your recent publication (L.A. Rising: The 1992 Civil Unrest, the Arc of Social Justice Organizing, and the Lessons for Today's Movement Building) you share important assessments of the "movement ecosystem" that has developed over the past 20 years. Where do you each see your organization's role in the movement at this stage? What is the particular niche you play?

Manuel Pastor: At PERE (USC's Program for Environmental and Regional Equity), we're very clear that we work with and for community-based organizations, trying to produce very rigorous research and unearth the arguments that our opponents make. We see ourselves as being a very data-intended shop. What we do is provide research ammunition to people who actually make policy, and that is these community-based organizations that are really organizing to garner the power to change things. Interestingly, that devotion to data accuracy has helped the Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration become kind of a neutral space to bring more mainstream organizations like the Chamber of Commerce and business groups to the immigrant rights cause.



actually networks around race as well. The Community Coalition tries to intentionally situate ourselves to bring a particular voice to those discussions. One way is having a Black/Brown coalition. Oddly enough, there isn't as much of that in big cities as you might think.

We also try to make sure that we continually raise issues related to both substance abuse and the war on drugs that impact our community. And we always try to press the point around innovation, both exposing and being transparent about things that we've tried and failed, and just giving ourselves the space and the permission to try to be innovative around our work.

MP: The Community Coalition has been able to develop a pretty deep bench. A lot of that has to do with careful attention to leadership development, and that's really a very important part of institution building and alliance building. It also helps because there's so much intentionality around leadership development, which also helps with building Black/Brown relationships because people are being conscious about who they are and what they're hoping to achieve.

Similarly, a distinctive mark for the CSII is that it also spends time trying to understand the relationship between African Americans and immigrants, and views the centrality of the African American struggle for racial justice as being completely intertwined with the issues of immigrant rights.

MHD: Leadership development is a place where organizations can be completely conscious about race and gender in a way that is hard to do with other issues. Again, it's hard work but it can be done, and it helps you build the kind of organization over generations that can continue to stay on the forefront of the struggle for racial justice.

How would you describe the relationship between using an explicit racial justice analysis and transformative organizing? And are there any kinds of campaigns where it is less beneficial to be explicit about race?

MHD: We're in the beginning part of a big campaign



Marqueece Harris-Dawson: The Community Coalition plays pretty specific roles in the broader social justice movement. We are consciously building a Black/Brown coalition here in Los Angeles, which is kind of the epicenter in the United States for that kind of work.

Our organization is conscious about trying to build a popular front and pursuing the most advanced social justice or radical line that we can, while remaining in the broader political conversation and not finding ourselves on the outskirts of it.

What are some of the ways that you engage with your counterparts in terms of community organizing nationally?

MHD: There are networks on issue areas; there are networks around civic or voter engagement. There are

to break pieces of the prison pipeline, which features a discussion about Black and Latino boys in schools, and push outs and suspension rates. To me, it represents a sea change because there is really good data, but this is also a specific racial profiling issue with which to build a broad consensus. That's an example that we're right in the front of, and [it] will push the racial justice line in an aggressive way that we probably haven't done in awhile. In leadership development work, consciousness building around race and racial justice is really central to what we do. [But] in many of our campaigns, we don't have the luxury of racializing them as much as we'd like to. Our rule is that we push it as far as we can. But obviously we don't want to sacrifice victories and improvements in our people's situations because we carried a more radical race line than we had to.

Have you ever been able to win a campaign by de-racializing, even though you might lose something important in the process?

MHD: The Community Coalition had a big successful campaign around making college prep courses available to every student in the city, where students of color make up approximately 85 percent of the school district in LA. The point was to educate poor Black and Brown kids, and not to shortchange them. But we didn't frame the campaign that way, so there's a sense in which one of the things you lose is the evaluation of the success or failure of the victory because you don't necessarily get the racial justice angle. To me, we lose that kind of edge when, because of the political environment, we de-racialize things.

MP: The campaign around men and boys of color has allowed me to consistently raise the differences between African American and Latino young men, as well as the second-generation of immigrants, and the specific challenges they face. I think, frankly, it's young Black men who face the toughest of the challenges in terms of overincarceration, overpolicing, tracking in the schools, and so on. Second-generation Latinos are closer to the African American experience, while immigrants face a different set of challenges. And it's that sort of nuancing, that it is actually really important to have an effective intervention strategy; because if you build unity without talking about difference, then you're not going to really be able to keep the unity moving forward.

I firmly believe the line from our book "Uncommon Common Ground": "You need to get race upfront to get race behind." I find that if you put it at the front of a conversation, at the front of your analysis, you often wind up working on issues that are fairly universal, like reforming the ways in which we deal with tardiness at schools or protecting folks that are in hazardous environmental conditions. Making sure you've got it up front helps you understand how the policies will play out too.

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Have you seen traction on strengthening a race lens within the immigrant rights movement and among its allies?

MP: One strand has to do with recognizing that the most anti-immigrant initiatives are being launched in places that have a long legacy of racism, places like Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, South Carolina. You're seeing a really interesting set of shifts from what I would call transactional alliances to transformational alliances. For example, I think it is very clear that African Americans in Mississippi are recognizing that a strong alliance with Latinos and with progressive Whites might be enough to actually shift politics in that state in the next 5-10 years. Immigrants are beginning to understand their experience of being seen as "others" has been the history of racism in the United States; and African Americans [are] looking at what's going on for immigrants as being a kind of being part of an unfinished civil rights struggle.

The focus in a lot of our social justice philanthropy has been trying to get folks to understand the importance of funding community organizing, which we all think is critical. But when we talk about systems and structure, we can undermine the importance of the interplay between direct services, such as substance abuse or violence prevention, and efforts to build community power. Marqueece, can you talk about some of the interesting things the Community Coalition has done to bridge organizing and direct services?



MHD: The first constituency for Community Coalition was actually social service providers. Those were the first member activists of our organization and [they] remain the longest-standing members. One of the things I feel like we've learned is the importance of staying connected to people who both are receiving and providing services, because that keeps you grounded in a relationship with your base in ways almost nothing else does. Services are delivered in a politicized way, making that fertile ground for new activists. It is interesting that in the past 15 years or so, progressives in the U.S. have had this line about dividing services and organizing. We think the bridge between services and organizing is very important, and we try to push and help a lot of our friends see that they can find ways to do that, in order to preserve their organizing work.

MP: One of the reasons for the dichotomy between services and organizing is because people realized you couldn't service your way out of poverty, and so they leaned totally back on the organizing piece of it. It's important to integrate the two pieces. Service delivery is about actually showing that there are some things that you can do in the short run that make people's lives better. There's an element of the service component that's about soulfulness and people recovering their lives, which fits very well into this new direction in L.A. called "transformative organizing."

The two of you and your work together represent some of the more effective intersections between community organizing, and policy analysis and research to work for racial justice. What are some of the issues you think are most important about these relationships? And what are the next set of questions we should be focusing on regarding research and organizing intersections?

MP: One of the things that typically happens in the academic world is that faculty have all these theories, and they use the world to test the theories, rather than going out and understanding that there are some people actually building these social movements who are themselves pretty theoretically self-conscious. I think that suggests the need for a new humility on the part of researchers.

I also think a lot more needs to be done on what is the nature of transformative organizing. We've tried to take a stab at that with this new document called "Transactions, Transformations, Translations," which looks at how to measure movement building, both by the kinds of

transactions that take place or the number of people you bring to a meeting, but also by the sort of transformative organizing, leadership development, and alliance-building that takes place.

What are some of these things you'd like funders to think about in relationship to their approach, and support for work to mobilize communities and address racial justice?

MHD: One thing is to really try to invest in innovation. The other thing is to make a long-term investment so that people have time to push and prod, and explore the contours of the political world that we live in, and equally explore what their organizations are capable of.

MP: First, more funding around leadership development. The second thing is alliance building, which is different than leadership development because it is about learning how to be a good ally, how to sometimes put the movement ahead of your own organization, how to work together in the face of wedge issues meant to divide us. Another really key place is in the development of African American organizing leadership, meaning specific efforts that help to make sure that leadership is being built, and relevant in terms of alliance building with other groups.

The economy is key, and thinking about our economic strategy has been often confined to think tanks. So a better connection between think tanks and grassroots organizations that would actually move an agenda is really important.

Also, don't be so fascinated by the next new thing so funding tends to be kind of faddish, right? Some of our better organizations know how to package so it sounds like the next new thing. But I think understanding that this is fundamentally about having some research that undergirds

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the argument, developing a story that make sense and resonates with people, and doing the kind of leadership development and community organizing alliance building that actually moves people, power and politics. And sticking with it is important.

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Some of the things that funders often do wrong begin with well-intended goals that can perhaps go awry because of different power dynamics, or a need to focus on their own metrics, etc. What are some things they should be cautious about as they support this work?

MHD: The only thing that I would add as a caution is paying attention to organizational development, of which leadership development is a big, big part. We’re now at the point where a lot of organizations are entering particular changes in their lifecycle. A lot of it is leadership turnover at the top, with the baby boomers who started the organization moving on to other work. A lot of our organizations can really struggle if we don’t pay attention.

MP: Philanthropy needs to co-create its philanthropic agendas and the ways in which it measures success by bringing some of the best leaders and organizers in to help them think through what agendas should be, how success should be measured, etc. People are eager for it, and I think it can lead to more effective giving.

What currently gives you encouragement that you haven’t already touched upon?

MHD: We have some really big fights ahead. The 2012 election will be a big fight. And then on the world stage, a big fight is clearly shaping up around public investment. We’re excited and encouraged that these fights are mostly offensive fights for us – ones that provide space for lots of creativity and actions, and lots of hitting the streets.

MP: What gives me hope is watching this multigenerational affair moving forward from the baby-boomer generation that helped found a lot of these organizations. The boomers and then Marqueece’s generation were pretty intersectional and brought together

a lot of different movements. But when you see the Dream Act kids borrowing from gay and lesbian groups to “come out” as undocumented kids, and when you see the way in which young people are overwhelmingly in favor of marriage equality, and the way in which they can really reenergize these things – it sounds trite, but the younger generation gives me hope. Issues are not going away and it’s not post-racial. But this new generation is ready to fight in new and creative ways. Ways that are going to involve art and music; ways that are going to stretch across communities. And ways that are going to put marriage equality, immigrant rights, Black political and economic advancement, and the concerns of rural White working people all in the same bucket, in a much more comfortable and convenient way than we’ve ever thought before.

Marqueece Harris-Dawson is the president and CEO of Community Coalition, a social justice nonprofit organization based in South Los Angeles. Harris-Dawson came to the helm of Community Coalition in 2004 after years of hard work as a community organizer – leading the organization to its first educational justice victories. Harris-Dawson has been active in South L.A. for more than 20 years, leading campaigns aimed at improving the quality of life for African American and Latino residents. www.cocosouthla.org

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