

OLD INSTITUTIONS, NEW MOVEMENTS, ONE CRISIS

A Democratic Strategy Forum Essay

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We are already inside the crisis. The question is no longer whether authoritarian danger is coming. It is why so many democratic forces still behave as though it has not yet, and may never, arrived.

Federal and state institutions have already detached themselves in important ways from democratic norms, public accountability, and basic constitutional expectations. The Right advances through organized minority power, concentrated wealth, media machinery, institutional capture, and the political demobilization of everyone else. And yet much of democratic life still responds with caution, isolated moral concern, and the habits of normal politics.

That is the immediate problem this essay addresses. The fragmented terrain on which democratic forces now stand was not created overnight. It was produced through a long history of struggle, victories and losses, narrowing, exclusion, adaptation, and retreat. Older institutions and newer movements are both products of that history. The urgent question is why they remain so weakly aligned in the face of this anti-democratic emergency—and what that failure tells us about the present moment.

Reckoning With Our Own Side

The democratic camp did not create fascism, but it tolerated too much of the barbary and wreckage in which fascism could grow. That is the hard starting point. Pro-democracy forces helped create the terrain for revanchment through passivity, fragmentation, lowered expectations, and a long overreliance on the electoral center and funding support from the 10% and the 1%. Too much politics was reduced to not losing rather than building power. Too many organizations accepted decline as manageable. Too many institutions mistook survival for strategy.

This is not an argument for blame in the abstract. It is an argument for clarity. If democratic forces do not reckon with their own role in enabling passivity and fragmentation, we will keep repeating the same habits but under current conditions that are ready to extract much dearer costs.

The Real Tradition Is Fightback

The tradition democratic forces should claim is not caution. It is struggle. Long before the New Deal, working people, Black people, women, immigrants, as well as the excluded and marginalized, fought for dignity, personhood, survival, and democratic standing. They struck, marched, organized, resisted employers, confronted police, and pushed against systems built to keep them subordinate.

That broader democratic tradition matters because it reminds us that ordinary people were never simply recipients of reform. They were the makers of the pressure and demands that made reform possible. The real tradition is not accommodation. It is fightback.

Older Institutions Were Born Militant

What are now called the old institutions did not begin as the bureaucratic shells they now suggest. They were born militant. Sit-down strikes, industrial organizing, mass pickets, factory occupations, and insurgent labor struggles helped force open the New Deal order. These organizations once represented real social power from below.

But this history must be told honestly. Their militancy coexisted with exclusion. Black workers, women, and others were often marginalized or shut out, not because their struggles stood outside the working class, but because dominant labor institutions too often defined the working class too narrowly. That narrowness showed itself not only in who was included inside the unions, but also in how many labor institutions failed to take up the fight for Black freedom and women's equality as central to the broader struggle for democratic power. Too often those struggles were treated as secondary, separate, or someone else's issue, when they were in fact part of the unfinished struggle over the rights, dignity, and standing of working people themselves.

That is why examples like the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters matter so much. They remind us that the story of labor militancy and the story of democratic inclusion

were never identical, but they were always connected. Older institutions have militant roots, but they also carry a history of narrowness that later struggles were forced to confront, widen, and in some cases reorganize from the ground up.

The Partial Democratic Settlement

The New Deal and postwar order improved life for many, but not for all of the working class. Exclusions around race/ethnicity, gender, labor sector, and civic standing remained built into the liberal and capitalism order itself. The institutions that emerged from that settlement spoke as though they represented democracy in full when in fact they represented a narrowed and uneven version of it.

That matters because the order that was produced by and produced the older institutions never fully included everyone. It created gains but also limits. It built power, but also boundaries. These boundaries became the ground on which future struggles within the movement for a more inclusive democracy would emerge.

Postwar Stabilization and the Narrowing of Labor

Higher wages, benefits, and institutional stability gave many unions real power, however, these victories also narrowed labor's political vision. Cold War anti-communism deepened that narrowing. The broader Left, which often led the most aggressive campaigns for working people's economic and political power, was weakened. Unions became more institutional, more cautious, and less willing to fight across the full breadth of working-class life. The result was not the disappearance of labor on the political scene, but a shift in what labor imagined itself to be.

That narrowing is one of the keys to the present. Older institutions did not simply decline materially. They also shrank politically in both actions and vision. They became less insurgent and less socially expansive just as the defense of democracy required a broader imagination, not a narrower one.

Why New Movements Emerged

The newer movements did not emerge because the lives and struggles of working people ceased to matter, nor did struggles around race and gender begin only after the labor-centered order had taken shape. Black freedom struggles, women's struggles, and other fights for dignity, recognition, and full democratic standing long predated the postwar period and were woven through the whole history of democratic conflict in the United States. Nor

should these struggles be understood as somehow outside the working class. They were, and are, part of the broader struggle over the lives, rights, conditions, and power of working people in all their diversity.

What changed was that, as the limits of the older order became clearer, these struggles increasingly took new organizational form and political force. They did so because the labor-liberal framework remained too narrow, too conservative, and too exclusionary to answer the full democratic question. In that sense, these movements were not detours from material politics. They were efforts to deepen and broaden working-class democracy where older institutions had failed to do so.

That is why the current division between old institutions and new movements cannot be understood simply as a clash of styles or generations. It is rooted in the fact that different parts of the democratic camp were formed by different experiences of exclusion, struggle, and partial recognition, even though all of them belong to the larger history of working people fighting to enlarge democracy.

Neoliberalism Shattered the Basis for Solidarity

Neoliberal restructuring, in the US context "Reaganism", did not matter here simply because they increased inequality. They mattered more fundamentally, because they broke the organizational and social basis for democratic cohesion and action. Anti-union attacks, public disinvestment, deregulation, weakened labor protections, and rising inequality all helped produce a fragmented society in which fewer institutions could translate suffering into collective power.

This is one of the decisive bridges between the historical and the strategic argument. Neoliberalism massively enriched the already fabulously wealthy. In this political and economic struggle by working people, what was equally as important was that it intensified fragmentation below. It damaged the infrastructures through which solidarity becomes durable and, in that weakened terrain, encouraged forms of political life that were often more segmented and defensive than solidaristic. This is one place where the question of identity politics enters the story. Struggles organized around race, gender, sexuality, or other forms of oppression were not mistaken or illegitimate. Many were necessary precisely because older institutions had failed to confront those forms of domination adequately. But under neoliberal conditions, where broader class institutions were weakened and collective democratic life thinned out, political struggle

was often pushed into more separated channels. The result was not simply greater recognition of difference, but a more fragmented oppositional field, one less able to translate many valid grievances into a durable common project.

The Democratic Party and the Retreat into Electoralism

The Democratic Party adapted to this order rather than confronting it at the required level. Politics was reduced more and more to campaigns, candidates, and survival in the middle. The result was not simply a weaker party. It was a weaker democratic culture.

Dewey, Habermas, Barber, and other democratic theorists all understood that democracy requires education, participation, and practice. It must be learned, exercised, and renewed. When politics becomes only electoral management, democratic capacity withers. That is why dialogue, popular education, and practices such as community-based participatory research matter. They are not side issues. They are part of rebuilding the habits and capacities without which democratic struggle cannot be sustained and strengthened.

How Working People Were Separated From Their Own Interests

The Right (and the Republican Party) did not improve workers' lives. It redirected their anger. Once the connection between material suffering and political explanation is broken, disorganized pain becomes available for reactionary politics. The materially dispossessed can be taught to see scapegoats instead of structures, enemies below instead of power above.

That is why authoritarian politics became more culturally available, more pervasive, and more persistent among many who were also being harmed by the system it defended. Unless democratic institutions explain oppression and organize against it, suffering can be turned against vulnerable targets in ugly and destructive ways.

Where Are the Mass Organizations?

This is the center of the essay. The level of danger and destruction now facing democratic life stands in sharp contrast to the meagerness of the response relative to the power that still exists to resist it. Labor still has millions of members, treasuries, legitimacy, and infrastructure. Women's organizations, civil rights groups, environmental formations, educators, scientists, and other

democratic institutions still possess resources, moral authority, and reach.

So where are they? Why is there no fightback at a scale comparable to the danger? Why do major institutions still respond as though concern, statements, branding, and selective mobilization are enough? The crisis is not only one of historical inheritance. It is one of current institutional failure.

There may even be harder explanations for that failure than simple inertia or confusion. Some institutions may be more invested in preserving their current form than in risking themselves in a struggle equal to the moment. Some may no longer believe in mass democratic confrontation. Some may be too adapted to the degraded order they publicly oppose. Whether or not the essay answers those questions fully, it should at least acknowledge that the failure may run deeper than bad judgment alone.

Statements Are Not Strategy

Too many institutions still act as though this is normal politics. But concern is not strategy. Moral alarm is not organization. Institutional survival is not democratic leadership. What is missing is coordinated strategic action at scale.

That is the point at which the history of fragmentation becomes a direct challenge to the present. Democratic forces are not being asked whether they understand the danger. They are being tested on whether they are willing to act commensurate with the threat.

Old Institutions and New Movements on the Same Burning Ground

Older institutions still bring scale, memory, infrastructure, and legitimacy. Newer movements bring urgency, moral clarity, and broader democratic claims born from the unfinished struggles of the past. Neither is sufficient alone. The crisis requires alignment.

That means more than symbolic coalition. It means front formation, common struggle, shared risk, and a willingness to build power across traditions that were formed under different historical conditions. The same fire is now at the feet of all of them and us.

Conclusion

The question is no longer whether we know enough. The question is whether democratic institutions and

movements are prepared to act as though history is calling them. What the present requires is not another round of concern without strategy. It requires coalition, front formation, and common struggle now.

The fragmented inheritances of democratic life will either be brought into alignment—or they will remain one of the conditions under which authoritarianism continues to advance and metastasize.

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