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Culture and Community Power Building By Alexis Frasz

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CULTURE AND COMMUNITY POWER BUILDING

To achieve systemic change, philanthropy must invest in culture that builds community power.

BY ALEXIS FRASZ

Over the past decade, philanthropic leaders and others working for progressive social change have increasingly focused on culture. This growing interest in culture comes from a dual understanding that achieving systemic, lasting change requires a shift on a cultural level—our worldviews, lifestyles, norms, social relations, and values—and that cultural strategies and methods can help catalyze and accelerate change.

Philanthropists have invested in certain parts of the cultural strategy landscape—a growing field of practice that engages culture and cultural practitioners in efforts for social change—but much less so in others. Investment in cultural work that supports community power building is particularly lacking. While some grassroots organizations and organizers do integrate culture into their efforts, the potential to build power in under-resourced and marginalized communities by harnessing culture is not well understood or supported by funders.

This is a missed opportunity for two reasons. First, robust people-powered movements have proven highly effective at achieving transformational social, political, and economic change. Second, grassroots cultural strategies can catalyze and enhance community power in significant ways.

This article describes some of the essential features and functions of culture as it relates to community power building. My intention is to help funders (and practitioners) who are engaged in community power-building work see how cultural strategies might support and amplify their efforts. In addition, I hope to encourage funders who support cultural strategy to see community power building as a critical lever for change.

WHAT IS CULTURE?

Culture can be defined as the various ways that people understand, embody, and express their worldviews, identities, and values. In a power-building context, two aspects of culture are especially important.

FIRST, culture includes, but is more than, narrative. Narrative strategy is an important tactic, but not everything meaningful or real—let alone visionary, subversive, or not yet manifest—can be expressed in narrative form. Moreover, in certain organizing contexts, narrative methods may not be the most appropriate, such as when stories trigger trauma, amplify power dynamics, or highlight divisions, or when a language barrier exists. For example, the Asian Pacific Environmental Network uses music, food, and imagery to foster belonging and solidarity among

its multilingual constituents. A holistic and inclusive cultural strategy must include narrative as well as embodied and relational practices such as dance and movement, music, imagery, craft, ritual, and more.

SECOND, participatory culture—the process of people making and doing themselves—is critical for power building. Creating culture with others builds social bonds, shared identity, a sense of agency, an attachment to place, and other critical capacities that serve as a foundation for community power. For people who have been structurally disempowered, this can be transformative. El Puente, an environmental justice organization in East Williamsburg, Brooklyn, uses community art-making activities as “an antidote to disempowerment.” According to cofounder Frances Lucerna, “The arts are transformative because they help people see themselves and tap into their own potential for creation. The arts help people realize ‘I can.’” Transforming people from “consumers of democracy to agents within it” is a primary goal of power-building work. Participating in shared cultural activities builds relationships and a sense of agency that can be carried into other settings.

BUILDING A “WE”

Building community power is long-term work that requires stable, resilient, and accountable organizations to nurture and channel people’s energy and will toward strategic change. Organizations that most effectively build and channel power do three things well:

Build a “we” by fostering authentic relationships and a sense of collective identity among community members, across lines of difference.

Develop visionary and distributed leadership by helping people cultivate a shared understanding of the root causes of their conditions and a vision for their desired future.

Build new worlds by helping make alternatives tangible and visible. Grassroots cultural practice can support efforts in all three areas.

From the Civil Rights Movement to the pro-life movement, effective movements galvanize people around a common purpose and a sense of collective identity, or a shared sense of “we.” Power-building organizations use relational organizing to foster and sustain deep, mutually accountable connections with and among community members so that people stick together when challenges arise, or in moments when strategies must evolve. The “social infrastructure” built through organizing not only enables communities to fight for future change but also directly and immediately improves people’s health and well-being.

Participatory cultural activities create contexts for forging deep interpersonal connections and a sense of belonging to place and to a larger “we.” This “social cohesion” includes “bonding” between people who share a common identity and “bridging” between people across areas of perceived difference. Both bonding and bridging are essential for grassroots organizing, which requires leadership from community members who have experienced injustices working in solidarity with a larger constituency that is willing to fight for change. Cross-class and multiracial organizing yields a solidarity dividend that is essential to securing changes that both benefit marginalized groups and improve society for all.

Many organizers use cultural practices to help build relationships and group identity. UPROSE, an environmental justice group in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, uses community-based arts “because it helps us see and remember and understand who we are,” according to executive director Elizabeth Yeampierre. For structurally oppressed groups, reaffirming cultural identity can help members operate from a place of power and

strength and sustain long-term struggles. For example, while protesting the Dakota Access Pipeline, the Sacred Stone Camp at the Standing Rock Reservation taught traditional cultural practices such as horse racing, sacred rituals, and food preparation to fortify Native culture and pride. This was critical to sustaining cohesion and will in a challenging context.

Sharing cultural experiences with others who have different backgrounds and perspectives can help heterogeneous groups build trust, find common ground, and practice collaboration in low-stakes contexts. Even supposedly apolitical activities such as singing in a choir or sharing poetry can build a foundation of trust and shared experience that makes future collective action possible.

VISIONARY AND DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP

The erosion of democracy and concentration of power in the United States has created a reinforcing feedback loop whereby people feel powerless, as though the status quo is inevitable and there is nothing that they can do to effect change. A critical part of power building is helping people develop a shared analysis of *why* things are the way they are and a shared vision of a better world. Many organizers use critical storytelling methodologies to help people question inherited views about how the world works, who and what has value, and who gets to make decisions in society. Through a process of “re-storying,” people come to understand the systemic and unjust causes of their personal struggles and see themselves as agents of change. The Grassroots Power Project maintains that developing a new story must be “a democratic process—it is not something that is imposed on others, it is something people struggle with, develop, and test out together.”

Organizers like Movement Generation, The Point, and PUSH Buffalo integrate arts and culture in their work to help unlock people’s imaginative capacities to resist what they do not want and envision a better future from a perspective of abundance, hope, and joy. Through creative practices, especially those rooted in deeply held cultural values, community members are able to experience their full humanity and view themselves as creators and world builders. Even when the creative act seems purely artistic, the process of making something fuels a sense of agency that can be translated into other realms. For groups whose cultural values and practices have been erased, suppressed, or co-opted, reclaiming expressive capacity can be a political act of self-determination.

For Kentuckians for the Commonwealth, cultural strategies pursued in partnership with artists have proved critical to organizing in coal country. The region’s complex relationship with the coal industry—a source of harm, but also livelihood and identity—has divided many communities. Over the course of several years, artists Carrie Brunk and Bob Martin hosted community gatherings where people shared meals featuring locally grown foods and made music together, celebrating aspects of Appalachian culture that sparked pride and united people across ideological divides. Through story circles, community

members processed their past and shared hopes for the future, eventually turning their stories into a play, which they performed together. Brunk says that this creative process “opened up an explicit and aspirational conversation within our community about our relationship to the land, about the preciousness of our good water, about our food and farms as a source of abundance, about the kind of community we live in, and the future we are building.”

These cultural strategies proved their relevance when prospectors began approaching community residents to buy their land for fracking exploration. Thanks to the relationships and networks of trust that had developed, people quickly mobilized to share information and unite in resistance. Martin notes that cultural organizing work has made the community “more resilient and flexible ... more able to respond creatively to fracking, climate change, homophobia, racism, or whatever else might come our way.”

WORLD-BUILDING

The goal of building power is to enable people to change the world in ways that improve their lives. This means having the capacity to “fight the bad,” as well as the vision and agency to “build the new.” World-building creates opportunities for people to practice better ways of living, working, and meeting their spiritual, social, and material needs *today*. These experiments—whether mutual aid groups, cooperative businesses, democratically run investment funds, land trusts, alternative currencies, publicly owned utilities, open technology platforms, restorative justice communities, or sites of cultural production—build community, transform people’s perceptions and capacities, and create possibilities for larger-scale changes down the line. Even when such experiments are small or hyperlocal, they offer the “threat of a good example” by demonstrating that another world is indeed possible.

The Mississippi Center for Cultural Production, Cooperation Jackson, Utah Diné Bikéyah, the East Bay Permanent Real Estate Cooperative, the Boston Ujima Project, the Philly Peace Park, Thunder Valley Community Development Corporation, and Ekvu-Yefolecv are just some examples of world-building initiatives that are culturally rooted or incorporate cultural dimensions. The Boston Ujima Project has created a democratically governed fund to invest in local, socially beneficial businesses, led by and for working-class and frontline communities of color in Boston. Executive director Nia Evans says that participating in the fund has changed community norms: “Real power and democracy are becoming more and more normal as we continue to practice better ways of being.” Ujima uses arts and culture to create meaningful, joyful experiences so that community members feel a sense of belonging and want to participate in the work, which can sometimes feel “dry and hard.”

But arts and culture are not simply the honey that attracts people to participate in something serious. When people have a chance to envision the world they want, culture and creative expression typically feature prominently in it. Creating a world where people are not only free from suffering, but also able to express and develop their full human potential is one of the main purposes of organizing work. The East Bay Permanent Real Estate Cooperative is working to develop community-run cultural spaces for Black arts and culture in West Oakland as well as permanently affordable housing. Thunder Valley CDC is designing its local economy and built environment in ways that embody and sustain traditional Lakota cultural values.

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The cultural, economic, and political dimensions of these world-building efforts are interconnected. People engage in collective decision-making (political) about how to steward and allocate resources and labor (economic) in ways that align with their values and worldviews (cultural). With this in mind, I offer a definition of cultural power as *the capacity of a group to shape its physical environment and socio-economic systems in ways that align with and support its worldview, values, and preferred way of life.*

PHILANTHROPIC SUPPORT

Most progressive philanthropic funding for cultural (and narrative) strategy to date has supported mass media or pop culture strategies led by expert practitioners (professional storytellers, impact producers, cultural strategists, communications consultants). These approaches are often appealing for issue-based and electoral campaigns because they can reach large audiences with strategically coordinated messages. However, philanthropy has invested very little in cultural strategies for

building power at the community level, which is critical for winning transformative and lasting social change.

There are many possible reasons for this dearth of investment. Organizing is decades or generational work, which does not align with the one- to three-year grant cycles at most foundations. Power building may feel “too political” for funders who prefer to see themselves as ideologically neutral (philanthropy currently invests only about 3 percent of its funds per year in grassroots organizing). Grassroots power-building organizations are typically multi-issue and shift to accommodate community needs in real time, which may not fit the issue silos or logic models at many foundations. Community power-building work is often hyperlocal, which can appeal to place-based funders but not others working at the national level. Perhaps most significantly, grassroots power building aims to disrupt and counter concentrated elite power, whether political or economic, which may threaten some of philanthropy’s embedded interests.

There are also barriers to supporting grassroots cultural work. Community-based cultural work is slower, less scalable, and less flashy, and its outcomes are harder to quantify. It often involves creative work made by “regular people” that may not meet professional artistic standards. Moreover, community-based cultural work is not always legible to outsiders, which can make it hard for funders to see and understand it. One funder told me that the cultural work they support, though critical to the movement groups who deploy it, “is not ‘arty’ enough for arts funders and not ‘campaign-y’ enough for political funders, so it falls between the cracks.”

URGENT WORK

Building people-powered movements is the best way to combat authoritarianism and advance a society that is more fair, caring, and sustainable. Incorporating cultural strategies into power building can help grassroots organizations build solidarity, activate agency, and

create living examples of a better future. Cultural power is not limited to representation and visibility within cultural domains. Rather, it is closely linked to people’s ability to shape the structures and systems that influence their daily lives in ways that reflect their own values and worldviews.

Among organizers, funders, and cultural practitioners, there is growing interest in work that sits at the intersection of culture and community power building. The Culture and Community Power Fund (with which I am affiliated) was launched in 2022 to invest, connect, and amplify efforts to build community power through arts and culture. Other funders who support culturally rooted movement work include Tao Rising, Chorus Foundation, and The Southern Power Fund. Much more can and should be done to support organizations and organizers that do the urgent work of harnessing cultural strategies to build grassroots power. □

Alexis Frasz is codirector of Helicon Collaborative, which works on the intersection of culture, economics, and the environment to achieve a more just and beautiful future for all.