

Worldview and the Contest of Ideas

After wandering in the ‘messaging’ wilderness for several decades, and having their hopes for change dashed too often, community, labor and faith-based social justice groups are turning their attention toward gaining control of the larger political narrative. This is a very positive development. To make the most of current enthusiasm for developing alternative narratives, we urge groups to place their narrative work in the context of the larger struggle to shift power relations in society. To do this, we must recognize that we are in a contest: what National People’s Action likes to call the “battle of big ideas.” Understanding the power of worldview, and the role of narrative in shifting worldview, gives us a more comprehensive framework for taking on corporate-conservative ideologies, for engaging in the contest of ideas.

Narratives compete on the terrain of worldview. As we use the term here, *worldview* refers to the collections of beliefs, norms, value systems, core themes, popular wisdom and traditions that people draw upon to help them make sense of the world around them. Worldview often is linked to unexamined assumptions about human nature, identity, gender, race, class and sexuality and family. And while the worldview terrain contains a rich and varied array of ideas, at any given time, a certain set of ideas tends to dominate. In other words, there is a *dominant* worldview. Our mission is the shift the dominant worldview in our direction.

Worldview struggles are about moving the whole political spectrum, not about winning this or that issue. For well over thirty-five years, the dominant worldview has been skewed rightward, reflecting a range of values and beliefs that bring together cultural conservatives and corporate elites, free-market conservatives and libertarians. Immediately after the near-collapse of the financial sector in the Fall of 2008, corporate-conservative ideas came under close scrutiny. But, almost three years later, their ideas again dominate. They’ve managed to label the victims of Wall Street’s recklessness as the perpetrators: the poor, the public sector worker, the retiree, and any workers who

have the audacity to complain about the gross concentrations of wealth and power in our society. Conservatives’ ideas are so resilient that, in the wake of the worst recession in over 80 years, our lawmakers are obsessed with cutting taxes for the super wealthy instead of creating jobs and stimulating economic growth.

The dominant worldview is built upon a powerful nexus of themes: rugged individualism, market fundamentalism and a limited role for government, especially in economic affairs. Consider their appeals to rugged individualism – the kind of ‘bootstraps’ individualism that has distorted public discourse and trumped community values and notion of interdependence. It has such power because it is tied to other core themes in the dominant worldview: competition, a limited role for government, and subtle as well as overt appeals to exclusionary impulses around race, nationality, gender and sexuality. We can see this interweave of conservative themes about individualism, competition, limited government and appeals to ‘us’ versus ‘them’ in the current emphasis on demonizing public programs and any public solutions to the current economic crisis. With these themes, ultra-conservatives have taken over the Republican Party, and pushed all of our national debates to the right. Instead of focusing on creating jobs, stopping foreclosures and making Wall Street pay for the mess they have made, our lawmakers have decided that deficit reduction is the most crucial thing to do during this protracted recession.

The Right’s themes also link up with a particular way of understanding discrimination and other structural barriers as being a thing of the past. They will reference race in their criticisms of the first African American President with one breath, then say that his election in 2008 proves we are living in a ‘post-racial society’ with the next breath.

Less than two years ago, cutting Social Security and privatizing Medicare were still virtually unthinkable. Today, lawmakers from both parties have put both of these programs in peril. Conservatives have a good narrative, built around interlocking themes, and they know how to use it.

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Worldview Building Blocks: Themes and Values

The word 'freedom' is used for many purposes.

It is sometimes even used in the interest of 'freedom.'

—Duke Ellington, Sacred Concert

Good narratives tell a story that clarifies the problems and the solutions while pointing people toward collective actions that will bring about the solutions. If the narrative is to have resonance, it must convey values and beliefs, as well as core ideas, through a thoughtful and nuanced use of *themes*. Themes are the raw materials that help us construct stories about social and political problems. They enable us to connect our stories to the larger world of meanings. The rich and diverse terrain of worldview is built around core themes that are derived from (and reinforcing of) the cultures and subcultures, as well as shared and divergent histories that exist in our society. Examples of core themes in our society are “freedom,” “equality,” “fairness” and “democracy.” These themes do not necessarily have meanings on their own; their meanings are fixed in the context of the dominant worldview.

We tend to use familiar themes in our stories, issue frames, and messages about social and political issues. We try to convey a specific meaning in the message; this is what is referred to as *encoding*. However, the meaning is not fixed or determined by the sender, it has to be interpreted by the receiver. People are not passive recipients of meanings. They bring their own consciousness to their interpretation of a message. The ways in which the receiver interprets the message is called *decoding*. To communicate more effectively, we need to know more about the ideas and impressions that the receiver brings to the process of decoding our messages.

As we build narratives that appeal to themes like “freedom” and “fairness,” we need to keep in mind the power of corporate-conservative worldview in setting the context in which those themes too often are understood. Our efforts to create alternative narratives have to deliberately break the association of these themes with conservative worldview.

Themes get articulated within a chain of associated ideas which form a “chain of meaning.” These associations are derived from historical developments and social arrangements. Different elements of worldview—including values and the words and phrases that convey those values—are combined in ways that tap historic associations to create what Stuart Hall refers to as a ‘chain of

meaning.’ The specific word or value does not stand on its own. When combined with other worldview elements and value statements, a new set of meanings emerges (Morley and Chen, 1996).

Consider the ways in which *democracy* is articulated within a chain of associated ideas. The current, dominant chain of meaning, which limits democracy to forms of political representation, reflects how concepts of democracy have evolved historically. Grassroots organizations can contest and expand the meanings while creating new experiences of democracy. We can draw upon histories of ‘popular-democratic’ struggle and bring in examples of deepening the content of political life. This new association expands the meaning of democracy.

As Stuart Hall notes, a chain of meaning is difficult to break because it becomes part of the way in which the worldview terrain is mapped out. The chain of meaning for a theme or value becomes part of common sense. In order to frame an issue (or reclaim it from conservatives and reframe it), we have to break the ‘chain of meaning’ that becomes part of the common sense that people draw upon to decode our messages. Hall refers to this as establishing a new articulation (Dines and Humez, 1995).

Here are a few more examples of the chains of meaning that we need to break as we try to reclaim core themes. As Duke Ellington’s lyrics suggest, the word *freedom* is used for many purposes. For conservatives, freedom is associated with individualism and the free market, which gives it a narrow and specific meaning: the freedom to be left alone, to make your own way in the world.

For progressives and the Left, freedom is more of a collective condition, linked with community, and equality, autonomy and the intrinsic worth of all people. When it is tied to these kinds of community-based themes, *freedom* becomes part of a more progressive chain of meaning.

A related example comes from our efforts to define and reclaim *community values* as a counter-weight to rugged individualism. Cultural- and corporate- conservatives talk about community values through the prism of their dominant themes. Their notion of community evokes images of an old-fashioned, homogeneous community of ‘hard-working’ citizens who take care of their own instead of relying on government. In this narrative, government programs contribute to community decline. This story is rife with coded messages about ‘us’ versus ‘them,’ sometimes backed up with coded phrases meant to evoke racist responses. For example, in many contexts, ‘hard-working’ is a code for ‘white.’ During the 2008 presidential campaign Hillary Clinton reinforced the association between ‘hard-working’ and

'white,' giving us a concrete example of both encoding and decoding on the terrain of the dominant worldview.

To break through the conservative chain of association, we want to give meaning to a sense of community that is larger than ourselves, a community to which we all contribute, from which we all benefit. Our definitions of community have to address racism and its impact on both policy and consciousness. We also need to associate 'community' with 'power.' This must include the power to control more resources at the community level, and to shape more local economic decisions. Otherwise, 'community values' can be decoded in ways that mask the power relations that maintain policies and practices that perpetuate disinvestment, disengagement and despair.

Similarly, the impulse to reclaim the phrase "The American Dream" must be undertaken with the knowledge that it has been chained to conservative themes and must be carefully and deliberately re-articulated so that we can lift up what is good about it, and link it to our themes. As understood through the dominant worldview, the American Dream is about the promise of prosperity and success for everyone regardless of social class or circumstances of birth. Sounds pretty good, though maybe a bit naïve about the role of structural racism and gender oppression in society. When we tie this notion of the American Dream to conservative ideas about market fundamentalism and limited government, it becomes: "Any one can make it here. It is up to you to work hard and get ahead. If you don't make it, it is your fault." This version fits in well with the dominant worldview. If we are to use it for progressive purposes, the "American Dream" needs a new articulation. Is this possible? Is it even desirable? These questions require debate and discussion that puts the phrase into its historic and thematic context, including its relation to racial justice.

Worldview and Power Analysis

In our experience, groups quickly reach a level of comfort with the language of values. It is a bigger stretch to apply themes and values to analysis of power, including the power of ideas; the notion that we are in a struggle, and that one of our aims is to shift the balance of power in society. Part of shifting power is addressing economic power, in particular the distribution of resources, how resources are generated, managed and controlled, and the prevailing definitions about what an economy is for. Economic power is bolstered by ideology, and currently, the prevailing ideology has market fundamentalism at its core. This

means, it is hard for us to engage in a struggle around ideas, to promote and work from a progressive worldview, if we avoid taking on market fundamentalism.

In order to deploy our themes and values in the service of grassroots community power, we must address conservative attacks on government, countering with ideas and examples of participatory democratic practices at the community, regional, state and national levels in which government plays a vital role. This is different from defending 'government-as-we know it' which, for many, can seem remote and unresponsive. As we paint a picture of a new relationship between government and community, we must also confront the ways in which race is used to stigmatize public programs. This is key, because themes about government have been so well chained to race-based resentments. The Tea Party is masterful at manipulating these resentments and fears, while bristling at any suggestion that they are invoking racism. Our new articulation of government, or governance, can embody our vision for a new, moral economy.

Worldview and Critical Consciousness

To paraphrase Antonio Gramsci, ideas shape the terrain upon which we move, acquire consciousness of our positions within the world around us, as well as our sense of what we can and cannot change about the social relations and conditions in which we find ourselves.

The prevailing ideas, beliefs and commonsense that come together as part of the dominant worldview act to shape and constrain a person's degree of awareness about power relations and structural oppression. In this way, worldview is very much related to individual consciousness. What we are aiming for in our work on worldview, and as part of developing worldview, is developing *critical consciousness* among the members and leaders of grassroots organizations working at neighborhood, state and national levels. Our organizations need to be places that help more and more people to see beyond conventional explanations of 'the way things are.'

Unless something in their lives compels them to dig deeper, people tend not to be very aware of how the worldview terrain is mapped out. As we noted earlier, the most dominant chains of meaning become part of common sense, making them harder to see. Two conceptual tendencies that have evolved over time in our society are worth noting, as they are part of the ways in which worldview is mapped out. One is the *eternalization* of relations: what we see today is the way things always will be. Implicit

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in this is the notion that the way things are is the way they should be. The other is *naturalization*, which assumes that products of historically-specific developments (like corporate-dominated capitalism) are universally valid, arising not from historical processes but from Nature itself. In addition to the eternalization and naturalization of markets, we can see these elements at work in the social construction of race, in gender relations and around human sexuality (Morley and Chen, 1996).

Part of our challenge in re-articulating community, democratic governance and a moral economy is to reclaim the notion that the economy is not a 'thing apart.' It exists within and reflects dominant social and political relations in society. We can change those relations, and build a more just and people-centered economy. Getting people to see that the 'economy,' which has been naturalized for so long, is a social construct that we can re-shape, requires a new common sense.

Worldview and Leadership Development

Too often, the dominant worldview leaves community members and workers feeling powerless to change conditions in their communities. This, in turn, makes it harder for them to believe that they can have political agency. As people get involved in more sustained action, as leaders and members of community, faith or labor groups, they get a glimpse of the possibilities for both personal and social transformation. But experience is not enough. Our efforts to engage people in critical analysis of the world around them must combine both practical and theoretical knowledge in ways that tap peoples' experiences and emotions.

Base-building organizations and alliances must provide spaces where people can share their experiences and learn from one another. They also need to challenge people with new ideas, as well as new tools for analysis that can help them move from individual experience to collective action informed by a shared worldview. This should be one of the goals of leadership development.

GPP's case study of ISAIAH's strategic practice describes the role of worldview in their leadership development. ISAIAH's tradition of investing in leadership development has helped them connect worldview with critical consciousness. Their leaders work together on shaping and defining the beliefs, values and assumptions about who

ISAIAH is, what they stand for and the kind of world they are trying to create.

ISAIAH* leaders describe worldview work as a way of "pursuing a deep and authentic exploration by real people about their faith, values and beliefs and how they connect with economic and racial justice." In doing work on developing worldview, ISAIAH has found that people feel more emboldened and motivated to act on legislative issues when they can tell a story, in their own terms, that is grounded in their deep faith beliefs and values. Worldview is at the heart of ISAIAH's efforts to engage leaders in developing, implementing and assessing their strategies and tactics (Zemsky and Mann, 2008).

Developing narratives that shift the dominant worldview is a democratic process—it is not something that is imposed on others, it is something people struggle with, develop and test out together. It is the democratic nature of worldview struggle that makes our efforts so different from what the Right has done, and continues to do. Conservatives try to fix the meaning of concepts and themes. As a reflection of democratic and inclusive values, we want to unfix those meanings, expanding and redefining them, so that themes become more fluid. The collective process of developing and testing worldview themes helps us model democratic engagement and struggle within our own organizations and networks.

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*. ISAIAH is a faith based organization with nearly 80 congregational members in the Minneapolis/St Paul metropolitan region and in St Cloud, Minnesota, ISAIAH is an affiliate of the Gamaliel Foundation.