

Strengthening the Movement: Voices from the Field

PRE Executive Director Lori Villarosa conducted a series of joint interviews pairing leading research and policy analysts/advocates with community organizers in May 2012 to discuss what they each see as the key issues within the realm of structural racism and community organizing. Following are excerpts of the interviews held with Deepak Bhargava of Center for Community Change and Dr. John A. Powell of the Haas Diversity Research Center at the University of California; Maya Wiley of Center for Social Inclusion and Ai-Jen Poo of National Domestic Workers Alliance; and Marqueece Harris-Dawson of Community Coalition and Manuel Pastor of the Program for Environmental and Regional Equity (PERE) and the Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration (CSII) of the University of Southern California. These conversations provided an opportunity to discuss where approaches aligned, and possibly surfaced some nuances reflecting their unique vantage points within the movement ecosystem.

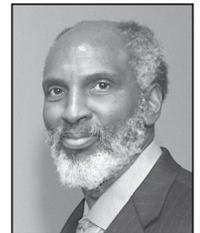
Talking About Structural Racialization and Community Organizing with Deepak Bhargava and John Powell

Let's start by talking about how a structural understanding of racism leads to a new vision of community organizing.

Deepak Bhargava: There is a history in community organizing that tries to assert that it is free of values and ideology. But there is no such thing. Organizing does, in fact, manifest values about how the world should be. The infusion of a structural racism analysis into the field of community organizing is still a work in progress. What I see changing is more careful attention to who is in the leadership of organizations, who is doing the actual organizing, and what issues organizations pursue and how they pursue them. A good example, and where John's work has been instrumental, is the Ohio Organizing Collaborative. They have a big jobs campaign that has both a set of revenue and job creation demands for state policy, but also very specific and targeted goals to address collateral sanctions on people who were in the criminal justice system and aren't able to find employment.



Dr. John Powell: We're a country that's radically individualistic and pretty ahistoric; issues are framed as if everything is really about personal responsibility, so structures have largely been invisible in our society. Add to that the issue of race and it becomes exponentially more challenging to introduce either an analysis or explicit discussion about structures and race. You're really skating uphill. But there is significant movement that is happening, although the challenge extends beyond community organizing. Because structures tend to be change-resistant, they are harder to actually move than an individual campaign might suggest. And often times there are many more interests to keep a structure in place. You need more power and more coalitions. A lot of traditional ways of organizing are not as broad or effective as they need to be.



Would you say community organizing is central to sustainable and transformational change? What does a structural racism analysis reveal about the centrality of community organizing?

jp: Well, I would start at a slightly different place. Because structures are complex and resistant to change, you need a lot of capacity. Community organizing is a part of a larger field of organizing and it is probably not sufficient in its current form. You need a substantial, organized effort and to be able to engage at a pretty sophisticated, long-term level. I am worried that we are losing organizing capacity. Fifty years ago, unions represented 35 percent of the labor force; now in the private labor force, they're at 9 percent. The capacity to engage from that sector is diminished; and I'm not sure if community organizing has really thought through how to step into the breach in a way that builds enough power, especially when structures have become more important than they were 50 years ago.

Deepak, let's build on that. In addition to what John has just raised, I want to talk even more broadly about some of the constituencies that need to be organized and who should be doing the organizing, particularly when we are trying to impact structural racism.

DB: I share John's anxiety about the state of organizing in the country. We start in a situation where the strains of radical individualism work against us. We don't have the same traditions of solidarity as in other countries. There's been erosion in a number of critical institutions, unions in particular. We are at a pivotal point in the country's history, and we don't really have the scale of organization that is required. And there are at least two requirements; the first is organization within African American and Latino communities. That's a major precondition, in my opinion, especially for broad-based coalitions required to get major changes done. The last 15 years has seen an enormous amount of talent and energy in the immigrant

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rights movement, but I have a particular concern about whether there is enough attention being paid or enough resources devoted to leadership and organization in the African American community. The second thing is building a broad base of organizations in which race is not submerged by universal agendas. The embracing of specific and general has been maybe the single greatest challenge that the left has faced in constructing mass movements. This has proven very challenging on the multiracial left for decades, maybe forever.

How do you build a broad-based coalition without submerging race? And related to mobilizing broader coalitions, what criteria do you use for developing campaigns, considering your different positions within the movement?

DB: We start with a commitment to alleviate human suffering, and the impact that particular policies have on our well-being. Beyond that are these questions: Is the campaign going to ameliorate problems that will continue to be generated from the structures that are left intact? Is there energy in the community for taking this on? Does this particular campaign have organizing and movement potential? Does the campaign attract new people to the organization and to the movement? Does achieving these changes position us differently with respect to being able to move other changes? Because as John has articulated very powerfully, systems are complex and interlocked, so it's unlikely that any one particular campaign by itself will fundamentally change life conditions. However, one thing that I have been thinking about lately is consciousness. Of course the goal of a campaign is in part to win policy changes, but the goal of our campaigns should include changing how people understand the underlying dynamics of what's going on. I think about the right's campaign on something like the "death tax"; the payoff from a policy point of view may not be immediate, but it infiltrates consciousness in a way that sets the tone of the debate for a long time. That's challenging for community organizing, but it's a frontier that many of us are trying to explore.

jp: Part of the challenge, as Deepak suggested, is changing the goals. We have to have relationships at different levels so it's not just transactional. Think about unions in the '40s and '50s; they were not just where people would go on strike together. They actually had picnics, went bowling, and literally lived in each other's neighborhoods. Because there really was community, there was something there that could sustain them through the very tough fights they had with corporations who were better resourced and could call



in the government. We don't have that. For the most part, our efforts are transactional, exhausting and most people don't really like them. Once the fight is over, people leave and we have to start rebuilding all over again. As a result, we don't get critical mass. Part of the goal, part of the metrics, is figuring out how to build a movement that can sustain people at multiple levels. People aren't going to be engaged in something that depletes them. What we're doing has to be informed by long-term goals about what kind of society we are trying to build; so when Deepak says we need to focus on consciousness, I completely agree. We also see a deeper understanding of how racialized structures and cultures inform much of what is and what is thought of as possible in this country. So race is often present even when not named. Race is more than just about skin tone. America's obsession with freedom, our radical separate individualism, states' rights, our weak welfare system, the Electoral College, and the way we think about class and many other American institutions are all substantially informed by race. We cannot have a serious social justice movement without seriously engaging race.

Where do you each see the connection in applying a structural racism analysis and utilizing a communication strategy, and do you think you have to be explicit about race in the work?

jp: The analysis and the communication are not the same. I don't think you have to lead with race, but it has to inform our analysis and be explicit in our communication. The question to me is not "Do we talk about race?" but "How?" How do we talk about it in a sophisticated way? How do we talk about it in a way that makes it hard to avoid? And how do we do it without driving people away? From a structural perspective, it's a different conversation. It's thinking of how we're located in structures, how these structures produce different life outcomes, and how they are profoundly racialized. In talking about race, we also need to think about our aspirations. How do we build our structures to reflect a truly inclusive and diverse society? This is a conversation that is fundamentally different from the one we normally have.

DB: I see a lot of progress and more intentionality in community organizing to lift up race. I am not sure if it is always done skillfully because it is complex for all the reasons John said. Sometimes it plays out through a false binary set up between race and class: what should we be leading with? But, there is no class in America

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without race. The history of the country is such that they have to be spoken of together. One thing that we are learning – and John's been very important in framing this – is that it is possible both to assert that everybody in this organization is getting harmed by a set of policies, and at the same time to note disproportionate harm or differences in circumstances for certain groups within the constituency. There is no contradiction in that. In other words, one can build the kind of unity that's required in a community organization to go and fight for change on the basis of both shared grievance and also difference. I have seen people move and change when other leaders and organizers have had the courage to lift up the different ways people have experienced health care or housing, or whatever the issue may be. When there are wedges brought to bear, it never works to run and hide. When there is rampant Islamophobia, for example, or bias against African Americans or immigrants, you have to confront it. Those wedges are deployed strategically and intentionally, and the response has to be equally strategic and intentional.

Many of our readers will be funders who are already allies in some ways, perhaps supporting social and/or racial justice. I'd really love to lift up some of the things that they could be doing more or less of – or differently.

DB: We need to rethink outcomes. We measure turnout at events or policy victories. Those are important, but there are other dimensions of change that have to do with, for example, developing consciousness, which isn't amenable to a short campaign. I am not saying we shouldn't do them. I love 1- or 2-year campaigns. But knowing that the gigantic policy reform may be a 10-year project, it's important that funders, together with grantees, help reconceptualize how we build outcomes. The second thing is inviting some risk taking. There's a tendency in philanthropy to gravitate towards the campaigns that

have previously delivered results, as opposed to looking for new approaches to organizing, coalition-building or campaigning that might be suitable to the large challenges we face. So, more appetite for risk taking and tolerance for failure are pretty important.

jp: Again, I agree with Deepak. You want to encourage people to take chances, to do things that are bold and that are different from the traditional things that are funded. I am not saying that is all we should do, but it certainly should be a part of what we do. To be candid, I feel like a lot of our efforts actually have come from foundations in the sense that they're picking the issues, essentially structuring the field, without the field always having the proper input. Sometimes they get it right, sometimes they get it wrong, but it's like they're deciding for – and not with – the field. That speaks to their style and power, and it also speaks to the field's vulnerability and weakness. I think it's very problematic. Something different might be, for example, creating different pots of money. I am not saying we should mimic the business world, but people talk about patient capital as opposed to debt capital. We need patient capital. Now there are some important and noted exceptions – but they're exceptions. I guess if foundations were going to be partners in this effort, I would want them to basically say, "OK, we're going to take 25-30 percent of the resources and work on really long-term problems in networks with each other."

This is an interesting point, Deepak, because some of us have been trying to help folks be activist leaders within philanthropy; but are there also concerns if funders interpret this activism as being more about setting the agenda?

DB: I agree with John – we do need to reinvent the financial base for social justice work, so that we have more patient capital and a greater ability to take risks. But there are appropriate forms of funder activism. For example, the core of funders that support community organizing and support work against structural racism is ridiculously small. I think it is increasingly how they see their job description to recruit new funders to support this work. I think there's no better perch from which to recruit than from a philanthropic perch. And we can help by strategizing together about what we need to do in order to tell the story in a compelling way, to develop people to tell the story, to promote them. That kind of a recruitment focus would be very valuable for allies in philanthropy.

jp: Let me add one other thing: part of the responsibility lies with us in the field. We shouldn't leave it to the foundations to figure this out themselves. We should be saying, "Here are 10 groups who are substantial players in the field. We have some differences, but we all agree we need to think about transformative change, big change, and we're not structured right to do it." The next step would be to participate in a planning process for a year or two to think about this in a serious way.

I want to make sure I end on a hopeful note, as you each raised important ideas about moving things in the right direction. What are one or two things that make you hopeful as we move forward in this work?

DB: I have a great deal of hope for the field broadly defined as community organizing. It is potentially a deeply transformative force in American life. My optimism lies in the fact that what has changed in the last 10-15 years is the bringing to bear of an analysis, which includes structural racism and also an analysis of how principled coalitions are building for power at all levels. I wouldn't say it is true everywhere, but there are fewer arguments about the centrality of a racial justice analysis than there were years ago. There are now more discussions about the "how" and that to me is remarkable progress. It makes me hopeful that we will actually be able to change some of these systems in a lasting and meaningful way.

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jp: Well, I see encouraging signs for what we're doing and what actually is being reflected in the larger society. For example, structural racism or racialization is not a term or idea that is unheard of anymore. Ten years ago that wasn't the case. We are not going to go back to the 1950s. We can't build an electric fence on the border, and we can't reassert the dominance of men in the workplace. An alternative vision demands that we go forward in a very complex, interconnected world where Blacks and Latinos aren't your enemies, immigrants and gays aren't your enemies, and China is not your enemy. So part of our job as progressives who care about race and about justice is to push our friends, whether they are in the foundations or



in the White House. We have to do it in a strategic and respectful way – by helping and pushing. We’re starting to see some of that. We are creating a table with unions, community organizers, stakeholders, communications specialists and researchers. We are seeing some new alignment with LGBT and civil rights. We will also expand to issues around gender, disability, immigration and others. We are seeing some elites and Occupy raise questions of corporate misalignment and inequality. There will be more opportunities ahead, as well as more danger, so what we do or don’t do, what we build or don’t build, will matter a lot in the coming years and decades.

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