

Bridging the Praxis Divide: From Direct Action to Direct Services and Back Again

Benjamin Shepard

In recent years a new breed of organizing has ignited campaigns for peace and justice. Many of these campaigns utilize innovative approaches to organizing diverse communities against a broad range of local and transnational targets, including global corporations and organizations such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). According to the Institute for Policy Alternatives, the Global Justice Movement (GJM) has had its greatest policy successes when matching the burlesque of protest with practical policy goals. While the movement has had policy success in areas, such as slowing and shifting debates about “Fast Track” trade negotiations, compulsory licensing, debt cancellation, and through corporate campaigns such as the work of Rainforest Action Network,¹ there have been many areas in which the movement has failed to match its rhetorical goals with clearly outlined, achievable goals. While this limitation may result from challenging a very large target, it also results from ideological conflicts within this movement of many movements, herein referred to as movement of movements (MM).² Perhaps this movement of movement’s greatest strength is a focus on creative expression³ and praxis, rather than iron-clad ideological certainty. Naomi Klein’s now famous essay, “The Vision Thing,” elaborates on this theme.⁴ Anarchists have worked with liberals; queers have organized with environmentalists; and in homage to a respect for diversity of tactics, great things have happened through the savvy deployment of multiple approaches simultaneously. Once secretive policy meetings have become occasions for carnivalesque blockades, while the discussions inside

Constituent Imagination

become subject to newspaper accounts around the world. Yet work remains. While diverse groups have collaborated in direct action, not enough of these groups have worked to advance workable alternative proposals to the current model of neoliberalism, especially in the North American context. Tensions around the role of the welfare state, movement organizations, service provision, electoral politics, political compromises, and proximity to political power have emerged as sources of significant ideological tensions. Still the GJM churns forward.

What has been put forward is a “no” to neoliberalism and a prefigurative “yes” to community building. This elliptical disposition is embodied in the Zapatista call for “One No and 1,000 Yeses.” At its core, this expression aims at creating a new relationship to power and democracy. This new politics begins with a single “no,” a “ya basta!” to the neoliberal economic trade and social policies embodied in the NAFTA accords in 1994. Refusal starts as a statement of rebellion and survival in the face of a future denied; it is then transformed into a series of yeses, encompassing encounters with new political spaces, strategies, dialogues, and a new political project creating a new kind of autonomy.⁵ The movement’s vitality is found in this open democratic call for a multiplicity of voices, grievances, approaches, and connections, all loosely coordinated within a democratic call to action.

Obstacles to the practical “winnable win,” which organizer Saul Alinsky suggested is essential for group cohesion,⁶ are many. Some argue that an era of corporate or “primitive” globalization⁷ has rendered efforts at local organizing obsolete. Others suggest that the neighborhood is still a primary tactical site for movement attention.⁸ As “convergence” actions against global summits, meetings and conventions have increased; much of their suspense has diminished, especially in the North American context.⁹ While the rhetoric of calling to “shut down the IMF” and “abolish capitalism” functioned as a broad critique, this framework was not matched with a set of strategies that produced results. As the War on Terror has translated into a war on dissent, the efficacy of broad convergence demonstrations has been vastly reduced in North America. Momentum and resources for social justice campaigns at home dwindled.¹⁰

Along with these transformations the link between a theory of action and practical tactics that helped create change became a chasm. As the refreshing spirit of engagement and problem solving movements faded, the movement’s praxis waned. The MM faces a praxis divide between its theory of action and political power capable of transforming lives. In response to this divide, a number of movement activists and theorists suggested that more dramatic, well-researched, tactical approaches to targeting local targets could help infuse an ethos of success into campaigns for global justice in North America.¹¹ Such thinking harkens back to the notion that “all politics is local.” The result is an organizing framework that involves identifying local needs, some of which involve transnational economic circumstances. Advocates suggest that translating movement goals into clearly identified manifestations of global problems is an effective approach to organizing for social change. After all, recent years have

Bridging the Praxis Divide

witnessed neighborhood actors in fields as diverse as urban housing, labor, gardening, anarchist, and public health fields using both disciplined research and community organizing tools to create wins. The GJM has something to learn from them.

Burning Ambitions and a Praxis Divide

Many of the tensions within the GJM arise from a difficulty reconciling a series of lofty goals with the prerequisites of a system of global capitalism. This tension is complicated by dueling ideological conflicts between radical and liberal approaches to social change activism—the reform vs. revolution challenge that has long accompanied movements for change.¹² Yet few social movements are able to remain entirely outside of a policy framework of the provision of services. The challenge for many involved in the Northern American GJM involves reconciling a struggle against unbridled capitalism and a practical need for immediate limited reforms necessary to make the rules of global capital more humanitarian. Much of the literature on the movement reveals an opposition to the work of nongovernmental organizations.¹³ This is understandable. The hierarchical nature of many organizations is worth addressing and improving. Yet these limitations do not preclude the need for both direct service organizations and grassroots groups to handle the short and long-term goals of movements. Dynamic movements need people in the streets, at the negotiating table, and providing services.¹⁴ Each has a role in a movement built on respect for a diversity of tactics. After all, in these quiet days before the revolution, people get a little hungry. People need food, shelter and medicine. Low-income people depend on NGOs and non-profit organizations to provide vital services, including clean needles, dental dams, stem kits, housing, food and healthcare. From the Settlement Houses to the Civil Rights Movement, progressive reforms and social programs only gain strength with the support of social movements.¹⁵ Victories such as Seattle set the stage for these forms of social change.¹⁶

Unfortunately, the North American GJM has earned few of these wins of late. One explanation for these limitations is the movement's lack of a coherent overarching theoretical framework with which to propel itself forward.¹⁷ According to this view action is privileged over theoretical debate. Thus intellectuals fail to play a coherent role in the MM. Critics of this view suggest that theory emerges from a coherent model of action, not vice versa.¹⁸ Steve Duncombe suggests that it is not a lack of theory as much as a lack of appreciation, that sometimes there is more to theory than talk. Theory may not be lacking as much as that critics are looking at it too narrowly. “[P]erhaps a different type of theory is simultaneously being created, and importantly, employed by this new movement,” Duncombe notes. “What I’m talking about here is praxis, or what I’ll call, sans Greek, embodied theory. Embodied theory arises out of practice, the activity of engaging in the world, of coming up to solutions to problems and working out their resolutions.”¹⁹ Thus, “all successful theory is lived theory.”²⁰

Constituent Imagination

ACT UP and LIVED Theory

In the case of ACT UP, its theory, “ACTION = LIFE” and “SILENCE = DEATH” propelled a generation of actors. For many, it involved a system of silences that allowed business as usual to create conditions for a deadly epidemic to progress unchecked. Many in the group assumed that participation within this system was tantamount to complicity. For others this adherence to a notion of pure refusal smacked of social purity.²¹ While members of the Treatment and Data affinity group advocated “drugs into bodies” regardless of the means, others suggested that negotiating access to experimental drugs for some but not all created another form of social and cultural apartheid. Long before the GJM calls for respect for a diversity of tactics, members of ACT UP went their separate ways over some members compromising with drug companies.²² Yet the group continued, with some staying in the streets and others finding a place at the negotiating table. Members of the Treatment and Data Committee rejected the notion that the scientific establishment should be viewed simply as enemies. Mark Harrington, a founder of the Treatment Action Group, reflected on his first meetings with drug company members he had zapped in previous years: “At the time, I would just say that it was clear from the very beginning, as Maggie Thatcher said when she met Gorbachev, “We can do business.””²³ Rather than cower or scream Harrington, sought common ground when he met representatives of big science. The result was more rapprochement and dialogue.²⁴ Given the urgent need for results, many favored a pragmatic compromise rather than ideological purity.

Yet there was more to the group’s work than difficult compromises. A second example is instructive. Jim Eigo, who was arrested during the first AIDS related civil disobedience in the US, recalls one of many occasions when ACT UP members advanced an effective alternative policy. Much of this work was based on a high level of research, a vital part of the group’s approach. Initially, ACT UP’s Treatment and Data Committee applied its work to local issues, by identifying local hospitals which received federal research funds for AIDS research and targeting them. From here, Eigo helped advance one of the group’s greatest achievements. He explains:

In February 1988, on behalf of my affinity group, I wrote a critique of AIDS research at New York University (NYU). We delivered copies to NYU’s AIDS researchers. One suggestion of our (fairly primitive) critique was that the federal AIDS research effort initiate “parallel trials.” A drug’s major “clinical trials” gather data on a drug’s effectiveness in human subjects. They’re very strictly limited to people who meet rigid criteria. We advocated parallel trials which would enroll anyone with HIV who had no available treatment options.

In 1988, an overwhelming number of people with AIDS were routinely excluded from trials due to gender, illness, or conflicting medications. Data collected from parallel trials, while not clean enough to secure a drug its final approval, would yield a wealth of data on how a drug worked in the target population. Our

Bridging the Praxis Divide

group sent our critique to Dr. Anthony Fauci, head of the federal AIDS effort. In a few weeks, in a speech in New York, Dr. Fauci was using several phrases that seemed lifted from ACT UP's critique. But one he rephrased: "parallel trials" had become "parallel track."²⁵

As the story of parallel track suggests, ACT UP found much of its greatest success from advancing a well-researched, practical working strategies. Parallel track was most certainly one of a thousand "yeses" the group would put forward. A large part of the group's influence on federal and state AIDS policy stemmed from its strength as a worldwide grassroots organization. Members were well aware that part of their power emerged from a consciousness that AIDS was an international problem; their local response addressed conditions of this larger problem. Much of this mobilization occurred within a 1001 local skirmishes—at hospitals, a schools, boards of education, and even department stores—anywhere the homophobia, sex phobia, racism and sexism that helps AIDS spread reared its head.

A Different Kind of Theoretical Framework

To bridge the GJM's praxis divide, many have come to look back at a number of classic community organizing approaches. According to Robert Fisher, U.S. based community organizing can be distinguished as social welfare, radical, and conservative approaches to social change practice.²⁶ For Jack Rathman approaches to purposeful community change work within three distinct communities: urban, rural and international.²⁷

These approaches are divided into three additional categories of practice: locality development, social planning/policy, and social action. Locality development assumes that social change takes place through the active participation in local decision making to determine goals, tactics and strategies for action. The style is deliberately inclusive and democratic.²⁸ Social planning/policy involves the process of identifying of social problems, assessment of their scope, data collection, and solutions on a governmental-policy level. This style is deliberately technocratic and rational. Community participation is often minimal. Professionals are thought to be best able to engage in this mode of social-change practice. While community participation is not a core ingredient of this approach, differing circumstances and problems may require differing levels of community involvement. After all, garnering maximum civil involvement or successfully carrying out a protest demonstration against a carefully chosen target in the policy food chain requires a great deal of calculation. Thus, means are logically connected to intended ends.²⁹ In this respect policy and planning are linked with the third appellation of community change work: social-action based practice. This type of community organizing assumes there is an aggrieved section or class of the population that needs to be organized in order to make its demands heard to the larger society. Classically stemming from the 1930's and 1960's, this mode of practice involves a range of confrontational techniques, including: sit-ins,

Constituent Imagination

zaps, demonstrations, boycotts, marches, strikes, pickets, civil disobedience, teach-ins, and festive carnivals. The aim of these practices is for those with little financial power or access to use “people power” to apply pressure to or to disrupt carefully chosen targets. In this respect, even social action applies a rational theoretical analysis to its practice. Social-action based practice was first advanced by the Settlement House Movement. Saul Alinsky built on this model. His work was followed by the writings of Burghardt, Fisher, Piven and Cloward. In recent years, social action movements have moved beyond many of the traditional models to expand strategies and targets.³⁰

Social Action from Housing to Direct Services

For AIDS activists involved in the AIDS housing movement in New York City, advocacy involves a healthy combination of locality development, social planning/policy, and social action constellations. Given the enormity of their tasks, these actors make use of every tool they can use. For Housing Works, like the Squatters of Amsterdam and the Sem Terra land occupants in Brazil, a single sentiment drives their work: everyone deserves a roof over their head. Housing is a human right. The New York City AIDS housing and advocacy organization Housing Works locates itself within this ethos. According to their mission, “The purpose of Housing Works is to ensure that adequate housing, food, social services, harm reduction and other drug treatment services, medical and mental health care, and employment opportunities are available to homeless persons living with AIDS and HIV and to their families.” The group is committed to reaching its ends through: “Advocacy that aggressively challenges perceptions about homeless people living with AIDS and HIV, both within their indigenous communities and in the larger society,” and “Direct provision of innovative models of housing and services.” Thus a diversity of tactics for Housing Works bridges a range of tactics from direct action to direct services.

In New York City, where gentrification has put housing costs beyond the reach of many working people, the AIDS crisis compounded the problem as people who were once able to house themselves fell ill, lost their jobs, faced eviction, entered the homeless population, and gridlocked the hospitals. Keith Cylar, co-founder of New York’s Housing Works, described the challenges faced by social workers as the AIDS crisis emerged:

There was a gridlock in the hospital system... For me working in the hospital... I couldn’t get people out of the hospital because they didn’t have a place to live. We’d get ‘em well from whatever brought them in; but then they wouldn’t have a place to live. They’d stay in the hospitals and they’d pick up another thing and then they’d die. Remember, ‘88, ‘90, ‘91, ‘92—New York City literally had hospital gridlock, that was when they were keeping people on hospital gurneys out in the hallways. That was when people were not being fed, bathed, or touched. It was horrendous. You can’t imagine what it was like to be black, gay, a drug user, transgender, and dying from AIDS. So housing all of a sudden became this issue. ACT UP recognized it and formed the Housing Committee.³¹

Bridging the Praxis Divide

Here service delivery became a necessary goal to save the lives of people with HIV/AIDS in NYC. Charles King, another co-founder of Housing Works recalls:

You know, there were several of us in ACT UP, somewhat separately who had been passing homeless people in the streets. And in the late '80's was when you started seeing the cardboard signs that said, "Homeless with AIDS Please Help." I was a poor student so when I passed someone who was homeless on the street, I would give them a quarter. When I passed someone and they had a sign that said they had AIDS, I gave them a buck. But really hadn't figured what to do with that. And it sort of crystallized when we attended the Republican Convention in New Orleans in 1988. And those of us that went spent the week hell-raising there and organized a New Orleans ACT UP while we were there. And some of the folks who were there became very, very involved in what we were doing, who were demonstrating with us all day every day, as it turns out were two homeless men. And when we got ready to leave asked if they could come back with us. And we were very cavalier about yea, things were better in New York. When we got back here and tried to help these guys get things together, we realized that things were much better for people with AIDS who were housed but if you were undomiciled you might as well still be in Louisiana.

And so we organized the Housing Committee of ACT UP. We spent the next year and a half very aggressively challenging the city around homelessness and AIDS and its responsibility. Ginny Shubert had filed a lawsuit, *Mixon vs. Grinker*, to establish the right to housing. I like to think of it as the best lawsuit we ever lost... We won it all the way up to the state court of appeals. We lost it there but basically it forced the production of almost all of the AIDS housing that now exists in New York City.

Anyway, Ginny had started that lawsuit at the Coalition for the Homeless. And the Housing Committee of ACT UP actually did its first direct action in support of a plaintiff in that lawsuit to get the city to file an injunction to take this person out of the shelter. So to fast forward, we saw Dinkins as our great hope. Ginny had actually drafted his position paper on homelessness and AIDS. And as soon as he was elected, he repudiated his position and adopted a modified version of the Koch plan which was literally to create segregated units in the armory shelters, indeed running a curtain down the middle of the shelter, with people with AIDS on one side and other people on the other. No one would do anything. At one point in the struggle over *Mixon vs. Grinker*, a gay man with AIDS actually testified that homeless people with AIDS were actually better off in the shelters. And it was sort of devastating to hear this.

I actually remember a meeting on a Wednesday night the day or the day after his testimony that we met in an apartment on Eighth Avenue and 23rd street. And people were just so discouraged. And we started talking about it and decided that if the people that we cared about were going to be housed then we'd have to do it ourselves. And the only thing that we agreed upon was that we were going to start this new organization. And that it was going to be called Housing Works.

Constituent Imagination

From their beginning, Housing Works approached their task with this sort of audacity. Keith Cylar recalled that the Housing Works took the approach that if no one else was going to house drug users with AIDS then they were going to do it:

To start off with the Housing Committee of ACT UP was amazing fun. I remember when we were trying to get HASA working, back then it was called the Division of AIDS Services. And they had a bunch of new hires, like sixty new employees but hadn't given them any desks or workspace. So they were just spending their days sitting in a classroom. And so we organized this action. The union was picketing. We organized this action. Eric actually drove the truck where we brought a bunch of desks and chairs and phones into the middle of Church Street in front of HRA and handcuffed ourselves to them. I loved the chant. The chant was probably one of the best that we ever created. It was: "The check is in the desk and the desk is in the mail." (Laughs). Our HPD action was another amazing one. On Gold Street they have revolving doors. We went around on a Sunday night and picked up a bunch of abandoned furniture on the Lower East Side and Monday morning took it down to Gold Street and stuffed the revolving doors with furniture trying to deliver it to furnish housing for people living with AIDS.

So, the actions were fun. The actions were creative. We saw success at the margins. But at the end of the day, the truth of the matter is that AIDS housing providers did not want drug users. Homeless providers didn't want people with AIDS. And so even if the government had been willing to take on its part of the responsibility, there probably wouldn't have been providers who were willing to do it with people who we were trying to get housed.

And I think the way we brought that spirit of creative action into Housing Works was in how we designed the programs. Take our first scattered site program. Our housing contract around the country had some preclusion about drug use, requirements around being clean and sober. And we demanded and demonstrated for a contract that would require us to take people who were still using drugs. What everybody else in the country was precluding, we decided we would fight for.

Cylar recalled the ways that the radical approach to social service work at Housing Works actually overlapped with a form of direct action. "[N]obody knew how to treat an active drug user. No one knew how to deal with an active person who was dying from AIDS and HIV and they didn't want to confront that... And here we were saying, "Fine, everybody that you can't work with in your program, I want. I want to work with them and I'll find ways to move them."" While other providers viewed drug users as problems, Cylar explains, "They were people. They were wonderful people and they had lots of stories. They had lots of life and they had lots of wisdom."³² Since 1988, Housing Works has housed over 10,000 people. Yet many other homeless people have remained marginalized.

Bridging the Praxis Divide

New York City AIDS Housing Network and Human Rights Watch

After Housing Works was born the notion of housing homeless people with HIV/AIDS emerged as a social movement goal in itself. The core argument became “Housing is an AIDS Issue, Housing Equals Health.” In linking housing and healthcare, AIDS housing activists linked the co-epidemics of homelessness and AIDS into a struggle to house homeless people with AIDS. Since the epidemic’s earliest days, homeless people with HIV/AIDS in New York have been placed in Single Room Occupancy (SRO) hotel rooms. Yet even this remained a battle.

To guarantee a right to shelter for homeless people with HIV/AIDS, housing activists fought for the creation of the New York City Department of AIDS Services (DASIS) within the city’s Human Resources Administration (later renamed HASA) in 1995. They also fought for a law passed in 1997, referred to as Local Law 49, that guaranteed people with HIV/AIDS the legal right to be housed by the city within a day of a request for housing placement. Yet the fact that the law was on the books did not ensure its implementation. The spirit of the local law would not find its full expression for another five years. Integral to this was the work of the New York City AIDS Housing Network (NYCAHN), whose watchdog role brought their volunteers into the streets outside New York City’s welfare centers for nearly two years. NYCAHN members ensured that either people with AIDS got placed that day, or else lawyers, politicians, and newscasters would be notified that the city was violating the law.

In a campaign reminiscent of the 1960s National Welfare Rights Organization campaigns,³³ NYCAHN workers spent well over two years monitoring the city’s compliance with this local law. The core organizing principle remained the demand that the City of New York obey its own law. By the end of the campaign in 2001, the city was compelled to do just that— some four years after the local law’s passage. In the following interview, NYCAHN co-founder Jennifer Flynn, is accompanied by homeless advocate Bob Kohler. They explain how they forced the city, mayor, and welfare offices to obey the letter and spirit of Local Law 49. The campaign involves elements of legal research into the workings of the cumbersome public welfare bureaucracy and the determination to make it work; it included the willingness to be there through cold winter nights and hot summer days. Activists had to be smart about a media strategy that highlighted these wrongs: they had to build support on the grassroots level as well as with policy makers, and had to be willing to make use of direct action. Much of the interview begins where Charles King and Keith Cylar leave off. I began the interview by asking Jennifer Flynn (JF) what the conditions were like for people with HIV/AIDS ten years ago. Flynn explained:

Well, prior to the early 1990s, people with AIDS [PWAs] lived in the shelters like homeless people in New York do. In New York State we have an interpretation in our constitution that gives us a right to shelter. However, there was a tuberculosis outbreak in the shelters. People living with compromised

Constituent Imagination

immune systems in the shelters were dying. So there was a court case, *Mixon vs. Grinker*. That court case said that shelters are not medically appropriate housing for people with compromised immune systems. As result of that, the city really did start to send people to single occupancy hotels, the same hotel system we use now.

So throughout the 1990s PWAs, when they identified themselves, were being sent to these hotels. But from there, there really wasn't anywhere else to send them until 1993. Bailey Holt House was really the first AIDS housing residence that was created (on the East Coast). Housing Works was started in 1990. And then a few other organizations were created. There was an initiative that was created through HRA/Welfare in New York, the Department of Health, specifically to provide housing for people with HIV/AIDS who were suffering from tuberculosis...And a lot of this housing now started as a result of those funding streams.

Then in 1994, when [Mayor Rudolph] Giuliani came into office...it was the first time that social services across the board were cut...Straight up every single social service program was being cut. That led, in 1995, to this kind of unified cry out for attention to fight back against those cuts. And that led to the 1995 Bridges and Tunnels action.³⁴

It happened because all social services were being slashed. There were also a few high-profile police brutality cases. And people really thought that was result of the policies of the Republican mayor, which they were. It was also that he was talking about cutting welfare in a way that predated federal welfare reform. He talked about changing welfare. One of the first things he did when he came into office was try to shut down the city agency that provided welfare benefits, including housing for PWAs, the Division of AIDS Services. There was an enormous outpouring of anger over that, and he was stopped in a number of different ways. First he was stopped because of the publicity. ACT UP had been doing a lot of organizing against Giuliani around his attempts to dismantle DASIS, which would have resulted in homeless PWAs going back to the shelters.

So some members of ACT UP made calls to other organizers throughout the city. I think that the first call that they made was to Richie Perez, who was at the National Congress for Puerto Rican Rights. He'd been organizing this coalition of parents whose kids had been killed by the police, and had looked at some changes in policing that were resulting in increased cases of police brutality in New York City....ACT UP had a history of doing Richie Perez type of direct action...Then they brought in some other groups, such as Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence, the Coalition for the Homeless, and surprisingly, the Urban Justice Center. At the time, there also were huge cuts to public education. So CUNY students were organizing. In the months before April 25th, 1995, they had had ten thousand students descending on City Hall. New York City hadn't seen such numbers in a few years. It was pretty remarkable. So they brought in the CUNY students...Then those groups kind of morphed into SLAM.

So there was a complete shut down of the East Side of Manhattan. ACT UP and Housing Works had about 145 people arrested at the Midtown Tunnel,

Bridging the Praxis Divide

the one that goes to Queens. And Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence and the National Congress for Puerto Rican Rights took Manhattan Bridge. The CUNY students took the Brooklyn Bridge. The Coalition for the Homeless and Urban Justice Center actually had homeless people getting arrested, I guess on the Williamsburg or the Manhattan Bridge. And the entire East Side was tied up for a good two or three hours as a result of that... We beat back a lot of those cuts that year but never really got back to the point before. The other thing he kept doing in every budget was to do away with the Department of AIDS Services. He really hated it... He was always trying to weaken the welfare system, anyway. And he hated that there was this separate agency that served PWAs.

To buttress DASIS, ACT UP partnered with a broad-based coalition to help pass the Local Law 49. Flynn explains:

It was like he decided to dismantle DASIS as soon as he came into office. City Counsel member, particularly Tom Duane, and his then chief of staff who was Christine Quinn and Drew Cramer, started to write the legislation. And they really worked to pass that legislation in the next two years. I think they have a lot to do with it but I think, I mean Tom Duane was essentially a member of ACT UP so it kind of came from ACT UP. People say that it was an insider strategy, but Tom Duane really was not an insider kind of guy at that point. His power really came from ACT UP. It was a grassroots strategy. He was able to say to other council members "If you don't sign onto this, I will have 1,000 people at your door in the middle of the night." They knew that this was possible. They were people who had money and resources that they should be afraid of. Then by that point there were AIDS service organizations, who came to the table.

There was this huge march across the Brooklyn Bridge in 1996, the year before the law was passed. It was organized by ACT UP and Housing Works. About 1,000 people marched across the bridge. About 300 people stood outside of the gates of City Hall waiting to get in. And they were really sick people with AIDS. I guess it was early 1996 so people were looking sick. I think there was the contempt case. There was a ruling on Hannah vs. Turner in 1999. We felt that the city had violated the ruling, which meant providing same day—meaning 9 to 5 PM—emergency housing placements to everyone who qualified and everyone who requested it. A lot of AIDS service organizations had started to get tired of it...It wasn't playing well anymore.

We needed to do something so we begged Armen Mergen, who was the lawyer from Housing Works. He had this whole theory of why it was a difficult case. It went through the court of appeals and he was very concerned about it. But finally, he took the 17 people that we gave him. We sent more. [T]hat legal strategy alone could not have worked. It worked purely as the perfect storm of an organizing strategy, having the testimonies of people who were affected, and having your [Kohler's] testimony.

And it was also using everything together. It was sort of targeting Giuliani, directly, trying to make policy changes. Also, everybody wanted to be the one who solved it. At some point, there were insider lobbyists, who were

Constituent Imagination

hired by these big AIDS service organizations, who kept telling me they had met with someone in Giuliani's office and they were going to fix it tomorrow. I think that probably helped. And I think the legal strategy helped. The leadership development and organizing helped. The monitoring—just standing there with a moral purpose. It's also one case where it was so clear that we were right. There just isn't any gray area about that.

The wins would build on each other. "Other people could just go to a welfare center and track complaints. And it always fixed something. Even if the whole problem wasn't getting fixed, you got the doors on the bathrooms stalls," Flynn explains.

"But once you get one win," Bob Kohler recalls, "then you want more. Once you got a water-cooler and doors then you keep going. And it shows you, we got that."

Community Gardens and a Struggle for Healthier Neighborhoods

Throughout the years of Housing Works and NYCAHN's work, a community garden movement gained steam in New York City, its aim to make streets and neighborhoods healthy places for joy and connection. I came into the gardens direct action movement in March of 1999, during the organizing to stop the auction of 114 community gardens. Throughout that spring, garden activists from the More Gardens Coalition and the Lower East Side Collective Public Space Group had been engaging in a theatrical brand of protest, which included activists dressing like tomatoes and climbing into a tree in City Hall Park, and lobbying dressed as giant vegetables. The state Attorney General even noted that the reason he put temporary Restraining Order on the development of the garden lots was because, "A giant tomato told me to." All these actions seemed to compel neighborhood members to become invited to participate in a process of creating change. Faced with a gentrification and globalization process that was homogenizing and privatizing public spaces at an astounding rate, garden activists dug in to defend their neighborhoods through a wide range of tactics. As with Housing Works and NYCAHN their campaign involved a savvy use of research with an engaging model of protest.

Michael Shenker, a long time Lower East Side squatter and garden activist, recalls four tactics used in the garden struggle in NYC. These included: direct action, a judicial strategy, fundraising, and a legislative approach.³⁵ Direct action combined with a joyous approach played out through tactic including a "sing out" disrupting a public hearing, as well as an ecstatic theatrical model of organizing that compelled countless actors to participate in the story themselves. The aim was to convey their messages and engage an audience without being excessively didactic. Thus, groups made use of a range of crafty approaches, engaging audiences in playful ways with stories that seduced rather than hammered. This theatrical mode of civil disobedience had a way of disarming people and shifting the terms of debate. More Gardens Coalition organizer Aresh Javadi explained this successful approach

Bridging the Praxis Divide

to bridging the looming praxis divide facing the group:³⁶

Theatre has always been a method, where going back to Iran, where troops, singers, and theatre people would come and do the performance of Hussein, where he is martyred. But when they did that they came from village to village to village, they would tell the real stories behind what was going on through theatre that was also interactive. So the whole village would be singing and dancing with it backwards and forwards. So you were absolutely ingrained in it. There was no one person to see and the other person act. It opens you to all sorts of possibilities. Again, when you see a plant or a vegetable, you automatically come back to a world of childhood, cartoons, something that is not like the, “there is a protest and they are against us.” Rather the reaction is, “That’s so magical. That’s so amazing on top of concrete.” It brings you a recognition of why it is that people care so much about green space when you can’t actually take them to the garden. Did you see this over here—what it meant to this woman, to this grandfather, this granddaughter, how much it improved their health, their life? You can do that by having a flower dancing with a giant tomato and then there is the action of someone trying to take that away from people and people are willing to step up and move that. It allows people to really engage and question their own intents. It’s a very, very powerful thing that I will say again, Bread and Puppet and other groups have utilized. But Bread and Puppet tend to be a little bit darker. We are just like this is fun, its loving, and you are going to see how passionate we are about. The other aspect was that even during the civil disobediences, we would have hats and colorful things. The police sometimes didn’t even know what to do with the puppets. And they would be like, “We can’t arrest a flower.” (Laughs.) “That’s not a person that we can arrest.”

As with AIDS activists, the garden struggle is about life and community. Aresh explains how he planted those seeds within his campaigns:

To me it was just like, how can we be a “Yes” group. Yes, we agreed that this needs to be approved. We never said, “no, you suck.” We said, “Yes, you can do the right thing, like the flowers, like the fruits, like the yeses that have been created and brought forth in visual and even in food.” This is what we’re visioning and this is what we want—a celebration, a bringing together of the spirits, and having the politicians just follow what was right. And putting facts out. When we did a banner hang the visual enhanced the words. We didn’t try and over state it or get wordy, saying, “Oh well, housing vs the sunflower. Do you want a house or do you want homeless children?” We said, there it is: 10,000 vacant lots and they are being given away to rich developers, while the community gardens that could be there next to real housing, are being bulldozed. We were not against real housing. Why not have these two balanced? And keep both of them. We want both—real housing as well as real green spaces. I think any time anyone builds over a piece of land, he or she should automatically be adding community gardens with your money for the community. The point is opening up spaces that are communal and cultural. To me that’s the steps that need to be pushed forward.

Constituent Imagination

The strategy was always to advance images of a healthier community. “Sustainable healthier communities. From the Romans to the Greeks to the Persians to the Chinese—they’ve always had spaces where people can gather and be part of nature. And realize that we are nature—no matter how much steel and concrete that break us away from that.

During the organizing to save the 114 gardens, we had moments where we were in the gardens that were like a week away from being destroyed or given away to some developer. And the children came and took the puppets and automatically told the story. They would tell the story of the garden. And they would say, “So why do you think we shouldn’t have housing right there?” And the other kids would say, “Look at that house across the street. That’s not for us.” And I had nothing to do with that scene. Yet, these kids represent a future of why New York is going to be such an amazing space.” The end result of this organizing was a compromise, which helped preserve the community gardens in New York City.³⁷

Art, Creativity and Victory in an Anti-Corporate Campaign

The final case of this essay offers another example of the use of creative direct action and community organizing yet in a strikingly different context: the successful campaign by the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) for better pay from Taco Bell. Like the garden activists, this campaign made use of a prefigurative organizing model. Long time organizer David Solnit, who worked on the campaign, elaborates on this form of organizing: “I think its essential to think below the surface, from the gut, if we don’t learn to articulate the core roots of the problems we face, we’ll always be on the defensive.”³⁸

For some three years Taco Bell neglected the CIW’s simple request: an increase of one penny per pound of tomatoes picked for their tacos. And it’s no wonder, small wages translate into large profits. The demands of migrant and immigrant workers, such as the mostly Haitian, Latino, and Mayan Indian immigrants subsisting on poverty wages who constitute the CIW coalition, are a minimum priority for companies such as Taco Bell. Poverty among migrant farm workers, such as the CIW, saves consumers some \$50 a year.³⁹ Thus, campaigns for higher wages faces an uphill challenge. At first Taco Bell refused to even acknowledge the CIW requests. Yet the company reached out after the CIW’s staged a guerilla performance/production of mock marriage of a ten-foot-tall Queen Cheap Tomato and King Taco Bell in the street facing their corporate headquarters in Irvine, California.⁴⁰

Fast forward five years. Facing a mounting boycott and pressures from workers, students and activists around the world, Taco Bell agreed to the core demands advanced by the CIW on March 8, 2005. The CIW could thus celebrate what amounted to a complete victory against one of the largest fast food corporations in the world.⁴¹ David Solnit suggests the campaign be understood as a best practice example for a GJM facing a praxis divide. Through its use of high-

Bridging the Praxis Divide

ly theatrical guerilla theatre, organizers involved in the campaign successfully bridged the movement's broad critique with an effective organizing strategy and messaging. This also helped bring new workers into the campaign.⁴² After all, Solnit suggests: "People join campaigns that are fun and hopeful. It's always been there—in the Civil Rights Movement and art helped shut down the WTO." This creativity helped highlight the social and economic issues involved in their campaigns in countless engaging ways.⁴³ These involved combinations of art, research, well-targeted theatrics, and grassroots, non-hierarchical organizing utilized by the CIW.⁴⁴

A vital part of this consciousness raising included an engagement between arts, playfulness and creativity capable of inspiring action. The CIW explain: "By looking at the roots of the agricultural industry's problem, we were able to come up with a strategy to change the problems that we face in our community. We do this through popular education: flyers, drawings, theater, videos, weekly meetings, and visits to the camps. We draw on the innate leader that exists in every worker."⁴⁵

Community building was also a vital element of the success of the campaign. The CIW worked from their local bases to expand a series of networks that allowed coalition allies to feel part of this community. These networks helped transform an isolated struggle of one of the least visible communities in the world into one of the most connected struggles in North America. The CIW began by building an effective neighborhood campaign and expanding from this base. As with ACT UP and countless other labor struggles, a consciousness of the global dynamics of the struggle helped cultivate a solidarity which invigorated the campaign. "[W]hen we came to understand that the root of our problem was located at a much higher level we knew would have to get our voices heard all across the nation."⁴⁶ And momentum steamrolled. In many respects, the boycott built on the vitality of the pre-9/11 backlash Global Justice Movement's political agenda. In the summer of 2001 before the terror attacks the Harvard Livin Wage campaign galvanized the nation. U.S. Senators, student activists, anti racism and poverty activists found common ground and worked together to fight for a social and political agenda that challenged the idea that it is acceptable for workers to live in subpoverty conditions.⁴⁷ The CIW began their work within this same milieu.⁴⁸ In the same way that the Zapatista movement built an ethos that allowed anyone with a computer to become part of their community, the CIW invited citizens from around the world to participate and feel part of their struggle. In this way, leadership and community emerged in bountiful ways. "Our network spread and grew like wildfire. And suddenly wherever we would go and mention that we were from Immokalee, it would illicit the reaction "Oh, the tomato pickers" or "yo no quiero Taco Bell."⁴⁹ Yet, for the campaign to sustain itself through the years, as much of the vitality of the global justice struggle was overtaken by a push for permawar the CIW built on an approach that broke down the struggle into a series of Alinsky-like winnable goals.

Certainly art and culture helped this coalition stay engaged and move

Constituent Imagination

forward. The CIW explain: “The corporations who we are fighting have multi-million dollar advertising budgets, we the farm workers from a small and resource-poor community don’t have the same kind of access to the media.”⁵⁰ What the CIW had was a conscious appreciation of the intoxicating possibilities of creative play. Combined with a willingness to make use of the tools of popular education, storytelling, art, and joy, this spirit helped advance a viable winning approach to organizing strategy. “We have to be creative about communicating our story. Art, images, and theater played a very important role. We were able to show through their use what the reality of our lives is really like. We were able to catch people’s attention by making our marches and protests colorful and fun. And through the images and signs we were able to more effectively communicate our message to anyone who might have driven by or seen us on the news or in the newspapers.”⁵¹

The result of the work was a successful prefigurative yes to community and the rights of workers. The result is an inspiration and a future best-practice model for those involved within campaigns for global peace and justice.”⁵² In many respects, the CIW, Housing Works, NYCAHN, and the Community Garden Movement operate within the same ethos. They show people social change is possible through community building. Here, social change is activism in process, not a theoretical promise.

Notes

1. Cavanagh, John and Anderson, Sarah (2002) “What is the Global Justice Movement? What Does it Want? What is in It? What has it Won?” *Institute for Policy Studies*. Washington, DC.
2. For an elaboration see Tom Mertes (ed.) (2003) *The Movement of Movements: Is another world really possible?* London and New York: Verso.
3. For an example of the movement’s creative expression see Notes From Nowhere (eds.) (2003) *We Are Everywhere: The Irresistible Rise of Global Anti-Capitalism*. London and New York: Verso.
4. Naomi Klein (2002) “The Vision Thing,” in *From ACT UP to the WTO: Urban Protest and Community Building in the Era of Globalization*. Edited Ben Shepard and Ron Hayduk New York: Verso Press.
5. David Solnit (ed.) (2004) *Globalize Liberation: How to Uproot the System and Build a Better World*. San Francisco: City Lights Press: 215-20.
6. Alinsky, Saul (1971) *Rules for Radicals*. New York: Vintage Books.
7. William Sites (2003) *Remaking New York: Primitive Globalization and the Politics of Urban Community*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
8. Benjamin Shepard (2005) Review of *Remaking New York*. *Urban Affairs Review*, (September): 106-8.
9. Certainly, the protests in Cancun in the fall of 2003 were profoundly effective, far more so than the police crackdown in Miami during the FTAA meetings. In many ways, the militarization of police have shifted the ways we understand social protest.
10. See Benjamin Shepard. “Movement of Movements Toward a Democratic

Bridging the Praxis Divide

Globalization,” *New Political Science: A Journal of Politics and Culture*. December 2004 26: 3.

11. Eddie Yuen elaborated on this theme during the Spring 2002 release party for *The Battle of Seattle*. New York: Soft Skull Press.

12. For a review of these ideological conflicts, see Robert Mullaly (1993) *Structural Social Work*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart.

13. James Davis (2004) “This Is What Bureaucracy Looks Like: NGO’s and Anti-Capitalism,” in Yuen, Burton-Rose, and Katsiaficas (Eds.) *Confronting capitalism: Dispatches from a Global Movement*. New York: Soft Skull Press.

14. Martin Luther King (1964) “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” in *Why We Can’t Wait*. New American Library. New York. King suggests the point of civil disobedience is to get policy makers to the negotiating table.

15. See Addams, J. (1910/1998). *Twenty Years at Hull House*. New York: Penguin and King

16. See Benjamin Shepard. Review of *the Battle of Seattle: The New Challenge to Capitalist Globalization*. Edited by Eddie Yuen, Daniel Burton-Rose and George Katsiaficas, *Socialism and Democracy* Vol. 18, #1, Jan-June 2004: 258-65.

17. Liza Featherstone, Doug Henwood and Christian Parenti (2002/4) “Activism: Left Anti Intellectualism and Its Discontents,” in Yuen, Burton-Rose, and Katsiaficas (Eds.). *Confronting capitalism: Dispatches from a global movement*. New York: Soft Skull Press.

18. Certainly, intellectuals and academics, including Douglas Crimp, Michael Warner, Kendall Thomas, and others helped infuse a critical theory into the work of ACT UP and SexPanic!; others, including Hall (2003: 80) suggest they borrowed from ACT UP’s work to infuse its vitality into the academic field of queer theory (see *Queer Theories* by Donald E. Hall (New York: Palgrave Macmillan). Many activists suggest these theorists retreated to the academy when things got tough with organizing. Certainly, intellectuals including, Jeremy Veron, David Graeber, Steve Duncombe, Kelly Moore, and countless others are frequent players in GJM activist circles here in New York City. Some suggest the movement was legitimated when former World Bank Head, Columbia economist, and Nobel laureate Joseph Stiglitz (2002/3) seemed endorse many its claims in his work *Globalization and Its Discontents*. WW Norton: New York.

19. Stephen Duncombe. “The Poverty of Theory: Anti Intellectualism and the Value of Action.” *Radical Society*. April 2003.

20. Ibid.

21. Stanley Arronowitz (1996) elaborates on Marcuse’s principal of “repressive tolerance” in *The Death and Rebirth of American Radicalism*. Routledge: New York: 206.

22. For Sara Schulman, this period represented a fundamental Rubicon, which resulted in a split among the group. See Sara Schulman (2002) “From the Women’s Movement to ACT UP: An Interview with Sara Schulman” in *From ACT UP to the WTO*

23. Steven Epstein (2000) “Democracy, Expertise and AIDS Treatment Activism,” in *Perspectives in Medical Sociology* edited by Phil Brown. Waveland Press: Long Grove Illinois, 614.

24. Ibid.

Constituent Imagination

25. Ibid. ACT UP members would eventually testify to congress on the issue of parallel track. For a review of the 1989 Congressional hearings on parallel track in which Eigo spoke, see Congressional Hearing on Parallel Track, JULY 20. *AIDS Treatment News*. Published: July 28, 1989.
26. Rathman, Jack (1995) "Approaches to Community Intervention," in *Strategies of Community Intervention Macro Practice*. Fifth Edition. Edited by Jack Rothman, John L. Erlich and John E. Tropman. F.E. Peacock Publishers, Inc. Itasca IL.
27. Robert Fisher (1994) *Let the People Decide: Neighborhood Organizing in America*. Updated Edition. Twayne Publishers. New York.
28. Ibid., 28.
29. Ibid., 30-1/35.
30. Lesley J. Wood and Kelly Moore (2002) "Target Practice—Community Activism in a Global Era," in *From ACT UP to the WTO*.
31. Keith Cylar (2002) "Building a Healing Community from ACT UP to Housing Works: An Interview with Keith Cylar" by Benjamin Shepard. *From ACT UP to the WTO: Urban Protest and Community Building in the Era of Globalization*. New York: Verso.
32. Ibid.
33. See Piven, Frances Fox and Cloward, Richard (1977) *Poor People's Movement: Why They Succeed, How they Fail*. New York: Vintage: 264-362.
34. See Ester Kaplan (2002) "This City is Ours" in *From ACT UP to the WTO*
35. Interview with the author 22 August, 2005.
36. Interview with the author 23 August, 2005.
37. See Spitzer, Elliot (2002) Memorandum of Agreement between Attorney General and Community Gardeners. Available at <http://www.oag.state.ny.us>
38. Interview with the author, 24 August, 2005.
39. Eric Schlosser (2003) *Reefer Madness: Sex, Drugs, and Cheap Labor in the American Black Market*. New York City: Houghton Mifflin, 102-3.
40. "People Power: An Interview With David Solnit. News: A direct-action organizer talks about waging commonsense social revolution," Interviewed by Katie Renz. *Mother Jones Magazine*. (22 March, 2005).
41. Ibid.
42. David Solnit (2005) "The New Face of the Global Justice Movement: Taco Bell Boycott Victory—A Model of Strategic Organizing. *An interview with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers*," *truthout | Perspective* Wednesday 24 August 2005.
43. Interview with the author, 24 August, 2005.
44. Solnit (2005) "The New Face of the Global Justice Movement"
45. Ibid.
46. Ibid.
47. See Benjamin Shepard. Review of The Betrayal of Work: How Low Wage Jobs Fail 30-Million Americans, *WorkingUSA: A Journal of Labor and Society* Spring 2004.
48. Solnit. "The New Face of the Global Justice Movement."
49. Ibid.
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid.
52. Ibid