

Progressive Think Tanks What Exists, What's Missing?

**Report for the Program on Governance and Public
Policy
Open Society Institute**

by David Dyssegaard Kallick
ddkallick@tuna.net

January 2002

Preface by Mark Schmitt, Open Society Institute

The Open Society Institute is a relatively new foundation in the U.S., committed to broadening the public debate in a number of areas of policy. As such, we have been sympathetic to an argument put forth in a 1997 report from the Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, and echoed by others: That the infrastructure to develop, test, and promote progressive or liberal ideas is inadequate, especially in comparison to the think tanks and media outlets promoting the ideas of the political right. A corollary to that argument was that conservative foundations had systematically funded the promotion of ideas and had therefore become the dominant voices in the policy debates in Washington, New York, and the 50 state capitols, while centrist and supposedly liberal foundations had shied away from developing a countervailing voice.

For my own part, based on my experience in government as well as the philanthropic world, I found this argument persuasive, but also incomplete. There is a need for a greater capacity to develop ideas, to nurture creative public intellectuals and other leaders, to make key research accessible to everyone, to challenge misguided policies, false conflicts, and political timidity.

But simply to say that there is not enough policy development or advocacy is itself not enough. It's not that there are *no* progressive think tanks, research organizations, advocacy groups, fellowship programs, state-level and local groups, informal networks, etc. There are dozens, perhaps hundreds. None of them approach the magnitude of the great pyramids of the right along Washington's Massachusetts Avenue -- the Heritage Foundation and the Cato Institute, but center-left groups may be in their own way more adept and responsive to changing circumstances. Still, these organizations have not provided a counterweight to right-wing ideas such as privatization, deregulation, and underinvestment in public purposes.

As the critique of liberal foundations gained currency, a number of us at various foundations began to think more systematically about redressing the problem. Some of us began to think about creating new think tanks, others about encouraging foundations to support policy advocacy or at least to stop restricting grantees from exercising their legal right to advocate for policy change.

Before moving forward with efforts to expand the progressive capacity to develop ideas and policy, we thought it essential to go beyond the old critique and understand just what actually exists. What policy work is already being done? What's being done well? What's neglected? Where do we have ideas that need data to support them? Where is there data that needs an idea to make it useable? Where is there a need to link academic researchers to the press or policymaker, or to help organizers based in local communities speak to issues of state or federal policy?

In short, we needed a map, one that showed all the landmarks as well as the uninhabited places, the roads connecting organizations but also the missing bridges. The Open Society Institute enlisted David Dyssegaard Kallick, on short notice, to prepare that map. David is an accomplished writer and researcher, with a great breadth of knowledge on policy, organizing, and philanthropy. A former editor of the journal *Social Policy*, he has also worked for foundations and several progressive think tanks. David went beyond his commission, producing not just a map, but a savvy and dispassionate analysis of the ways in which policy is shaped. He demonstrates that many of the existing progressive policy institutions are professional, productive, and responsive, especially to the dynamics of legislation in Washington. But he shows that for their work to reach a higher level, and for progressive ideas to be heard in the public debate, we need more that brings these ideas together into something like a coherent public philosophy.

This analysis, while sophisticated and useful, is also not the last word on the matter. More thought needs to be given to the kind of institutions or networks that will help give philosophical coherence to progressive policies and ideas. But we hope this document lays the groundwork for that next phase of thought, and will be helpful to progressive foundations, individual donors, journalists, and policymakers themselves as we consider how to approach policy in the next phase of our nation's history.

Note: All the interviews for this report were conducted well before the tragic events of September 11, which will surely have a deep and lasting effect on America's psyche, our economy, our view of our place in the world, and our view of the role of government. Nonetheless, the basic points about the capacity to develop and promote ideas remain the same, even as the ideas themselves may change.

Introduction: What Exists, What's Missing?¹

Today, progressives can boast an impressive array of centers for research and analysis in virtually every major issue area. There is a place to turn if you want to track middle-income earning power, military spending on the B2 bomber, or the number of toxic waste dumps in your state. A quick glance at the think tanks listed on the web site of the Electronic Policy Network (www.epn.org) gives a cursory overview of the large field—and there are hundreds more progressive think tanks than show up on this one web site.

True, progressive groups are almost universally underfunded—hardly any have well-appointed offices, competitive salaries, excess capacity that allow them to respond to unplanned events, or adequate publicity and support staff. Still, the extent of the current infrastructure should not be taken for granted. A bit more than generation ago, the vast majority of today's think tanks did not exist. Political advocates, movement groups, even politicians had to rely primarily on government sources, media reporting, and a handful of academics; reliable information and analysis consciously presented from a progressive perspective was hard to come by.

Despite these strengths in research and analysis, however, there are significant holes in the infrastructure for progressive politics—and, of course, opportunities that arise in filling those holes. In this report, I will concentrate on four.

1. Ideology and Political Philosophy. While progressives have an extensive capacity to provide information and issue analysis, there is very little institutional support for work developing, honing, and articulating the underlying principles and philosophy of governance that tie the issues together. The institutions that do exist also tend to be very white, male and inside-the-beltway dominated; there are few institutional homes for bold new voices, racially diverse thinkers, a fresh take on progressive politics, or outside-the-beltway thinking.

2. State-level Policy Infrastructure. Progressives are gradually acknowledging the reality of devolution of government power, and are expanding the capacity of state-level and sub-state-level policy organizations. But coverage of the waterfront of issues is much spottier at the state level. Also, groups working in the states generally have even less capacity to focus on ideology than do those working at the federal level.

3. Think Tanks and Grassroots Organizing. There is a frustrating division in the progressive world between organizations that do grassroots or community organizing and those that do analysis and policy development. This works to the detriment of both organizing and policy, but it is not an easy fissure to bridge.

4. Opportunities to Catalyze and Synthesize. Any effort to start a think tank today does not begin with a blank slate. Given the extent of existing resources, the appropriate question is not so much “what should a think tank look

¹ In the interest of full disclosure, I should note that I am currently working for the Fiscal Policy Institute. I have been a consultant to the Institute for America's Future, a senior fellow of the Preamble Center, a co-founder of the New York Progressive Network, editor of *Social Policy* magazine, and on staff at the Working Families Party. Many of the organizations listed below are groups I have worked with on various projects.

like?,” but rather “what can be added that will allow the existing infrastructure to add up to more than the sum of its parts?” But smartly designed initiatives can catalyze and complement existing organizing and policy infrastructure in ways that may allow modest efforts to have disproportionate impact, and would allow a properly designed major new effort to be tremendously important.

Background and Context

At the beginning of the 21st Century, progressive politics is in a period of flux. The United States is making a transition from a Cold War politics to a politics of globalization and, perhaps, global engagement. In this context, a series of ideological and strategic questions hang in the air:

What defines progressive politics today? Is it simply a laundry list of issues? Or is there an underlying set of principles, a political philosophy?

How does progressive change happen? Do smart policy élites come up with new ideas and convince politicians to implement them? Do movements protesting current conditions create policy imperatives? Are political parties or politicians the source or the vehicle for creating policy?

What is the relationship of national politics to state and municipal politics? Where will progressive leadership come from, and what can it do?

What is America's role in the larger world. What is a progressive approach to international institutions and globalization? What is a progressive foreign and military policy in an era that instead of pitting one superpower against another pits the periphery against the center?

Forty years ago, the range of answers seemed clearer, and could be posed as a sharp debate. The dominant progressive ideology was managerial Liberalism, which drew the "best and the brightest" to Washington to solve the country's problems through government action in coordination with unions and big business. At the same time, this vision of Liberalism was challenged by social movements demanding an expansion of who was included in the Liberal social contract. Meantime, peppering the movements—and adding spice even to the government's Liberal circles—were strands of home-grown American radicalism on the one hand and European-style socialist and social democratic philosophy on the other. There was a complex array of political elements at work, but the ideological and strategic debates were explicit and clearly defined.

In 2001, all of these various strands have become fuzzier. The full range of left-of-center politics lays claim to the same label, "progressive," while at the same time there is less clarity about what progressivism means to people, and less debate about what it should mean. In the period since the 1960s, we have seen movements for Civil Rights, women's liberation, ecology, Black Power, Puerto Rican nationalism, gay rights, disability rights, to name just a few. But these many strands didn't re-assemble into a new politics, and they didn't settle back into the old politics. What emerged was a concatenation of issues, not a new synthesis of underlying political principles.

Part of the difference between forty years ago and today can be attributed to the decline of political parties: the breaking of the (corrupt) urban political machine; a shift in the role of party conventions in selecting presidential candidates; the increasing centrality of money and television. At their best, parties can hold together constituencies around a political vision in a way that a succession of individual candidates cannot.

Part of the difference is attributable to habits of self-censorship among progressives. In the era of Reaganism, progressives found it expedient to show a

united front—especially after having been burned by electoral politics of the '60s and '70s. But as a result, an open and honest debate about progressive politics was absent from the public realm.

Part is the concentration of progressive power in an expanded nonprofit infrastructure—which is paired with 501c3 laws designed to keep nonprofit groups at arm's length from political machines.

Part is today's absence of a movement atmosphere that would make thinking about political vision seem pressing.

And part is funding: foundations put significant pressure on grantees to find a “niche” in terms of issue area, strategy, and constituency—not in terms of ideology or political perspective.

Out of this history, progressives wound up with a strong set of small to medium-sized think tanks, mostly inside the beltway, oriented toward single issues and focused on analysis and information rather than on policy development and winning over the public or politicians to an ideological perspective. We wound up with a very young and incomplete set of state-level think tanks. And we wound up with an organizing capacity that is in many areas powerful at the local level, is sometimes also strong at the state, regional, and national level, but is almost always disconnected from the substantial progressive policy-development capacity.

Conservatives, in the meantime, organized differently. They set up major think tanks. A typical conservative think tank is an order of magnitude bigger than a progressive one—with an annual budget of \$15 or \$30 million instead of \$5 or \$10 million. Conservative think tanks are organized by ideological perspective, not by issue area. The Heritage Foundation (\$28 million/year in its year 2000 budget) was founded to shape a religious/economic “movement” conservatism. The CATO Institute (\$14 million/year) set out to articulate an individualist/libertarian perspective. American Enterprise Institute (\$19 million/year) aimed to restore faith in corporate capitalism. And the list goes on. These think tanks are not in ideological unity. Right-wing foundations, corporations, and especially individuals funded a debate, not a lockstep agenda. But there were a series of think tanks whose mission was to shape and advocate for a clearly defined political perspective.

A substantial proportion of resources at conservative think tanks is devoted not to research or policy but to message development, public education, and government/media relations. According to their annual reports, together these total 25 percent of the budget at AEI, 36 percent at Heritage. Some conservative centers do original research and some don't. But almost all pick their issues as a way of advancing a larger political perspective, not as ends in themselves. This also means the public intellectuals nurtured by these institutes can be groomed to speak from a conservative perspective about whatever the issue may be—education, health care, affirmative action, families and work. And, while the conservative think tanks may be managed differently than progressive ones, sheer scale also matters. As Richard Leone of the Century Foundation points out, the public sees the successes of this grooming effort, we don't see the dozen other ideas or intellectuals that conservative think tanks have the resources to nurture and support along the way to finding the “stars.”

Conservative ideology is not especially strong today—just look at the way George W. Bush ran from it in the 2000 election. The immediate aftermath of the World Trade Center bombings has rallied the public around the president, but it has not significantly changed the public’s political perspective. There is not a clear “conservative” foreign policy or answer to how to stimulate the economy.

But progressivism is not strong either. Progressives are still struggling to find a coherent vision that energizes its ranks. Big questions are still unresolved, such as America’s role as a single military superpower, centralization vs. decentralization of government power, technological change, a response to terrorism, or even globalization. A sharp sense of the problem has drawn masses to the streets, but substantial progressive alternatives are only beginning to be forged.

Organizationally, the bewildering array of small progressive groups focusing on individual issues and the lack of bigger ones focusing on overall political perspective is a source of continual frustration to progressives. But fragmentation is not (as is often alleged) a problem to blame on single-issue or constituency groups, but rather a failure of liberalism to reshape itself in ways that account for the issues raised or the groups demanding inclusion. Progressivism should be constructed not as a laundry list, but rather as an overarching political philosophy. Concern for issues such as environment, racial justice, or feminism should not be “tacked on” at the end of a progressive agenda, but should be integrated into its philosophical core—they should fundamentally reshape Liberalism’s vision of the economic future, the role of government, or the nature of social services. If Liberalism took on this challenge, groups working on individual issues could be brought into closer connection with bigger and broader progressive organizations. As it stands, instead we have a large array of organizations that add up to less than the sum of their parts.

There is some hope that this fragmentation could give way to work together. Models such as the Progressive Los Angeles Network, or the National Campaign for Jobs and Income Support seem very promising (both are described below). Personal rivalries—never to be underestimated—are fading too, as the generation that cut its teeth on McCarthy, the civil rights movement, and the Vietnam War is replaced by a generation whose political experience is far less intense and thus less divisive.

In many respects, the missing piece I am describing is work that, in Europe or Latin America or most of the world—would be done by a political party: developing ideology, working at the regional and local as well as the national level, drawing from political movements, tying together constituencies. In the US, we do not have strong political parties, so this is work that—especially in the period after the 1960s—gets done in civil society.

Ideology and Political Philosophy

However muddled it may be, there is still, of course, a debate among progressives about what progressivism means, what its principles are, and how it should shape a practical politics. What is lacking is not sharp individuals with creative ideas. What is missing is an institutional infrastructure that brings these people together with each other and with people who understand practical politics, media, and organizing.

Bill Bradley said as he was leaving the Senate that real thinking about a comprehensive political philosophy needs to be developed from a standpoint outside the electoral process. Running a campaign or serving as a Senator just don't open the space for creative thinking about political ideology.

Beginning in the late 1960s, the right side of the political spectrum found itself asking similar questions about conservatism, which at that moment looked hopelessly weak. They asked: what does conservatism mean in a changed world, and what would it take to connect it with a majority of Americans? To work out a clear and powerful answer, conservative leaders built a series of think tanks—the **Heritage Foundation** (cultural/economic movement conservative), the **American Enterprise Institute** (business conservative), the **CATO Institute** (libertarian), the **Hoover Institution** (free market capitalism), and more. These were big institutions asking big-picture questions. They boosted the message of some conservative “stars” and they nurtured a new generation of conservative thinkers. All made focused efforts not just to research policy issues but to hone, polish, and get out their messages.

On the progressive side, there are a few scattered institutions that set out to define progressive politics in an analogous way—although none on nearly the scale of the conservatives. These efforts also are significantly limited by being mostly dominated by white, male, and inside-the-beltway players—which limits the scope of their thinking as well as the reach of their organizations.

The **Democratic Leadership Council** and its affiliated think tank, the **Progressive Policy Institute** (a nonpartisan 501c3 research and educational organization) form the one clear example of a left-of-center institutional capacity of some scale that is set up to address the questions of ideology and political philosophy. As such, they've done an effective job defining a new progressive politics in the center of the political spectrum. One could debate how much of the success of this approach is sheer political power of the DLC—fundraising and political organizing—and how much is due to the strength or coherence of a set of political principles. I would argue that both are necessary.

“When we started in 1989,” says PPI’s director Will Marshall, “we were struck by a vacuum on the progressive side: the Democrats had not taken the need for research and rethinking seriously.” A decade later, Marshall says, “I’m a little surprised that there isn’t more competition [in this work] among progressives.” The success conservative think tanks had in shaping the politics of the Reagan/Bush era and that PPI had in shaping the politics of the Clinton era make the absence of competition stand out starkly.

Like the many issue-focused think tanks, PPI takes up particular policy areas—that is how politics gets defined in America. But “we don’t just throw discrete

ideas in to the debate,” says Marshall. Each issue area is carefully chosen “to illuminate a synthesis or governing philosophy.”

PPI sets its goal as “defining the third way” for American politics, a role that is contested by a smattering of scattered individuals with a different perspective on third way politics. But it is not challenged by anyone with the institutional support to back up a sustained debate.

PPI aims to achieve a new synthesis of liberalism and conservatism for today’s electorate. PPI’s vision generally blends a traditional liberal politics (universal health care) with more market-oriented solutions and individual choice (Medicare choice, charter schools, a limited role for unions), then adds to the mix a strong dose of the moralism usually claimed by conservatives (welfare reform, v-chips, school uniforms), and a sprinkling of thinking about civil society (Americorps, community policing). It holds traditional liberal constituencies such as unions and African Americans at arm’s length, while actively courting corporate leaders and the white middle class.

PPI has sometimes been drawn toward a “triangulation” that is more about splitting the difference between left and right than about moving off the one-dimensional liberal-conservative spectrum. But PPI has gone virtually unrivaled in its effort to turn institutional attention to defining a coherent post-New Deal progressive synthesis. PPI has clearly been winning on some of its key priorities (budget balancing, welfare, crime, globalization, unions)—so much so, in fact, that this leaves the way forward that PPI is proposing less sharply defined.

In addition to an ideological focus, PPI has been clear about the need to connect ideology with constituencies. Some have criticized this attention to public opinion—which entails polling and honing a message to majoritarian sentiment—as a sacrifice of principle to electoral calculus. But, Marshall replies, “If your only interest is in espousing your point of view and you’re willing to let the other side govern the country, then you don’t have to look at [constituencies and polling figures]. But if you’re interested in governing, you have to figure out how to frame your policy innovations in a way that appeals to people beyond the core constituencies.” Of course, one could go too far following this logic. “It’s not that we’re trying to break down the electorate and say we’ve got to appeal to three-toed white men from Utah,” Marshall says. “We’re looking at where we’re not connecting with broad swaths of the electorate.”

PPI has a staff of 15-20 people (“smaller than the janitorial staff of the Heritage Foundation,” quips Marshall), working on projects strategically designed around popular concepts, from the New Economy to Community Crime Fighting to Work, Family and Community.

The **Campaign for America’s Future** (a 501c4 nonprofit group, and thus able to do more partisan political work) and its affiliated **Institute for America’s Future** (a nonpartisan 501c3 organization) were set up in 1996 by Roger Hickey and Bob Borosage as an attempt to shape a viable progressive alternative to the DLC’s and PPI’s centrist vision of a new politics. CAF/IAF’s primary political orientation is on strengthening and consolidating the politics of the progressive wing of the Democratic Party and connecting it with progressive activists and unions—with some interest in exploring what a new progressive politics would look like.

Despite its ambitions, CAF/IAF is considerably smaller than the DLC/PPI operation, and it is dwarfed by the right-wing think tanks. Currently, CAF and IAF together have a staff of about eight people. They have enough support from labor unions and a few foundations to draw some funding and to get major labor leaders to attend meetings and press conferences. CAF/IAF have begun to make fruitful contacts with a new leadership at the AFL-CIO, and CAF/IAF are positioning themselves to take advantage of and to bolster new progressive labor strategies.

CAF/IAF frequently bring together the work of pollsters and analysts studying the American public, progressive advocates, and politicians in office—mainly progressives from the Senate and House of Representatives. CAF/IAF hold public conferences, send out press releases, write in the progressive and the mainstream press, organize discussion groups, hold press conferences, repackage reports, and carefully nurture personal relationships with friendly politicians. CAF/IAF don't do a lot of original research, leaning heavily on work done by others. But CAF/IAF's strength is that they respond to the needs of politicians and the media in a way that many more research-oriented think tanks cannot. Borosage characterizes it as “operating in political time, not public-interest time”—understanding the pace of the political/campaign/news cycle, and how to work at a speed that affects the next cycle.

CAF/IAF have done some work to pull together clusters of ideas, especially those that energize the progressive community and are judged by pollsters to resonate with voters. The group is currently enthusiastic about metropolitan strategies (i.e., seeing urban issues in a larger regional context), green growth (sprawl, environmentally sound economic development, etc.), a women and families agenda, social insurance in the new economy, and progressive responses to globalization.

Yet, Hickey underscores: “We don't see ourselves as a think tank exactly.” Instead, he says, CAF/IAF are a kind of complement to the Economic Policy Institute, a “real” think tank that Hickey helped found in 1986 (see below). “In the best of all possible worlds,” Hickey says, “CAF would have more substantive people on our staff, and EPI would have more people doing policy development.” The analog among right-wing think tanks, he says, is not so much AEI or Hoover—which have a heavy load of PhDs and policy analysts—as it is Heritage Foundation, which famously sets out to hire journalists who can put a 10-page briefing paper on the next day's agenda in the hands of a member of Congress.

At the same time, CAF/IAF hope to develop a network of grassroots groups and state-based think tanks that could experiment with progressive policy at the state and local level, while also being state-by-state forces to help national campaigns. CAF/IAF is currently rolling out a series of conferences around the country that it hopes will mobilize these efforts, primarily through existing institutions (see the EARN and SFAI networks, below).

But, whatever the institutional structure, Hickey is clear that progressives “need the capacity to develop a more aggressive political argument. We need to pull ideas from others into a unified program and promote them together as a program.” CAF/IAF's part in this process is to be able to “package ideas and promote them in the political world.” As Hickey describes it, “We and PPI are in the same business of packaging ideas and promoting a broad analysis of what's

happening with voters, with workers, and to shape a broad agenda for reform for politics and for winning elections.”

Borosage and Hickey are enthusiastic about their work, but they are also realistic. “We have the charter,” Borosage asserts, to develop an alternative to the DLC’s centrist vision of a progressive politics. Others agree: no institution besides CAF/IAF sets out explicitly to do this, and it is a role progressives across the country are eager to see filled. Yet, Borosage’s assessment is: “We know what the task is, we have done work on the task, we have created a group of folks who are arguing about it, we do polling, we contest the meaning of elections, we try to put things in a majoritarian context. But we’re \$2 million away from really having an impact on that debate.”

The Century Foundation, a progressive center based mostly in New York with a small Washington office, concentrates primarily on specific policy issues, funding writing and research projects. It puts out a series of books and pamphlets, and has a good publicity and media capacity. TCF has a combined total of 35 staff members (including interns), and contracts with roughly 100 individuals to work on writing projects or to serve on TCF commissions.

Yet, says, Richard Leone, director of TCF, “To compete in the worlds of Hoover and Hudson and CATO and AEI, you really need dozens of people who are paid [full time] to produce work on public policy, op-eds, media reactions. And they need to be supported by a public affairs and PR staff, which in the big think tanks amounts to [a major portion] of spending.”

Like most progressives in the field, Leone regrets the absence of a progressive—or, he adds, even a middle-of-the-road—effort that approximates what the right-wing think tanks have done. “Does anyone doubt that Heritage and the others have been enormously influential, and dramatically reshaped the political landscape?” Leone asks rhetorically. Yet, he concludes, “It would be very difficult to duplicate the full range of conservative think tanks because of the advantage they enjoy in fund raising. It would be remarkable if a similar set of institutions, supported on a similar scale, were to spring up in any other part of the ideological spectrum. In my judgment that is extremely unlikely because the keys to the fund-raising success on the conservative scale are the existence of deeply committed foundations and a large pool of corporate contributors.” And, one might add, conservative donors often “get” something from their public policy victories—financial rewards in the form of tax cuts and business advantages—that progressive donors do not.

Currently, TCF (which before the millennium was known as Twentieth Century Fund) is experimenting with building a modest capacity to address strategic questions, fundamental principles, and connection to constituencies. The project is headed up by Ruy Teixeira in TCF’s small Washington, DC, office and Tova Wang in the NY office. While TCF in general might be characterized as Liberal in the FDR-JFK-LBJ mold, this new effort is intended to redefine a progressive politics around a New Progressivism, updated Liberalism, or a different kind of Third Way than PPI envisions.

Teixeira, for one, is convinced that the problem progressives face isn’t a lack of smart people, it’s a lack of institutional support for such fundamental discussions. As a result, Teixeira says in frustration, “more people have a role in

the debate than there are people who have time to think about what we should be debating.” Which, he concludes, “is one reason the discussion is less interesting than it might be.”

At this writing (early summer 2001), TCF is in the process of conducting a series of meetings about whether and how to expand this work. If it goes forward as expected, Teixeira predicts that the project will be about exploring “what is an intelligent way of adapting progressivism to 21st Century problems.” The effort is a step removed from electoral politics. But it will be attentive to electoral concerns such as constituency (the focus of Teixeira’s influential book, *America’s Forgotten Majority: Why the White Working Class Still Matters*, co-authored with Joel Rogers).

One of the few progressive institutions that approaches the scale of what Leone calls a “real” think tank is the **Economic Policy Institute**. EPI employs about 45 people, including about a dozen staff economists and researchers, and a handful more who are affiliated with EPI without being on staff. EPI’s funding comes mostly from unions (which allow it a slightly more political role) and from foundations, although EPI does also receive individual contributions as well as corporate, government, and other support.

EPI produces top-flight economic reports that command a solid professional reputation, even among those who disagree with the group’s political perspective. EPI is regularly quoted in the mainstream media as a reliable source of analysis while also being identified as a liberal think tank. EPI’s politics are basically Liberal and Keynesian, with strong attention to unions and the federal government.

EPI’s focus on economics is at least in part a political decision about the appropriate centrality of economics to progressive politics. But EPI’s work also extends beyond a narrow economic focus. Its five areas of concentration all begin with economic questions, yet each also touches on related topics: living standards and labor markets, government and the economy, globalization and trade, politics and public opinion, sustainable economics.

In addition to its own work, EPI provides technical support to a number of progressive organizations and politicians. EPI also anchors and provides analytic support to the EARN network of state-based economic research institutes (below).

But the bulk of EPI’s work is strong economic analysis, not ideological positioning nor even policy development. More than the institution itself, individuals from EPI play a significant role in shaping the debate about ideology and political philosophy. Jeff Faux, in particular, has written about political direction in the progressive press. Others regularly write about politics, too—Heather Boushey, Max Sawicky, David Kusnet, and Eileen Appelbaum, to name a few. But, for all of them, this is essentially a sideline to their main jobs, and it is not promoted aggressively the way a Heritage Foundation or an American Enterprise Institute does, pushing and developing people to be in the media.

Proactive policy proposals, too, are an occasional rather than a core activity for EPI. As a sympathetic Roger Hickey puts it, “EPI is terrific in terms of analysis. They’re struggling to do more policy development.”

In a similar vein, the **Center on Budget and Policy Priorities** is a major progressive Washington institution analyzing budget, taxation, and government programs on a regular basis. The Center has some 50 staff members, including over 30 policy analysts and departments of outreach, communications, and legislative liaisons.

Robert Greenstein, director of the Center, well understands the day-to-day working of Washington, and excels at getting fast, accurate analysis and commentary to the media and politicians—at the moment they need it and in a form in which they will read it. Greenstein and some of his staff are frequent commentators on policy proposals and other developments affecting poor and low-income people. The Center has played a major role in shaping the political debate on policies such as welfare, food assistance, low-income housing, and Social Security.

The Center's *modus operandi* is to provide analysis of the affects of policies on poor and low-income people. This sometimes entails individual staff members thinking about how to shape an overall progressive politics. But, although the Center is undoubtedly a progressive organization, its focus is on the issues of the moment, not on defining the principles of a progressive politics.

The **Institute for Policy Studies** plays several important roles in progressive politics—especially in providing intellectual and policy expertise on issues, and in making an effort to connect with grassroots organizing. IPS sponsors work with the Progressive Caucus of Congress under the project title “The Progressive Challenge,” does some work with activists in its SALSA leadership training program, has an engagement with the **Progressive Priorities Project**, and does some media outreach. IPS is multi-issue, which is rare among think tanks, and reasonably large in size. IPS is the furthest to the left of the progressive think tanks in this section, with roots in the 1950s and '60s New Left. IPS is far more sympathetic to third-party expressions of political outrage than others. And IPS is more sympathetic to (if not always as deeply connected as it might like with) grassroots organizing, while being less enthralled—and less deeply involved—with the day-to-day activity of Capitol Hill, the *Washington Post*, or the Democratic Party.

The closest IPS comes to systematically addressing questions of ideology and political philosophy are through director John Cavanagh's pioneering work on globalization. This is not so much a project staffed by IPS as a network that IPS plays a significant role in helping coordinate, in particular through the **Hemispheric Social Alliance** and the **International Forum on Globalization**.

The discussion of ideology in relation to globalization comes up not because ideology is the theoretical interest of participants, Cavanagh remarks. It is more because ideology is naturally raised by the issues at hand: the problems presented by a neoliberal model of globalization are clear, but the alternatives still need a great deal of work. And, Cavanagh muses, perhaps it has to do with the engagement of people from other countries that have stronger political parties and a more rooted tradition of ideological discussion. In any event, “the constant

refrain” of both networks on globalization, Cavanagh says, is at its heart ideological: “What should the government do versus what should markets do?”

The scope of the groups mentioned here cannot be judged simply by the size of their annual budgets—in many instances, even fairly large groups have less capacity than it might seem at first glance. Foundation grants, which comprise most of the revenues of these groups, are rarely made as the kind of unrestricted funds a director would like to see. Cavanagh estimates that 80 percent the IPS budget, for example, is raised from funds that are restricted for use on specific issue-oriented projects. It’s always a struggle to find funding for things that don’t fit into project budgets: rent, office furniture, support staff, electricity, work on the principles that tie projects together. Add to that list the critical category of media outreach—where Cavanagh echoes Richard Leone and Roger Hickey’s observations that right-wing think tanks spend a vastly larger percentage of their much larger budgets. Even with a relatively large budget, a director may not be in a position to allocate money to media or political strategy because of project restrictions on the funds. Operating with a \$3.5 million annual budget, Cavanagh wistfully estimates, “if we had an extra \$50,000 a year, I think we could double who the message gets out to.” Unfortunately, that \$50,000 would have to come from a foundation that designates it for the purpose of media outreach (highly unlikely) or in unrestricted funds (hard to get).

The Brookings Institution—an obvious multi-issue think tank of serious scale that is not squarely conservative—has an ideological approach of avoiding an explicit focus on ideology. It takes on many specific issues, providing technical expertise and media commentary that can fall around the center on either side of the left/right divide. This is not to say Brookings is “objective”—no institution is that. But Brookings does not *work on* its ideology; ideology is implicit, not explicit (and part of its ideology is to avoid ideological coherence).

Similarly, the **New America Foundation** updates the Brookings concept for a younger generation, making an ideology of being anti-ideological. NAF sometimes takes a technocratic approach, implying that “new ideas” crafted by “public intellectuals” will overcome old divisions. At other points, it embraces the ideology of the “radical center,” which similarly seeks to make ideology irrelevant. NAF supports a number of provocative intellectuals, some leaning center-left, some leaning center-right, all modern and forward-looking. But the institution does not develop underlying ideological perspectives or connect them with constituencies.

To some extent, there is work around ideology that comes from issue groups. **Sierra Club** and **National Resource Defense Council** for example, both have some people who address ideology. Similarly, the **National Organization for Women**, **Planned Parenthood**, **NAACP** all have some staff members who participate in these debates. The **Urban League** or the **Joint Center for Economic and Political Studies** are more in the mold of the Brookings Institution—generally non-ideological and, each in its own way, more centrist than openly progressive. And a broad range of institutions house people who are similarly occasional entrants in the public debate about progressive politics.

Generally, those are the major think tanks that provide significant institutional support for work on ideology. Who are the other players?

There are journalists—also a largely white and male crowd: *The American Prospect*'s Harold Meyerson, *The New Yorker*'s Hendrik Hertzberg, *New York Magazine*'s Michael Tomasky. There are pollsters and political consultants: Stanley Greenberg, Emily Klein, James Carville. There are academics: Theda Skocpol, Frances Fox Piven, Joel Rogers, Robin Kelley.

Labor unions, too, have a handful of players who are active in the debates about ideology, constituency the future direction of progressive political parties. Labor unions do not provide institutional support for pursuing these questions. But, unions do provide a “perch” for a number of key figures: Bill Fletcher at the AFL-CIO, Bob Master at CWA, Mark Levinson at UNITE, Amy Dean at the Silicon Valley AFL-CIO Labor Council.

Strategically, labor's thinking is primarily about the mainstream Democrats; most unions have had little patience for Ralph Nader or even for upstart Democrats. There is growing interest in “fusion” parties, led by the Working Families Party in New York, as a way of leveraging the Democrats. And there is a small constituency, being organized nationally by former Oil Chemical and Atomic Workers' Union treasurer Tony Mazzochi, to build an independent and strongly class-conscious Labor Party.

But all this activity takes place in the margins of the labor movement. The vast research capacities of the unions are not mobilized to do polling or policy development that explicate and polish a coherent political direction. Unions do this work around the issues that involve them, and people like the ones mentioned above use this work and other materials as a basis for making extremely smart but still largely “gadfly” arguments about where politics should be headed. Asked whether there are union efforts to work on developing a sharp political ideology and strategy, Master responds: “to my knowledge, no. And that's the problem. Or at least part of it. Most labor political activists either come from the Democratic Party and/or are not terribly ideological.”

Universities have sometimes housed small centers that provide some institutional support for scholars interested in real-world politics. The Humphrey Institute (University of Minnesota), the A.E. Havens Center (University of Wisconsin/Madison), the emerging Democracy Collaborative (University of Maryland) are all in this category. Locally, universities sometimes play a larger role. New York City, for instance, has the Center for Urban Policy (Barnard-Columbia), the Center for Law and Social Justice (Medgar Evers), the Center for Urban Research (CUNY), and the Center for New York City Affairs (New School), just to name a few.

Finally, progressive magazines have provided a home (although not much institutional structure) for honing an ideological perspective. Indeed the magazines may be the place where differing progressive political philosophies are most clearly defined and elaborated in relation to policy.

Magazines have played a critical if unsymmetrical role on both sides of the political spectrum. *The National Review*, *American Spectator*, *The Weekly Standard* have been heavily subsidized to develop writers, ideas, and audiences. The larger size of conservative magazines is sometimes assumed to be

due to their broader popularity in a conservative age. Not so, says Beth Schulman, former publisher of *In These Times*. In the March/April 1995 edition of *Extra!*, Schulman quickly counts \$2.8 million in foundation grants to a handful conservative magazines, and a grand total of just \$270,000 to the top progressive publications. Still, despite their lack of institutional resources, progressive magazines have played an important role in shaping the progressive political debate.

Below are a few key magazines; there are, of course, more (a fuller list can be found on the Independent Press Association's web site: www.indypress.org).

The American Prospect, in issue after issue, lays out a fairly coherent view of what a liberal strategy should be. It would be fair to say that, although there is diversity among writers, there is an *American Prospect* wing of progressivism that involves working through the Democratic Party to restore faith in government and its ability to carry out, expand upon, and perhaps update the trajectory of liberalism that moves from the New Deal to the Great Society and that, in the *American Prospect's* view ought to continue forward. *TAP's* perspective is fairly removed from grassroots organizing and movement politics, but it is strongly connected with Washington politics. *TAP* is currently undergoing a significant transition, as Harold Meyerson of the *L.A. Weekly* takes on editorship of the magazine and moves the main editorial offices to Washington, DC. This follows on the magazine's still recent transition to a biweekly from a bimonthly, which is the difference between a journal and a magazine. Although it approaches its tenth anniversary, *TAP* should be seen in many ways as a new venture. (Circulation 45,000)

The New Republic is a leading voice for its particular brand of progressive politics. What it is selling is mixed bag of neoconservatism, neoliberalism, and generically "new" thinking. It is very much tapped into daily Washington politics, and openly uninterested in grassroots efforts. (Circulation: 100,000)

The Nation provides a home for a more radical crowd. Its political orientation—while, again, diverse—has its ideological roots in American radicalism, socialist movements, the New Left, activism (student, women's, environmental, gay rights, civil rights, etc.), and today's academic left. As a strategy for change, some in *The Nation* cohort hope for a revived left wing of the Democratic Party, others for a minor party to express its views more sharply, others still see hope mostly in political movements—such as the abolition movement that founded the magazine in 1865. (Circulation: 100,000)

In These Times, founded two decades ago by James Weinstein and edited for the past few years by Joel Bleifuss, has done more to connect its politics with current political movements and organizing than the other widely read progressive magazines. It has stronger labor coverage and a closer connection to African American politics than *The Nation*, while being more grassroots oriented and more progressive than *The American Prospect*—and operating on a considerably smaller scale than both. (Circulation: 20,000).

Other magazines also provide a home for progressive ideas: ***The Progressive***, ***Dissent***, ***Z***, ***ColorLines***, ***Tikkun***, ***Social Policy***. To some extent, each carves out an ideological niche, but the clarity is consistently muddled by the fact that none of these magazines has the resources to support writers. As a result, an

overlapping cadre of contributors provide articles for a range of publications. This naturally inhibits any one magazine from developing a sharply distinct political perspective, since readers might find an article by (say) Barbara Ehrenreich, Christopher Hitchens, or David Moberg in an issue of any number of the above magazines. Even the larger magazines rely heavily on writers who have a “perch” at some other organization from which they can occasionally write articles.

These are the main institutions that have structured themselves to engage in a debate about ideology—contesting what “progressive” means or should mean, what direction progressive political parties should pursue, what the underlying principles of progressivism are, and how to get a majority support for a progressive political program.

There are internal issues that block greater effectiveness. A more direct approach to race and gender equity is certainly one.

But, without belaboring the point: there is a fundamental difference between the think tanks on the progressive side and those on the conservative side. Key aspects are scale (the conservative think tanks are all several times larger), media and politics (conservatives devote far larger percentages of their budgets to outreach and less to research and analysis), and ideological focus (even among the progressive think tanks explicitly taking on issues of political philosophy, none are as sharply or openly defined around a political perspective as are the conservative think tanks).

This difference is surprisingly underplayed in a good deal of writing about think tanks. Two key books on the subject, for instance, James A. Smith’s *The Idea Brokers: Think Tanks and the Rise of the New Policy Elite* and David M. Ricci’s *The Transformation of American Politics: The New Washington and the Rise of Think Tanks* look at the world of think tanks as though progressive and conservative think tanks were doing essentially the same job. They’re not, in large part because of the difference between the two groups of funders. Conservative think tanks are supported by conservative individuals, corporate donors, and foundations—all of them eager to see aggressive, political, conservative institutions. Progressive think tanks are supported by big foundations such as Ford or Rockefeller. These foundations may support a number of progressive causes, but they most definitely are not set up to define a progressive agenda. Instead they are designed to foster good governance, improvements in education, quality health care, and the like. As a result, progressive think tanks tend to focus not on defining what progressive means, but on developing *good* policy.

Progressive magazines, which focus more explicitly on ideology, have gotten little foundation support of any kind. The substantial financial support that bolsters conservative publications allows them to pay authors at a level that can sustain them, put out a glossier and more sharply edited publication, and—importantly—pay for direct-mail appeals that build circulation to a level that gives the magazines more serious credibility that, among other things, boosts their authors and issues into the mainstream media. Progressive magazines can do little to match this.

The big conservative think tanks, it is worth noting, are not funded primarily by foundations; they receive the bulk of their contributions from individuals and

corporations. Heritage Foundation reports that over half of its budget comes from individual donors. AEI says it raises more than a third from individuals, the largest single source of contributions. Progressive think tanks have generally relied much more heavily on foundations. Individual donors (like corporate donors, and labor unions—which sometimes support progressive think tanks) act differently from foundations in several key respects. Although individuals (and corporations and unions) can make tax-deductible contributions to a think tank, they also can make non-tax-deductible contributions to candidates. Similarly, individuals (and corporate leaders, and labor unions) will likely be excited to see a think tank having real political and ideological impact in ways that may make the big foundations uneasy. Finally, if individual donors like a think tank’s work, they are likely to become loyal supporters, increasing their contributions throughout their lives, and—through bequests—sometimes even longer. Foundations, by contrast—especially those that support the progressive side of the spectrum—tend to follow trends that pull institutions first one way, then another. They rarely increase their level of commitment to major institutions, and often cut off support altogether after a relatively moderate amount of time.

“Ideas have consequences,” was the rallying cry of a generation of conservative ideological development. Perhaps we need to add as a corollary: developing ideas takes money. And it may be that the kind of reliable, substantive money, unafraid of the risks and controversies that go with developing ideas, will not come principally from foundations. Unless, that is, foundations decide to change their basic approach to public questions.

State-Level Policy Infrastructure

The network of progressive institutions at the state level is far more hit-and-miss than at the federal level. For years, progressives—and especially Liberals—fought against devolution and stressed the belief that major social issues must be addressed nationally. Slowly, progressives are acknowledging—sometimes even embracing—the reality of an increasing local and state role in politics. As a result, there is a growing infrastructure of state-level progressive policy institutions pursuing local battles and creative strategies for addressing healthcare coverage, minimum wage hikes, and other issues once thought of as federal issues.

The **Center for Policy Alternatives** was out ahead of this curve, advocating “progressive Federalism” as early as the 1980s. CPA does a useful job networking state legislators and providing some resources that allow them to develop and spread progressive policies. CPA has roughly 20 staff members, and an annual budget of about \$4 million. It convenes meetings of state legislators, has a number of working groups to engage legislators on issues, and produces written materials and a web site to foster and disseminate ideas.

In many respects, CPA aspires to be the progressive version of the conservative American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC). ALEC is a crackerjack operation that feeds conservative policy and philosophy to state legislators, and brings conservative legislators together to meet and bond with each other. On its web site, ALEC lists a staff of 28 staff people in its Washington office (including, for example, a director of membership, a director of programs, a director of membership programs, two membership coordinators, and a 10-person legislation and policy staff).

One thing CPA’s Acting Director Jane Gruenebaum sees at the state legislative level is a repercussion of progressives’ overall absence of focus on ideology. “What we’re lacking is a framework and a strategy. Where the conservatives really cream us is that they have a vision of where they want to get to. Progressives are more at sea about where we want to get to, and especially how we want to get there.” At the state level, Gruenebaum says, this is especially apparent. “We have these single-issue groups out there flailing away. But we are at least two decades behind in understanding how to move policy through the state and to the national level. We don’t have the picture, and we don’t have the unity that brings.” As one way of doing more on this front, CPA is currently engaged in discussion with **The Preamble Center** about possibly incorporating some of Preamble’s experience with addressing this level of ideology and “framing” into CPA’s work. And, on a more substantial scale, CPA is developing a state issues forum at the **National Conference of State Legislators** to bring together groups interested in working on a common set of messages and strategies.

For the most part, CPA looks at one slice of the world: state legislators. That is CPA’s “niche.” CPA does some work in coordination with regional groups, state-level groups, and especially with existing networks of state-level organizations. It also is increasingly involved in collaborations with other national organizations such as Demos, or the National Campaign on Jobs and Income Support (below). But for the most part, its work is not with state policy groups, nor with governors, mayors, or municipal legislators but specifically with state legislators.

US Action, ACORN, US PIRG, and to a modest extent the **Industrial Areas Foundation** also have some degree of policy capacity to help their affiliates at the state level—in particular, one or two policy people on an issue of particular focus is common—living wage, campaign finance reform, etc. The **Midwest Academy**, in relation to but separate from US Action, also provides a degree of assistance with policy development at the state level.

In relation to but separate from these networks are a series of state and regional institutions constructed on the model of **Northeast Action, Western States Center, Revisioning New Mexico, Progressive Leadership Alliance of Nevada**, and a handful of others, with some intergroup coordination provided by the one-staff-person **Coalition Collaborative**. Each serves to link progressives in their region with electoral savvy, issue focus, and some capacity for policy development. This has proven a successful model and, with support from a foundation-sponsored State Strategies Fund, is an important piece of the state-level infrastructure. But these groups tend to support networking, coalition-building, issue campaigns; they do not generally have more than an occasional capacity to do research or policy development, and conversation about ideology is sporadic.

Two other important networks of state-level groups are comprised in the **State Fiscal Analysis Initiative** coordinated by the **Center on Budget and Policy Priorities**, and the **Economic Analysis and Research Network (EARN)** coordinated by the **Economic Policy Institute**. Each network counts 20 to 30 state-based groups as members (a number of groups are members of both networks). The SFA Initiative is intended to collect state-level groups that address tax and budget questions, and enhance their capacity by adding expertise and resources through the initiative and with support from the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. The EARN network is somewhat more loosely structured, but sets up a similar relationship between the Economic Policy Institute, which convenes an annual meeting, and state groups that do economic analysis. From **Alabama Arise Citizens' Policy Project** to the **Wisconsin Council on Children and Families** (covering the waterfront from A to W), these state groups provide a policy resource that is increasingly important—and increasingly sophisticated—an the era of devolution of federal power and responsibility.

There are other regional or local networks of varying types, such as the network **Democracy South**, the local **Greater Birmingham Ministries**, the nexus of organizing and policy work in Los Angeles (**AGENDA/SCOPE/CIPHER/Metropolitan Alliance/LAANE**), the California **Labor/Community Strategy Center, Working Partnerships USA** in Silicon Valley, **Dirigo Alliance** in Maine, **Northwest Federation for Community Organizers** and **South West Organizing Project (SWOP)** in their regions. There are probably five or eight times as many similar efforts as these.

In addition to the networks of groups, there also is a truly staggering array of local policy shops, issue groups, academic centers, and others that play a role in local and state policy. In New York City alone, over 40 were identified by the **New York Progressive Network**, and it is clear that this just scratches the surface in the city. A national study I helped conduct for the New World Foundation identified roughly 350 such groups, defined along slightly different lines. And, again, it is clear there are many, many more.

Work in any given state tends to be no more coordinated than work at the federal level, despite operating in a smaller fishbowl. Washington-based think tanks provide support and analysis that is often a huge help to state-level groups. But just as often, state and national think tanks work in isolation from one another. And when they do work together, the process is not always easy. “Just this morning I’ve already chewed out one Washington person saying they can solve state problems,” Jean Ross, director of the California Budget Process told me recently.

Finally, as the Center for Policy Alternatives’ Jane Gruenebaum points out, national think tanks can serve as a resource, but they cannot supplant widespread local citizen participation. “A focus on process—who is at the table, who is involved in formulating the solutions—that is part of what it means to be a progressive.” This is different from the conservatives’ approach. And it is a lesson even the smartest inside-the-beltway experts need to take to heart.

Think Tanks and Grassroots Organizing

There is a real division in the progressive world about strategy. On one side of the divide are people who believe that political and social change come about through legislation, policies, and Washington or statehouse politics. On the other side are people who think political change comes from the ground up through grassroots organizing, constituency building, and movements. There are a relative handful who think both sides of this picture are crucial, and fewer still who have been able to integrate this belief into their practice. But it is no exaggeration to say that the current relationship between think tanks and grassroots organizing is based as much on resentment and division as on organic connection.

“The divide between organizing work and think tank work is a big one,” says Kim Fellner, director of the **National Organizers’ Alliance**. “I think the primary problem is the dichotomy that’s artificially created between who can organize and who can think, and the conception that if you’re an organizer you’re not a thinker. One of the big needs is to mix up those constituencies a little differently, so there are opportunities for practitioners to be thinkers. Not think tanks where ‘ideas people’ tell organizers what they should be thinking.”

NOA is attempting to do something about this, in a modest way. The alliance has experimented with convening a diverse group of organizers around such issues as immigration, globalization and local organizing. NOA organizes an annual Gathering that always raises important policy questions. But NOA has not yet found a process for developing the ideas these meetings spark into honed policy proposals, or to bridge the gap between organizers and research institutes.

To do policy and ideology work in a way that links to organizing, says Fellner, “I feel like we need a different breed of think tank. I don’t quite know how one would go about doing it. You would need to balance the institutional capacity factors with the democratic factors. Rather than a think tank, maybe what we need to do is to build a community around a certain piece of work.” And, says Fellner, static institutions may not be enough, since inevitably, “When you institutionalize a think tank you generate your own elitism. We may need to augment traditional think tank structures with more transitory ‘think tank opportunities.’”

The **Applied Research Center** in Oakland, CA, provides a different kind of link between organizing and policy. Founded by longtime organizer Gary Delgado, ARC is deeply rooted in the world of grassroots organizing. But its work has been oriented to listening to the organizing world and producing materials that serve it, prod it, and lift its issues into the media and policy debates. ARC’s focus is on issues affecting people of color, from schools to immigration to welfare. ARC produces reports, works on policy issues, convened a recent conference on race and public policy, conducts original research, and produces *Colorlines* magazine—all oriented far more at the organizing world than at the media and governmental audiences to which Washington think tanks pitch their products.

Through its GRIPP Initiative (Grass Roots Innovative Policy Program), Delgado claims ARC has demonstrated a model for grassroots groups to be effective in public policy, and to “lead with race.” He points to curriculum changes and access to health care in Idaho, and a change in discipline policy in

Oakland schools as policy changes brought about through a coordination of a) participatory research, b) policy development (together with groups such as **Welfare Law Center** or **Education Law Center**), and c) research and assistance from intermediaries such as ARC.

Delgado sees the ARC model as a successful way of bridging the gap between grassroots groups and effective policy—more effective than ARC’s inside-the-beltway cousins. “The problem with Washington think tanks,” Delgado remarks, “is that the accountability of the policy groups is in the wrong places. Washington policy shops feel accountable to foundations, to the media, and maybe to politicians—not to any constituency that is affected by the policies that the policy group covers.” In addition, because think tanks want to be taken seriously in the world of media and Washington politics, Delgado says, they modify their demands according to the prevailing political winds—which today are broadly conservative. As a result, “on an issue like welfare, you find think tank ‘progressives’ mouthing virtually the same ‘consensus’ positions as conservatives,” about issues such as workfare and time limits, says Delgado.

Increasing the sense of division between think tanks and organizing, adds Kim Fellner, is a cultural divide. “The Washington think tanks tend to be generationally and culturally very flat, not related to popular culture in any way. The movement and organizing on the ground, especially in communities of color and among the young, has a different cultural spin, and I think that gap is worth exploring. The think tanks tend to be monochrome, in a very non-monochrome environment.”

There are, however, a handful of successes in navigating the policy/organizing divide. One that is roundly praised is the **National Campaign for Jobs and Income Support**, run out of the Washington-based **Center for Community Change**. The National Campaign has been an unusual effort to coordinate the efforts of a group of participating community organizations from around the country that work on a set of issues—from immigration to welfare to health care to jobs. The National Campaign has provided a structure for the groups to develop a policy agenda and then build a real campaign to get it passed. With a staff of about seven and a budget this year of roughly \$3 million (two thirds of which is regranted to participating groups), the National Campaign adds a significant capacity to the field of organizing.

“The theory of it is that these organizations require a mechanism to take the power that they have, the ideas that they have, and to put them into play at the national level,” says Deepak Bhargava, Director of policy for the Center for Community Change and director of the National Campaign. “Whether that involves nationalizing a living wage movement, responding to abuses of welfare reform...whatever the issue, there needs to be a mechanism. The groups need to relate to other groups, sectors, and worlds of activity in an organized and strategic way.” That’s what the campaign helps groups to do.

The National Campaign is still a very new effort, and its effectiveness and durability remain to be proven. But it is widely seen as a very promising model for linking organizing to policy work.

In specific issue areas, there are also some major institutions that try to link policy to organizing. **Demos: A Network for Ideas** is stressing this role under the leadership of its new director, Miles Rapoport, especially in the field of democracy and political reform (and, to a lesser degree, around issues of economic polarization). Rapoport was himself Secretary of State in Connecticut and is keenly attuned to the needs of politicians. “What Demos is trying to do” he explains, “is to be a convener and networker of activists and advocacy organizations. But we also want to do good intellectual and policy work not in isolation from the advocacy work but in connection with it. We want to try to issue reports, for example, in a way that they have real usefulness to activists. That means they might 20 pages long instead of book length, be timed to fit into an organizing campaign, and not just be released into the sky but be released into the reform community that we’re trying to nurture.”

In addition, Rapoport stresses, the material “ought to get developed together with people who are working on the issue on the ground. There has to be an organic connection between us and the people doing the work.” Navigating the relationships between existing organizations is not always easy, though, so Demos has its work cut out for it. Rapoport expects the organization to have a budget of \$2 to \$2.5 million in 2001. It currently has a research staff of three or four people in New York, and expects to add a communications capacity and some regional field staff. Demos is still relatively new, and much of the work it hopes to do is still in the pipeline.

At the state level, there is always both policy and organizing work going on in any given area. Some of the organizations doing this work are named above. But the degree of state-level institutional infrastructure linking grassroots groups to policy development varies tremendously. With some notable exceptions, it is generally weak. And, Bhargava stresses in particular, “in the big states it’s a disaster.”

Opportunities to Catalyze and Synthesize

Looking at the sum total of progressive think tanks, there are the modest number described above that address ideology and political perspective, a few dozen fairly large ones that concentrate on single issues (**NRDC, Center for Women Policy Studies, Citizens for Tax Justice, Children's Defense Fund**, etc.), and a staggering number of small ones—at least several hundred—with perhaps an executive director and a graduate student. Although underfunding is a chronic problem, there is also a significant problem of organization and management.

In New York, for example, there is frequent discussion among progressives about the need for a progressive version of the conservative Manhattan Institute. Yet, the 40-odd members of the New York Progressive Network employ at a rough guess least 100 research/policy staff. This alone would make for a far larger set of experts than the 24 senior fellows listed by the Manhattan Institute.

So, as the Wizard of Oz might ask: What do conservatives have that we haven't got? Certainly not "a heart," or "brains" (pace the Tin Man and Scarecrow). It's tempting to say "courage" (not to mention ruby slippers). But I think the real answer is organization—and, as above, a focus on ideology.

Conservative think tanks tend to be of a larger scale (and smaller number) than progressive ones, and they tend to be ideologically focused, multi-issue organizations. Their directors often are experienced managers; they are rarely the institution's "star scholars." At right-wing think tanks, the best known individuals are the fellows; at progressive think tanks it is their directors (who are also the star scholars). As a result, conservative think tanks have managers whose primary job is to cultivate, develop, and promote fellows. Crucially, these directors do the fundraising, too, freeing the institute's best thinkers from that task—which often takes a third to a half of the time of a director.

Right-wing think tanks are stable places with pleasant offices and good salaries—not to mention fancy lunches—which helps in attracting fellows, politicians, and media people. Finally, right-wing think tanks have a substantial support organization: media trainers, public relations experts, and an enviable capacity to develop fellows' media skills and project their work into the public discourse. In the hypothetical scales weighing the New York Progressive Network members against the conservative Manhattan Institute, comparing the number of fellows tips the balance to the progressive side. Add union research departments to the mix and you tip the scales further toward progressives. But, in weighing media outreach, even after adding up all the capacity of more than 40 progressive organizations of NYPN, the sole capacity of the Manhattan Institute would surely tip the balance strongly to the right.

Outsiders often wonder why all these progressive groups don't just get together and form one large organization. Reasonable people could debate whether this would be a good idea. But, barring a major turn of events, this does not seem to be in the cards. The central reason is that funders simply don't support it, despite their frequent complaints about fragmentation.

Looking at the positive side, however: All this disparate activity does make for a great deal of latent energy. The progressive policy infrastructure currently adds up to less than the sum of its parts. But, as a result, even relatively modest

additions to the field can sometimes have a disproportionate impact. And a bigger effort could harness tremendous pent-up or dissipated energy.

The **Electronic Policy Network** or **New York Progressive Network** represent one type of addition. Simply linking existing groups and providing a small amount of organizational capacity to the field is already a significant contribution.

A different kind of model is the **Progressive Los Angeles Network (PLAN)**, formed almost by accident and catapulted in significance by the exciting near-miss of Antonio Villaraigosa's mayoral campaign.

PLAN began out of a 1998 conference, organized at Occidental College by activist professors Peter Dreier and Robert Gottlieb, which brought together a wide array of progressive organizations beyond "the usual suspects" to celebrate California's progressive history. Included were labor unions, activist groups, community organizations, church groups, academics, and local elected officials (including a then little-known Villaraigosa).

Out of the conference came a network, PLAN, that was able to hire "about one and a half staff people," according to co-director Peter Dreier. In the course of a few months, PLAN constituted a series of task forces on a dozen policy issues, prepared documents, convened meetings, and ultimately produced a series of white papers in ten key issue areas. These were concrete about specific policy changes in the context of a larger vision of the issue, and were intimately connected with ongoing organizing work in the city. As the mayoral race shaped up, the policy papers came to be a significant factor in shaping the agenda of Antonio Villaraigosa's campaign.

What is striking about the PLAN network is how quickly an extensive degree of progressive policy thinking can be marshaled with a relatively modest injection of new resources, if they are the right ones, and if the work is done with sensitivity by someone who has a real understanding of organizing, policy, and politics. There are not many such individuals, to be sure; and we're not doing much to identify and develop more. But neither are people with this breadth of experience and sensitivity impossible to find.

The PLAN process was exciting and impressive, and may play an important ongoing role in Los Angeles. The one missing element, in my opinion (and judging from afar), is the ability to move beyond the existing and fragmented ideological framework to develop, build consensus around, and highlight not just issues but also underlying political principles. That may not take enormous additional resources, but it takes more.

The impressive array and large number of progressive policy groups in this country certainly makes it seem like our problem is not a lack of resources, but a lack of management skill, organization, and funding that would allow us to make more of what we have.

Conclusions

There are several key additions needed on the progressive landscape: institutional support for a real debate about ideology; a sharper policy-development capacity; a larger commitment to media and public commentary; greater connection to work at the regional, state, and local level; a more integral relationship between grassroots organizing and “ideas” work; and a better model for coordinating work between fragmented institutions.

Done the right way, and on the right scale, adding new think tanks to the scene might help. So, too, might adding capacity to the existing think tanks—especially in unrestricted funds that would allow directors to be real managers of their own operations. Broadening the funding base of think tanks to include more individual donors could also provide a big boost not only in increasing the supply of money, but also in building support for a bolder political role.

Wherever capacity is added, however, it should be done in a way that grows out of current progressive experience, not as a mirror of what has been developed on the right or elsewhere. Whether it takes the form of new institutions, additions to existing institutions, or non-institutional experimentation, any new effort should stand in a complementary relationship to existing groups. A big new institution “parachuted” in to the progressive community undoubtedly would be tolerated but probably would not be roundly welcomed. On the other hand, an institution that is formed through a meaningful process of engagement with existing organizations to see what the needs are and what the new group’s relation to others might be greeted with a great deal of enthusiasm.

Direct attention to ideology is always controversial, but it is an important step in fostering an honest internal debate among progressives. Although the debate will surface differences among progressives, if done respectfully it also will aid in clearing the air, and—to the extent that it results in consensus—in more deeply “harmonizing” our efforts at the policy level. If the *way* progressives approach policies derives from a coherent ideological picture, we will mutually reinforce each other’s arguments. When each issue we take on is addressed in its own terms, we often wind up making ideologically contradictory arguments in the name of victory on a particular issue—and we win the battle but risk losing the war.

At the same time, it is clear that Americans generally have little interest in an overt discussion of ideology. The way to approach ideology in public, with rare exceptions, is through issues. Still, as the DLC/PPI have done with some success, it is possible to paint an ideological picture by choosing issues that demonstrate an ideological point, making that point clearly (don’t just focus on winning the issue itself), then choosing a succession of issues that begin to add up to a larger vision—and saying clearly what that vision is.

Although there is a need for clarification of ideology across the progressive spectrum, we particularly need to do more to develop a *new progressive* ideology. Established groups should be supported in working out established progressive lines of thought. But there is a glaring need for a fresh ideological approach that is molded around the major realities of the current world (globalization, decentralization/conglomeratization, multicultural populations, dramatic new technologies, international terrorism, a post-Cold War political context). We need institutions that can free and support a new mix of thinkers

and activists to be bolder, more grounded, and more connected in their efforts to define what a new progressivism should look like.

In both existing work and in any new enterprise, it is important to make race and immigration central issues at both the ideological and organizational levels. Ideologically, racial and ethnic diversity need to be articulated as part of the core of a political philosophy, not as add-ons. And organizationally, people of color and new Americans need to be liberally represented in the ranks of the leadership. It is embarrassing that mainstream political institutions (media, political parties, even the Bush cabinet) are often more diverse than progressive organizations. This is not only a moral issue, it is also a practical one: failing to account for multiculturalism in theory and in practice undermines the effectiveness and credibility of progressive organizations with minority groups, with the media, and with the public.

At the same time, any think tank capacity that wants to be effective at changing policy cannot think just about policy, but must be able also to think about constituency. As Amy Dean, CEO of the South Bay (Silicon Valley) AFL-CIO Labor Council and founder of Working Partnerships USA put it, “All too often policy analysis sets as its objective the design of a program that could solve a pressing social or political problem without focusing on whether the proposed concept meets the needs of any constituency that might actually carry it forward towards implementation.” As a consequence, says Dean, what comes out is “a well researched and intelligently drafted document that becomes at best part of an historical footnote indicating the paths not taken.” A think tank needs to have a close working relationship with organizations that represent constituencies.

Deepak Bhargava stressed repeatedly that people who are adept in all these different ways at once are critically important, yet not easy to find. This is a natural outgrowth of the fact that the progressive world is very segmented, making people with broad cross-cutting experience relatively rare. On the one hand, this points to the need to look beyond the usual networks for staffing and participation of any effort in this area. On the other hand, it points to the need to create, as a matter of leadership development, more jobs that involve working between and among different aspects of the progressive world.

As a final note, it is also important to recognize what think tanks can and cannot do. They can do all of the above, and they should. But we shouldn't fool ourselves into thinking that they create social change. Myles Horton, a founder of the Highlander Center, used to talk about “movement periods” and “organizing periods.” Nicholas Lemann has written about windows of opportunity for major legislative change.”

In moments when the opportunity arises—whether through movements or through a legislative moment—think tanks can play a critical role in moving principle into policy. And during the long organizing periods in between movement periods, think tanks can help nurture and develop the seeds of ideas that come to fruition in the next major period of social change, as well as the guiding philosophy that holds constituencies together for the long haul.

Any addition to the think tank scene today needs to work from an understanding of how social change happens and what part think tanks play in it; where we are at this historical moment and what the opportunity is for thoughtful intervention.

For further reading:

James A. Smith, *The Idea Brokers: Think Tanks and the Rise of the New Policy Elite* (New York: Free Press, 1993).

David M. Ricci, *The Transformation of American Politics: The New Washington and the Rise of Think Tanks* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

Sally Covington, *Moving a Public Policy Agenda: The Strategic Philanthropy of Conservative Foundations* (National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, 1998).

David Dyssegaard Kallick, Allison Barlow, and Rhonda Shary, "Who Does Research and Policy Analysis to Support Progressive Organizing?" (New York: New World Foundation, 1998).

Karen Paget, "Lessons of Right-Wing Philanthropy," *American Prospect*, September/October 1998.

Michael Shuman, "Why Do Progressive Foundations Give Too Little to Too Many?" *The Nation*, January 12, 1998.

Beth Schulman, "Foundations for a Movement: How the Right Wing Subsidizes Its Press," *EXTRA!*, March/April 1995.

David Callahan, "\$1 Billion for Conservative Ideas," *The Nation*, April 26, 1999.

Buying A Movement: Right Wing Foundations in American Politics, A Report by People for the American Way, 1996.

A Few Sample Lists of Progressive Think Tanks

Electronic Policy Network (www.epn.org)

New York Progressive Network (www.nypn.org)

Project Vote Smart (www.vote-smart.org) for both progressive and conservative think tanks.

Think Tank Directory: a Guide to Nonprofit Public Policy Research Organizations, (Topeka, KS : Government Research Service, 1996), for both progress and conservative think tanks.

List of Progressive Magazines

Independent Press Association (www.indypress.org)