



The State of the U.S. Left and What We Can Do About It



By [Michael Albert](#) and [Gregory Wilpert](#)

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Gregory Wilpert: What is the situation of the US left progressive forces, that is, left of the Democratic Party?

Michael Albert: I think the first honest answer is that we have no idea, that is to say, there's never been an accounting that I know of that is particularly revealing of the left, much less of what people are doing or are inclined to do. The problem is that my answer or anybody's answer is going to be a guess. My guess would be that there are a lot of people in the United States who are left of the Democratic Party, they might think the party is the lesser of two evils, but they are way left of any Democratic candidate. I think there are a huge number of people like that but they are completely separated from one another. They don't identify with any activism, they just comment on the day's events at the dinner table and are furious but are not part of an organized left.

Suppose we ask what about people who have a critique of the electoral political system and are seriously left. Now the numbers go down, but I think they are still in the hundreds of thousands of people in the United States. But the numbers of those who then also have any significant ties to one another or do anything beyond perhaps reading and talking about politics around the dinner table is much, much, lower.

So now we get down to a much smaller group, perhaps a few tens of thousands. These are people who are involved in local activities and organizations of many sorts. Peace might be the biggest but also around economic issues, race issues, gender issues. These folks often have ties to other people around the same priority but very few ties to people outside of their priority.

Next, if you're asking about the ideological left, or people who identify around all of these issues and who have at least some working ties to people who identify with all of these issues, then the numbers go dramatically down. Yet that's the part on which any kind of comprehensive change depends. No matter how radical or revolutionary or focused around a single issue many folks may be, they are still focused around that one issue and there is no long-term future transition to a better society imbedded in that.

Now, we ought to ask, I think, what are the obstacles to having a whole lot of people who are a whole lot more committed and a whole lot more informed about the gamut of issues and who are intent upon new kind of social structure or society. I suspect this is mostly asking how do we get people into the first biggest group and from the biggest group into the smaller group and so on... I think the obstacles are many but unlike many other folks, I think the least important is the power of the state, fear of the police, things like that, which many people point to first. I suspect those things are real but relatively small in terms of preventing people from being part of the left. I think much more important are the attributes of the left. That is, the tendency of people who are in the Democratic Party and don't move beyond its goals, so that they are not even in that first biggest group, and then all the way down... the tendency to not to go another step is probably very substantially affected by the feeling that taking another step is taking a step into insanity. It's taking a step into aggravation, frustration, and pain, whether consciously or not. People are afraid of the next step toward greater commitment if they feel taking it gains little and costs a lot in terms of personal well-being and mindset and their ability to go about their daily business. So that's one obstacle. The only solution to that obstacle is to have movements and organizations with features that make people's lives better instead of worse when they take that extra step.

The next obstacle, which is related to the previous one, is a feeling of hopelessness and despair about going any further. So if around the dinner table someone asks you what you think of the attack on Libya or the events in Wisconsin, you have an opinion. But as far as acting on that opinion in

any way, you feel it's a waste of time because nothing will be gained and it will take time and it may involve aggravation. That's in part because there's very little understanding of how you win change and of how possible it is to win change and, at the grandest level, of what it would be like to win change, not just on a single issue but toward attaining a whole new social system. There's little vision or strategy, people don't know it, people don't feel like what they are contributing to activism will somehow contribute to the desired outcome. So I think those are some the biggest problems.

Partly fear, partly time-constraints and structural things that have to do with the character of the United States. Some of these things we could help with, we could have movements that are more protective of their member and movements that as one of their demands free up people's time. The second part is people's expectation of alienation and frustration if they participate in another step to the left, the aggravation, etc., with no real gain. That can only be corrected by altering the nature of our movements. Finally there is the more general despair and hopelessness that there is no alternative and therefore even well conceived activism is a waste of time because "I don't want to be part of that, only crazy people do that."

GW: So it sounds like a vicious circle, if on the one hand you're saying people are resistant to getting more involved because of despair and because of their fears, and on the other hand, in order to become involved, some sort of organization is necessary, but then again we cannot have an organization without the people wanting one and contributing to it - so this is a vicious cycle, is that correct?

MA: Yes. And we have to find a way to break the circle. But this shouldn't surprise us. When we look at why the left isn't larger and more effective, after all, we should expect to see a serious and difficult problem because if we don't see that, then why hasn't the left at all those levels we talked about earlier, grown dramatically in the last four decades? There have to be serious obstacles - we would have overcome trivial ones a long time ago. If you look and you don't see serious obstacles, you are not yet seeing well. So I agree with you, yes it's a vicious circle. And yes, that's the problem to overcome.

One thing to wonder is why does the right seem to do so much better?

The tea party is appealing to a considerable degree – not only, since they also appeal to racism and fear-mongering and so on - but to a considerable extent they also say look, your lives are a mess, there is pain and suffering

and there are rich powerful people who are benefitting from this and we need to get together and take back our country. It's asking people to "Step outside of the norms," which we ask, too. So why do they do better?

Well, they do better partly because they have a lot of money, because they have a lot of resources, because when you align with them you do not look like you are from Neptune to everyone else – by joining them you only look odd to us. We think it's weird, but for the mainstream joining them you seem just angrier at something that everybody's angry at, because you're not taking the left stance, which is ridiculed. The nice thing about a vicious cycle, however, is that it can work both ways. Once you get going it can have the opposite effect. So once the tea party gets going, now there's some hope, some momentum, and so it grows.

The same thing with Egypt. They went from relatively little, to huge, very quickly. It's because they're overcoming a lack of hope. It isn't as if everybody all of a sudden became fantastically smart or fantastically more knowledgeable. They all knew what they thought of Mubarak ten weeks earlier, too. That isn't what happens. What happens is that hope rises, and the feeling of efficacy rises. People start to feel, if I go out on the streets of Cairo something may happen, we may win.

In contrast people here feel, if I go out on the streets in Washington, then I lose a day I may get hit, I may look like an idiot to my friends. I become more alienated. So why should I do that? It is easier for me to ridicule the people who do it than it is for me to endure the ridicule. So for a while a vicious circle of hopelessness is very hard to overcome.

But consider the Vietnam War era. Back then it was not a question of a lack of vision that bred hopelessness, a lack of generalized hope, it was that to be against the war was so discordant, was so different from the mainstream, so contrary to common sense belief in America, that that alone made you a pariah. So in the beginning there was a Catch-22, since you didn't have a movement, people had to go out and do the hard work of talking to an anti-war audience that was six people, two of whom were hecklers. That was the early days. But some years later, not too many years later, it became a movement that was sweeping the country. What happened was the assumptions, the beliefs were countered and overcome. That was a different task than we face now, because it is different beliefs at work.

GW: That actually gets me to my next question, which asks you to take a historical look back. How would you say has U.S. activism evolved in the last 50 years? If there was a surge of activism in the late 60's and early 70's, why did it collapse since then?

MA: First of all, why did it get going? People are going to say different things. There were certainly many factors, but the one I want to point to is that people got angry. Why did they get angry? They got angry because they discovered that everything was a lie. If you go back and look at the songs and the music, or you interview people who really were there, and are objective about it - that's what happened. People discovered they'd been tricked, hoodwinked. They discovered that it was all a lie, that it was all hypocrisy.

There were revelations about racism, about the war, about poverty, about sexism. In every case people were finding that some injustice that they sort of knew was there, was much worse than thought. So, for example, you might know that you were being abused by your husband, but you didn't know the number of people who were in that same position, and you didn't know that it was so pervasive, that that it wasn't just a bad guy you got stuck with, but something bigger, more systemic. You knew that there was racism, of course, but you didn't quite get the scale of it, and you didn't realize the extent to which it was, again, systemic. The war was another massive revelation that touched the whole society. You thought that the United States was a positive international actor, caring, freedom loving, but then you found out that the United States was a horrible international actor, that the United States was doing this horrendous stuff and you got pissed and that's when the youth movement just exploded in anger. Couple it with a rejection of the lifestyle of the times - and it added up to what is called the Sixties.

Now, the difference between then and now is that it's absolutely impossible to replicate that any longer. The reason it's impossible to do it in the same way is because nothing surprises anyone anymore. We were surprised, indeed shocked, by the revelations of injustice, back then. Now, in contrast, no matter what you reveal, the response is, "OK, uh huh, yeah, sure they do that, I get it." Everybody now knows, at some level, what we had to work incredibly hard in '67, '68, '69, '70, to get people to even notice. And when they realized, "Oh my God, this is horrible," they went berserk. But now, there is no revelation, they know, already.

Nowadays, that is, everybody knows the situation is horrible, at some deep level. You can see it all over popular culture. You can hear it at every dinner table. So movement can't happen the same way. There is nothing dramatic to reveal. What happened in the Sixties was that it got big, got angry, people thought they were going to change the world but it didn't turn out to be that easy. So after a while people started to get worn out, frustrated, started to have doubts about what they were doing, at least about changing society. In fact, much was changed. The war ended, tremendous gains were made in civil rights, around gender, even around poverty... Huge advances, but at the same time, very little structural lasting movement apparatus emerged. Getting back up to that big scale of mobilization and organization proved to be very difficult. The number of people who were involved in the no-nukes movement, about ten years later, or in Nicaragua or El Salvador, in the labor movement, in gender and race movements, these numbers were very high, but the difference was that people didn't have the anger, the spirit, or the inclination to want it all and to want it now, that characterized the Sixties. So it became movements that were trying to win important things, but at the same time as the people in those movements were trying to live their life normally. In the Sixties one was trying to win important things quickly, yes, but at the same time presuming that life was not going to go along in the way it was before. It was going to be fundamentally altered.

To get back to that transformative mentality, which leads to real solidarity and militancy, requires, nowadays, since we are now feeling that everything is hypocritical, that people come to know that everything is not just bad but grotesquely criminal and especially unnecessary because there is an alternative. As long as people think that there is no alternative, why should they get angry? You don't get angry at cancer or at aging – maybe a little bit, but you don't form a social movement about those things. When you don't think there is any alternative to the world as we know it, except perhaps in some small area where you can make some modest gain, mostly at the expense of someone else in some other area, then you don't work incredibly hard to create a type of movement seeking to change the whole society, because you think there is no such thing as changing the whole society. So, it's that absence of vision and associated hope that is a very big part of the difficulty, I think.

But then there are also some important structural things. For example, in the Sixties the campuses blew up and to a considerable extent it was initially at elite campuses. If you look at campus activism more recently,

however, the elite campuses were largely quiet. It was working class colleges that were most involved. Why? Well, the system realized that it was a big mistake to give people a whole lot of resources and confidence at elite schools and not to be very careful to be sure that they would be compliant. So a lot was done in terms of raising fees for elite schools and making people indebted, and they did a pretty good job at that, when you see the relative quiescence at elite campuses, it was sought and attained. The downside is that in places where people have more access, more freedom to move, they don't move, so it's harder to get a youth movement going. However, the upside is, once it gets going it will be led by poorer students, by working class students, and so therefore it will be more substantial and more important to the future of the country.

Basically, the difference between now and the Sixties is that back then we could form a militant revolutionary movement that saw itself as being very aggressive, that saw itself as planning a new society, that became the focal point of the lives of its participants, but it really wasn't any of those things, in the end, because it had no lasting structures, it had no coherent ideology or vision for doing those things. Now, we have a situation where we can't even have a really big and militant and angry movement unless it really is a movement that wants to change the whole society and really believes in doing that. If that's true, then it means that the task for the U.S. left now is not to keep crying out about the injustice of particular things – not that we shouldn't do that somewhat – but the reason why that isn't as high a priority as before is because everybody knows the hundreds of specific reasons that things are bad. Speaking and writing about that is trying to convince people of something they already know. at least broadly. Even the right knows! It's just that people think the suffering is inevitable; it's a necessary evil, in their view.

The real task, instead, is to show that there is a different way of operating, and that here are short-term gains we can win now and here is a long-term changed circumstance that illuminates our problems and that is the end point of these endeavors and is worth our time. If we can convey that, vision and strategy, then we are conveying information that can sustain anger, commitment, and passion all in a rich diverse and broad movement that could make people's lives better and that could win gains and move on to change society. But without being able to convincingly and inspiationally communicate vision and strategy - if we only tell people this hurts, that hurts, this is unjust, that is unjust, then I think we won't get far.

GW: What does this mean in terms of concrete organizing? What would be the role of electoral politics, for example? What kind of organizing are you talking about?

MA: Whether one is moved by a revolutionary vision of a new society and a lifelong commitment to attain it, or just by being upset about a particular situation, one still organizes around wars, poverty, ecological calamities, continuing sexism and racism. So the focuses remain. The difference is in what you do.

One thing that is different when you organize around these things strategically in light of a long term vision is that you talk about them and make demands about them in ways that challenge the whole system, in ways that move forward people's commitments and thinking toward a broad attachment. You connect these different short-term aims. You have movements around each contribute to movements around the others. You fight for the short-run gains in ways that would be different than if you fought for them when all you have your eye on is the particular thing you are fighting about. The difference is how you talk about your short term aim, the kinds of ideas that emerge in the discussion and that lead to further demands and to keeping fighting instead of going home. That's how you build an organization that isn't oriented only to achieving one thing and then dissipating, but that is dedicated to bringing about a new society and that in winning something simply becomes stronger and more adept and more able to win more, rather than going home. That is all a little vague and would take a lot of time to give specific examples. It is a different mindset and a different approach.

Some people think that when you're fighting for X you should only talk about X, you should never talk about Y or Z. Their logic is, if you only care about getting X you should talk only about that one issue so you don't upset anybody. But what if you care about sustaining X once you get it, and what if you care about getting Y, W, and Z as well? Then the logic begins to falter and what you need to do is fight for X in a way that talks about X leading beyond that one issue. So you talk about higher wages, say, as the one issue, but while you are fighting for higher wages you talk about it in a way that that leads to an understanding of what a truly just income would be and that would lead to the next demands, to make income more just.

The second thing you do is you tie these things together and develop real solidarity. Let's say we had a national movement around a shorter workweek with no change in income for those at the low end. In other

words, those with low incomes now work less but get the same income as before, despite working many fewer hours. And at the high end people work less too, but they get proportionately less income. So it's a redistribution of income from the top. If we are fighting for this campaign, which I think would be a fantastic campaign to fight for, not only because it redistributes income and prevents unemployment, but because it creates a situation in which it is easier to win more gains because people have more time – itself also a very, very important gain. But then I think you fight for it in a way that says what is actually really just is that people should be remunerated for how long they work, for how hard they work, and for the onerousness of their work. Not only should the poor be getting an increase, but they should be getting more than the people who have very cushy jobs. Do you still have strikes? Sure. Do you still have rallies? Sure. You do all those things, however, with a criterion that in doing them you should attract more people, not less. With a criterion that you should make life in the movement better not worse for those who are in it. And also with a criterion that you should raise social costs to win the demands you are trying to win.

So then you ask, what is the role of electoral politics? Honestly, I have no idea. I don't think anybody does. The idea that there is a principled reason why it has no place on the left makes no sense to me. The idea that there is a principled reason why it should have a primary place also makes no sense to me. The question is whether electoral politics can be used now or in the future as part of a broad array of approaches that the left employs to win more and more gains, to win more and more power, to win more and more people, while becoming ever more capable of still more victories.

Some might think that we can use electoral politics in a way that will raise consciousness, that will give us access to resources and power strengthening our prospects, and that will lead to great changes in the long-run. Others might think, no, it's a dead end because the dynamics of electoral politics and the implications of seeking to win elections for our agendas and thinking are to diminish our abilities, to diminish our capacity to win changes, to distort our consciousness, to weaken our prospects.

The really big question isn't which view do you believe, but what do you do if two such views exist? I think the answer is, it doesn't make any sense to fight this out. The people who think electoral politics is a bad idea should be ecstatic if someone shows it to instead be a good idea. They should not think it's a bad idea and want to be right that it is a bad idea. They should think it's a bad idea want to be wrong because every good idea for change is beneficial for their agenda.

The people who think it's a good idea should hope that they are right but not feel that they cannot acknowledge being wrong. If they are wrong, they should feel grateful for finding it out, so that they can put their efforts to better means.

The minute we have these mindsets, actually, I think it is a single mindset that places success over ego, where the goal is to win and not to be right about a particular choice, then the idea of exploring more than one choice makes sense. Those who think it is important to use some approach should try it, even as others doubt it will help or even fear it will hurt. We can respect each other. The same thing goes for almost all tactical choices, but not all. Some tactical choices are so detrimental, so harmful, that a political organization would have to say not only that it is a bad idea, but that we cannot be involved in that and that no one involved in our organization should be involved in that. But that's not true for most decisions. I don't think these questions have to be resolved in advance for everyone, they just need to be resolved for some. We do not have to have unanimity, which is impossible and is not a good idea in any case because diversity is vastly better.

Suppose it was the case that we had a big movement in the United States. Suppose we have a 20,000 person revolutionary organization mobilizing hundreds of thousands of people. We aren't about to win tomorrow, but we are getting bigger. Suppose in the organization 80% think electoral politics is stupid and a distraction. Should they annihilate the 20% and have nobody do it? No, that's not the right answer. The 20% will not be good at something else if they really believe in electoral politics. You shouldn't have to duke it out. You discuss and debate, of course. But we are trying to create a new and better society and unless we are Stalinists, we don't think that there should be one approach to every issue in a whole society. So we shouldn't have one approach to every issue inside the movement either.

GW: You talked about the objectives of such an organization, but I would like to get a little bit more specific. For example, you said such an organization would have to be oriented around multiple issues embody a vision for new society. However, I'm wondering if there's any issue that stands out that would serve as a vehicle for elaborating that kind of vision. Is there any issue that is particularly pressing right now?

MA: In a particular moment in time one thing or another will be pressing. Suppose the nuclear power plant outside of New York City melts down tomorrow. That would be pressing and would be on everyone's mind in the

country. Everybody would be paying attention to it. So any rational movement would pay very very close attention to it. But that's different than saying the movement should focus around one issue. Also, we don't know what that's going to be.

GW: But what do you think is a pressing issue right now?

MA: I don't think that there is one. There is what is happening in Wisconsin. It wasn't war, and it wasn't climate, it was some economic and political changes that would affect collective bargaining and it was powerful enough to yield one of the most important activist upsurges that we have seen in a long time. So someone could say, well, that is the issue. But others could say the war is the issue. After all, people are dying and we are blowing people up and certainly that motivates lots of people. Or climate change is the issue; after all, the future is at stake.

It is a dumb debate, I think. My feeling is, suppose you want to win on budgets, or on war, or on climate change, what does it mean? It means you want to win some gains now, and eventually you want to win a society that doesn't generate pursuit of profits, or war making, or a use of energy and an allocation of goods and resources that destroy the environment.

Suppose you want to organize around the economy and to change income distribution, or around foreign policy and to end war, or around nuclear power and to win green policies. In any of these things what you are trying to do is big. You are trying to win something major that elites in power care a lot about. So you have to ask, why would they give in? On any issue that galvanizes lots of people over a longer period of time, you're going to be fighting about something that matters to elites, such as in the case of these issues. Otherwise they would give in right away. So why would they give in on something they don't want to give in on?

The answer is because the movement raises costs and creates a specter or threat, due to which they say to themselves, "If we don't give in, then this threat is going to grow and it's going to be more damaging to us than giving in is." That's the calculus that they use. If they give in to a budget movement, or antiwar movement, or global warming movement, it's because they feel that to not give in is going to hurt them more. And what hurts them enough to be more is a threat that the whole system will change.

When you get to the level of wars and the treatment of the whole ecology and income distribution, then elites have to feel that to persist with what

we're seeking to end risks too much. What will convey that message to them?

If we turn out 100,000 people against a war in Washington, it's a cost but it's a relatively small cost because all they have to have to clean up the park. Even if we do it month after month, so? The demonstrations are only a real cost if there is the threat that the movement will get bigger and bigger. It is only threatening if it seems likely to change the mindset of the population and even more, if it threatens to address not just the war, but all of foreign-policy and beyond foreign-policy, domestic policy. If it threatens any of these things, in a growing way, it is raising the costs. But if it's just going to stand pat after 100,000 people or even 250,000 people, then it's no cost at all. The minute that it is not growing, the movement is no longer a cost, no longer a threat, because elites can just wait it out. The movement threat resides in growing numbers. The movement threat resides in growing relevance. And the movement threat resides in the growing diversity of demands.

Do the demands move from a particular focus toward changing the system? If they do, that's scary for elites. Same with the movement growing. In the Sixties the reason the antiwar movement was such a big threat was that a) it was growing and b) it included a spectrum from: against the war gently, to against the war moderately, to against the war militantly, to against foreign policy, to against the whole damn system. What you saw at each level was a growth of the broader level leading to growth of the more committed level as well. There was a continuing process, which in time said to the government, "You want to defend the war in Vietnam in order to enlarge your power and wealth and to maintain the system the way it is. What happens when the day comes when you realize the pursuit of this war, while it is in your interest in the sense of holding back change in Indochina, is not in your interest in the sense that it is polarizing and organizing the U.S. population in such a way that pretty soon they will be challenging your wealth and power across the board."

If you go back and look at the point at which elites started changing sides on the war, such as senators and business leaders, you see that they said not that it's immoral and our people are dying. No. They said, "Our streets are in turmoil and we are losing the next generation, society's fabric is being torn asunder." In other words, they were saying, "I got into this war in order to increase my wealth and power, but now it seems that if we continue to pursue the war it will risk my wealth and power even more than giving in to the demands to end it, so now I'm against the war."

So to come back to your point, suppose there is that meltdown or the war on Libya expands and gets much, much, bigger, or states across the country are doing what the governor of Wisconsin did, and it becomes a focal point. Or even there is a big ecological calamity. What I am saying is to win any one of them, it is incredibly advantageous that all of them are being sought. For example, that's why Seattle worried elites a lot. Honestly, it wasn't all that big. But the threat was that it was not just about globalization. It carried the threat of the labor movement, the green movement, the antiwar movement, the women's movement, everyone working together. So many in the elite sectors felt, "Our policies are creating the mess that we are trying to avoid." That was the threat. So sure, if there is a focus that attracts everybody's attention, okay, by all means, addressed sensibly, that can help us, but to get caught up in one focus, to make the mistake of thinking that everything should be geared to that one focus and we should set aside everything else, misses the point of how you win even short-term, much less long-term gains.

This is the first of a series of interviews on the state of the U.S. left.