

Fault-lines inevitably emerge in any movement seeking to create and maintain real system change in a toxic world.

Just how inevitable such fault-lines are is emphasised by Paul and David Engler in Chapter 10 of their book *This is an Uprising*. Speaking of how swiftly the surge for democratic reform that occurred during the Egyptian Revolution of 2011 was swallowed up by more deeply rooted elements of the pre-existing status quo, they explain that lasting structural shifts in power require agents of change to embrace an 'ecology' of theories:

“Not all efforts to create change prevail over the long term. But those that do tend to see themselves as part of an ecology that is made healthier when different traditions each contribute: mass mobilizations alter the terms of political debate and create new possibilities for progress; structure-based organising helps take advantage of this potential and protects against efforts to roll back advances; and countercultural communities preserve progressive values, nurturing dissidents who go on to initiate the next waves of revolt.”

So apparent 'interpersonal' conflicts within our movement may in fact be tensions between different emphases people give to:

- rapid street-level mobilisation for NVDA,
- pressure-building on institutions,
- mass mobilisation involving all sectors of society, especially those already politicised,
- structure-based organising for ratcheting democratic reforms (for example, our 'Future Democracy Hub'),
- deeper cultural (and personal) transformation.

Movements that fail to intertwine these threads of change in a systemic way, allowing one to dominate and to suppress the others, risk losing effectiveness and falling into a cycle of constant internal battles that may at first manifest as 'clashes of personality'.

According to Jonathan Smucker, this was the fate suffered by the Occupy Wall Street movement:

“... Occupy failed to cross a critical threshold in overall organisational capacity, at a national level. It was ultimately unable – and to a remarkable extent *unwilling* – to develop the level of strategy and organisation that could have provided strategic and scalable asks not just for self-selecting individuals, but also for existing groups and institutions on a nationally coordinated level. An important part of Occupy’s problem was that, after its initial success, it tried to continue to grow primarily by way of individual self-selection. Its core attempted to be the whole movement itself, instead of seeing itself as a catalysing symbol and “special agent” in the service of a far larger unification. Rather than helping to facilitate the activation of existing groups, social blocks, and institutions (e.g., labor unions, religious congregations, identity groups, etc.) into aligned collective action – an opportunity that was available to Occupy Wall Street to a remarkable extent – it too often attempted to build everything from scratch. To join the movement, one had to come to the park. When natural allies used the phrase of “*Occupy*” and “*the 99%*” to provide action opportunities for their already constituted social bases, they were often denounced as “co-opters.” Many of us worked tirelessly to counter this tendency, but we were ultimately unable to stop some of the most self-isolating tendencies from speaking for the movement and repelling the very social forces that we needed to set into motion.”

None of this is to suggest that one view of movement-making is better than another, but to accept that tensions between those who want a fast, sharp focus, and those wanting a broader basis for action, are inherent in the immense task we hope to help with.

As Yanai writes:

“If we allow the tragic divisiveness of our familiar toxic system to infect us with the tendency to treat each other as the problem, we will all continue to be victims of the toxicity. If we can see each other as having diverse experiences and sometimes divergent views and approaches, and value that, we can remember that we are all working towards a shared and deeper commitment - our courageous engagement with the climate and ecological emergency.”

More from [A Roadmap for Radicals](#) by Jonathan Smucker

[on encapsulation]

...Full blown encapsulation is relatively rare, but the tendency of social change agents to create identities that distinguish them from others, and to become self-referential and insular, is quite common. The negative impact of encapsulation is disproportionately harmful to social movements, because it occurs especially within the core of the most active and dedicated participants – people who give all or nearly all their time and energy to the movement, and who are often ready to sacrifice even more. Social movements need these people in order to be successful. That is, movements need some people who are heart-and-soul dedicated to the cause, flexible and free from other commitments or distractions. Yet, critical as these people are, they comprise a very small percentage of any successful social movement.

To be successful, most movements (at a national scale) need tens of thousands – if not hundreds of thousands or even millions – of people who are willing to give *something* of themselves. To get plugged into movements in ways that contribute to organizational capacity, these folks generally need, first, to feel welcomed by, and then, given some direction from, the more involved core movement participants. Encapsulation and the general tendency of radical groups to self-isolate prevents this needed relationship, creating an unbreachable chasm where there should be a continuum of levels of involvement, as well as levels of political analysis – and leaving dedicated radicals vulnerable as they are cut off from a broader movement.

To prevent insularity and encapsulation in our social movements and organisations, core members have to take responsibility for ensuring that collective rituals and alternative narratives are oriented to connect with broader bases of society. There's nothing wrong with creating social movement spaces where we speak some of our own internal jargon, but, if we want to build a truly mass movement for social justice, one capable of making the kinds of changes worth writing home about, we must also orient

ourselves to speak the language of the people who are all around us. The starting place of the movement must always be society – rather than the movement core itself. When our subcultures become too self-referential and incoherent to outsiders, then our words and actions may come to function as repellents to others – even to our allies and people who agree with us on the issues. Needless to say, this limits our potential power. People who may be aligned with our vision may refrain from joining us because they are not interested in assimilating into – or being identified with a self-marginalising fringe subculture or because they see a lack of strategy. (pp 84-85)

[on his experience of radical groups' tendency to form a 'righteous few']

... Taking the streets was good - as long as you didn't have a permit! "Direct action" was better. And "fucking shit up" – an ambiguous phrase that implied property destruction, usually directed at a large corporation – was the pinnacle of resistance. People often seemed "cool" to the extent that they embraced "hard-core" tactics, and were definitely uncool, even "liberal", if they were passe enough to suggest that the group consider applying for a permit or refraining from certain tactics in certain situations. Little if any time was spent discussing strategy and concrete goals.

Such tactical hierarchies are implicit doctrine within these subcultures. They serve as subcultural rites of passage. In both examples, the tactics were endorsed because of their reflection of the group's values in their service to the life of the group, rather than for their strategic utility.... Engaging in higher risk actions is exalted partly because the dramatic expression captured in these actions punctuates the collective narrative of the group, and partly for the sacrifice, heroism, and "hard-core-ism" involved.... However, to our detriment, we often fail to ask essential strategic questions: Who will see that action? What will the action communicate? To whom? And for what purpose?...

...[Often] the public's perceived meaning of the action differs severely from the actors' intended or self-understood meaning.

Such actions feed the actors. To be clear, feeding the actors is a necessary component of political action. ... finding a beloved community in a political group can be a critical source of motivation. However, we have a responsibility to push ourselves to act strategically, especially when we are considering substantial risk and sacrifice. Our time and energy – as well as our freedom and our very lives – are important, and we have a responsibility to calculate our risks (including how the risks we take might impact others, especially our political allies).

Sacrifice can serve as both a beautiful reinforcement of our collective values and a clear asset in our group's abilities to function with capacity. It is good to appreciate that which each of us is willing to give of ourselves. By maintaining a consciousness of the appropriate role of sacrifice in our groups, we can appreciate it while not letting it lead us to the risk-for-the-sake-of-risk mentality, which is characteristic of a martyr mindset. We have to choose the risks we take and the sacrifices we make based on strategic factors; not because the act of taking risks asserts our place in the group and reinforces our sense of righteous identity. (p 92-93)

In the story of the righteous few, success itself becomes suspect. If, for example, a political group or message is embraced by a significant enough proportion of society, it must be because it is not truly revolutionary or because it has been watered down. This mindset can lead us to publicly dismiss our allies when they succeed – to be oriented to look for and exaggerate their flaws, and to posture as more radical than them. It can seriously mess with radicals' heads when some of our ideas start to become popular! We are so accustomed to being the most radical kid on the block, and suddenly people whom we have never met are coming out of the woodwork, marching on the streets with us, and spouting some of the lines that we've been saying for years. It can lead to something of an identity crisis.

Here we see the importance of checking our narratives for faulty components. When we allow the story of the righteous few to have a place in our narrative about social change, we will always be hindered by the urge to separate ourselves from society and to retreat from success. To organise effectively, this mentality has to turn 180 degrees. We have

to orient ourselves to connect with others, to notice commonalities, and to embrace being embraced by society. For many radicals, this may require a big shift in the way we see ourselves and our society. (pp 94 and 95)

[Political] organising involves incentivising, facilitating and structuring the participation of many people – forming many fragments into a coherent political force that is powerful enough to then incentivize certain actions by the state and other powerful actors. An *ethic of responsibility* attempts to understand people as they are, and to engage them in a way that adjusts for the ways they are constrained, their limitations, their idiosyncrasies. An *ethic of ultimate ends*, on the other hand, requires no organising in the social sphere whatsoever – it only requires righteous stands, by whoever steps forward to take them....

Righteous action at least keeps alive the idea of courageously standing up for justice in the face of overwhelming odds, and surely, there are times when such hopeless stands are the only option available to conscientious people. But let us not fetishize such moments of despair. Better options are nearly always available. (pp 141-142)

[on encapsulation again]

There is a tendency among people who are very active in social movements to grow too comfortable with ourselves; to look at ourselves and think that *this is it*, that *we are the movement*, that *we know all the players*. When we think we know all the players, as well as how to talk to them (i.e., to ourselves), then we can become lax in our attempts to reach a broader public or a target constituency. Unconsciously, we compose our flyers, calls to action, tweets, and Facebook posts with people like us in mind – folks who are not only already on board with our values and goals, but who are also enculturated to the idiosyncrasies of our movement spaces and impervious to our jargon. This tendency limits our efforts to recruit, activate, or forge alliances with additional players. Again, if we think about a movement only in terms of its kinetic energy – i.e., that which is

already in motion – we will look around at the actors currently on the stage and think that it is up to us alone to somehow accomplish large scale political goals... This would require magic. We cannot realise a bold political vision with only our current numbers mobilised. For this we must build a larger social force. Again, we have to activate greater potential energy.

A central task of a challenger movement's leadership core is to take responsibility for building up the movement capacity by activating and facilitating the participation of larger numbers of people. A core has to provide opportunities for everyday people to take meaningful action that is aligned with the aims and strategies of the larger movement. We have to set others up to play helpful ongoing roles that they can sustain. We have to accommodate multiple levels of participation. And we must activate existing social networks and institutions, rather than only building the movement one individual recruit at a time. This facilitative role requires a leadership core to conceptualise itself as such and to understand the nature of its relationship to a broader movement or political alignment. (pp 165-166)