



Symposium: Organizing and Therapeutic Politics

Zelda Bronstein, James DeFilippis, Robert Fisher, Eric Shragge, Randy Shaw, David Walls, Erik Peterson October 18, 2011

We have asked a number of organizing scholars and practitioners to comment on Zelda Bronstein's "Politics' Fatal Therapeutic Turn" (and exchange with Marshall Ganz) from the Summer 2011 issue of Dissent. The responses were written either before or during the incipient stages of the occupations now taking place across the United States—events that carry with them the potential for a remobilization of the American Left. We hope that the arguments below will help carry forward discussions about where (and how) to go from here.

Relational Organizing or Therapeutic Politics?

By David Walls

In the Summer 2011 *Dissent*, Zelda Bronstein examines two organizational responses to the demobilization of progressives that pervades American political life (politics' fatal therapeutic turn.) She finds them both flawed because they "treat politics as a source of personal validation and emotional succor." This "personalized activism" is based on "therapeutic motives," she argues, and is "fatal to political effectiveness." Her two cases are the Berkeley-based Kitchen Democracy and the national MoveOn.org (hereafter, MoveOn for short). Bronstein's critique of MoveOn is centered on its use of the organizing model developed by Marshall Ganz.

Knowing nothing about Kitchen Democracy, I will limit my comments to MoveOn, with which I have worked closely over the past two and a half years. (Full disclosure: I served as the council coordinator—now renamed "council organizer"—of the Sonoma County Council of MoveOn from November 2008 through January 2011, and as a regional coordinator—now "regional organizer"—for MoveOn councils in various parts of northern California during 2010.) I continue as a member of the core team of the Sonoma County Council. My experience in these volunteer positions tells me that what

keeps MoveOn from being more politically effective has little to do with therapeutic politics and much to do with the way the organization is structured and run.

Bronstein starts with a fundamental misunderstanding of Ganz's organizing model, which is a reformulation of the best practices of the standard community organizing approach of the post-Alinsky community organizing networks (primarily the Industrial Areas Foundation, PICO National Network, and the Gamaliel Foundation). In this organizing tradition, shared with the more progressive components of the labor movement, organizing begins with relationships—not private, personal relationships, but public, political relationships. Organizers use “one-on-one” conversations as a means of getting to know the interests, values, and motivations of a potential recruit—not for “therapeutic motives.”

People on the democratic left need to recognize the potential of MoveOn to help build the progressive movement. The organization claims five million members—which means it has that many functioning email addresses from anyone who has contributed money, signed up to attend or host an event, or signed an online petition. By 2006, local meet-ups had become a network of MoveOn councils, groups that meet together to plan actions in common, gather for potlucks, and build political connections around common interests and concerns. To its credit MoveOn saw the powerful potential of combining its extraordinary email base with an in-person, on-the-ground council structure at the local level. Beginning in 2009, MoveOn has deployed eleven staff organizers to support the council network, which now numbers somewhere between 150 and 200 councils nationally.

MoveOn also deserves credit for rallying pragmatic progressives with its recent campaigns. Recovering quickly from the disappointment of not winning a “public option” in President Obama's health care plan, MoveOn has been on a roll since showing Michael Moore's *Capitalism: A Love Story* in hundreds of house parties in March 2010. MoveOn reacted to the Supreme Court's *Citizens United v. FEC* decision with its “Fight Washington Corruption” campaign, beginning in August 2010, aimed at ending corporate influence and making democracy work “for the other 98 percent of us”—themes it carried into the November 2010 congressional elections. In February 2011, MoveOn helped coordinate rallies throughout the country in support of Wisconsin public workers threatened with the loss of collective bargaining rights. Then on Tax Day, April 18, MoveOn led well-attended demonstrations at banks that managed to avoid paying income taxes.

The current Save the American Dream campaign, which began in the spring, conducted hundreds of house meetings the weekend of July 16 and 17 to determine a list of priority issues. The project involved an unprecedented number of co-sponsors, including a partnership with Van Jones. The ten key policy issues emerging from this process were termed the “Contract for the American Dream,” which were listed in a full-page ad in the *New York Times* on August 10, followed by a series of rallies the next day.

So what’s the problem, given the relative success of MoveOn’s recent campaigns in attracting both participants and allies? There is a fundamental contradiction between MoveOn’s commitment to building a progressive movement and its lack of a democratic structure. To borrow Albert Hirschman’s alternatives of “exit and voice,” if you disagree with some policy of MoveOn, the only option is to “exit” the organization; there is no opportunity to “voice” one’s differences. The result is an unnecessarily frequent turnover of leadership and churning of active membership in many councils.

Democratic member representation. MoveOn’s greatest need is for a structure that allows for democratic member representation. Members should be able to elect delegates to a regional board or state assembly, where there is an opportunity to gather periodically to debate issues, strategy, and tactics and where council leaders can get to know and trust each other, discuss regional and state issues, share innovative tactics, and plan common action. MoveOn’s board of directors should be expanded to include representatives of the councils.

Transparency. There is no public directory of the board of directors or staff of MoveOn, with job titles and a brief description of their responsibilities. There is no directory of MoveOn councils in each state, with names, emails, and phone numbers of coordinators. Such lists are essential. Contacts among coordinators in different regions should be encouraged. Councils need to be able to communicate more freely than is possible with the weekly telephone conference calls in which people are identified only by their first names.

Accountability. Evaluation of field organizers should be on a “360 degree” basis, with council organizers having input to the process. Staff, especially field organizers, should be seen as working for the membership, not vice versa. Organizational goals (that is, targets for numbers of councils, core team members, regional organizers, etc.) should be stated and evaluated annually. A regular review of field organizers and field operations by the council coordinators should be provided to the field director and

senior staff. Reasons for successes or shortfalls should be analyzed and shared with the council membership. Volunteer regional organizers should reside in and have a familiarity with the regions they supervise (currently, that's not always the case).

Local flexibility. MoveOn councils have been organized in the congressional districts of every type of representative, from progressive champions to blue dog Democrats and Tea Party adherents. Councils have been organized in localities ranging from major metropolitan areas to suburbs to rural areas. Some degree of flexibility in responding to national programs within the local context is essential, and should be recognized up and down the MoveOn hierarchy.

Membership diversity. MoveOn is very white and middle class. African-American participation is good in selected cities, but needs to be developed nationally. Latino and Asian-American participation is almost completely lacking and unlikely to grow without a greater emphasis on immigrant rights issues. Working-class membership would likely be enhanced by closer relationships with unions and community organizations at the local level.

Staff diversity. Most staff organizers appear to have learned their trade in electoral campaigns, particularly the 2008 Obama campaign. There's nothing wrong with that, but the organization would benefit from a diversity of organizing backgrounds, including people with labor and community organizing experience and training.

Leadership development and training. MoveOn should make a major commitment to leadership development through such training opportunities as National Leadership Training and Camp MoveOn at the regional level. The organizing model should be presented in its full richness, not used simply in an opportunistic and instrumental way to recruit new members and core team activists for local councils.

Staffing up to the challenge. MoveOn needs more than a dozen field organizers. For example, there is currently one organizer for the states of California, Hawaii, and Alaska when we need two in California alone. Supporting an expanded council network will require MoveOn to increase its national fundraising effort.

Local council fundraising. Local councils are greatly limited and inconvenienced by the PAC status of MoveOn.org Political Action, which requires reporting of contributions to the Federal Elections Commission (FEC). Chartering councils as MoveOn.org Civic Action entities would allow local fundraising under its 501(c)(4) status, which does not

require FEC reporting, much like membership groups with a chapter structure such as the Sierra Club, the ACLU, and NOW.

Movement building. MoveOn has made real progress in expanding its work with allies from the labor, environmental, and community organizing movements at the national level. Similar relationships have to be built at the local level by council core teams. This will take a lot of patient work, but could have an enormously significant outcome for building a powerful progressive movement nationally.

Can MoveOn transcend its origins as a political action committee and develop a democratic structure representing its active council membership? Does MoveOn's board of directors want to develop a powerful, effective multi-issue progressive organization committed to the long haul? Are they willing to share some control to accomplish that? Or are they content to stay as they are, another organization with promise, but never realizing the power to be a truly transformative force?

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