

## **Equal Justice Society**

### **Colorblind Racism: Mapping A Strategy for Social Justice**

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"Panel: How Think Tanks, Foundations, and Advocacy Groups are Changing America's Social Agenda," October 4, 2003

—Remarks by Lee Cokorinos \*

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We need to take a good look at how we are fighting the war of ideas. To ask the hard questions about advocacy, ideology, and theory. This can't all happen this weekend, but perhaps we can make a beginning.

These issues have been on people's minds for some time, for example at the very important "Take Back America" conference organized by the Campaign for America's Future in June of this year. But in my humble opinion, the passion for fighting the Right's think tanks on our side, which is absolutely great because it wasn't there for many years, far outstrips our particular understanding of what they do.

The more deeply you go into this subject, the more apparent it becomes how badly we need not just one or two, but a number of strong, well financed think tanks on the progressive side, in all areas of the country including, of course California.

The bottom line is that when it comes to think tanks (and I'll define that a bit more in a moment) the right wing is beating our pants off. They're killing us in the world of social policy, in the media, in the area of legal advocacy, in foreign and security policy, and indeed anywhere you care to turn. The recent proliferation of reactionary uses of the concept of colorblindness is just one example, but it is an example of how the right wing uses the technology of think tanks to drive pernicious and racist ideas through our society.

But the main question is "Why is the Right Winning?"

Right wing think tanks were forged in a climate of siege not unlike the one that the movement for social justice finds itself in now. They faced historic reversals—the rise of Keynesianism, civil rights, feminism, liberation support, environmentalism, consumerism, lesbian and gay rights, etc. They recognized they were losing in the war of ideas, and they set about doing something about it.

We now find ourselves in a similar situation. But the main lesson we can learn from the right is that if we fight hard and smart, we can reverse this situation and go back on the offensive. I'm an optimist of the will on this question.

Now I'll concede there are some who don't agree with the premise that the right is winning. Look at the outcome of the Michigan cases, look at how Prop 54 is going, look at the defeat of the Miguel Estrada Supreme Court nomination.

They have a point, but I think they're wrong about the long-term trend if things go on as they are going.

But I'm not going to hash that out this morning.

The first point I'd like to make is that I think we need to move out of our comfort zone when thinking about right wing think tanks. To be clear, a lot of liberals and progressives ascribe the success of the main right wing think tanks—the Heritage Foundation, American Enterprise Inst., Cato Institute, Atlas, Claremont out here in California—to money.

The argument goes something like this: the ideas of conservatives (which many on the left, frankly, haven't read, and never really will, ever, read) are flimsy and obviously stupid, but because they're backed by oodles of money by the capitalist fat cats whose interests they serve to legitimate—that we poor liberals and progressives don't have—that because of this the right wing's ideas are most influential.

Now as a great consumer of right wing and conservative literature, let me concede half in jest that there is some truth to this argument. But let me also say that there are some very serious ideas on the right that cannot be refuted by sound bites and emotional appeals to simple justice, important as those are.

Their concepts, frameworks, and assumptions need to be taken on in a complex way and refuted, not only with sound facts as all of us good Anglo-American trained empiricists will do, but with good theory, good critical theory, written in plain but sufficiently subtle and rigorous language to assemble a serious critique. As others have said here, we have developed some very bad habits in this regard.

We have critical traditions of our own that we can draw on, just as the right has drawn on theirs, and we should use them. I think that, if I may say so, there is too much contempt for our traditions these days in this area.

So, we need to take the ideas of the right seriously.

Next, I'd like to question the notion that all it takes is money (though money is essential) by also suggesting that in addition to complicated ideas to deploy in the right circumstances, the right wing also has done some other things:

They are ideologically aggressive vis-a-vis their academic and other opponents. They have been successful in *mobilizing* their intellectuals politically and polemically, not just in the media but at academic conferences and elsewhere. They have broken their

intellectuals out of their academic mode, teaching them how to write columns, and how to turn their research into a weapon.

Yes, their research into a weapon. As those of you who've read what I've written on the religious right, the antidiversity movement, and the antiabortion movement know, I believe that *political research is a contact sport*. I can assure you so does the right. In fact, they have largely stigmatized the best and brightest scholarly thinkers and public intellectuals in America, not to mention abroad.

OK, here comes a brief history of think tanks:

The rise of right wing think tanks covers roughly the last 30 years, from 1973-2003, dating from the formation of the Heritage foundation in 1973 to overcome AEI's shortcomings, by Paul Weyrivh and Ed Feulner, the current head of Heritage.

This was, of course, a period of great crisis and transition in the U.S., during which think tanks arose to defend a social order under siege, and succeeded in doing so thus far.

Heritage successfully married politicized research, great user-friendly outreach, and lightning fast issue lobbying—which is different from regular corporate lobbying in many ways.

In doing so, they changed academia, the media, and the art of lobbying.

People rightly credit the Clinton people with pioneering the idea of the “permanent campaign”. But these folks, for example Sidney Blumenthal (who studied the right deeply in the 1980s and wrote a great book on them), built upon and learned the lessons—mainly the technical lessons, not the ideological ones—of the founders of the New Right—Richard Viguerie, Paul Weyrich, Richard Mellon Scaife, Jeremiah Milbank, etc.

But I digress. Having won, the right wing Republicans proceeded, of course, to fight the Washington and electoral wars, but they also did something else. They developed the capacity to give their brightest intellectuals, attorneys, media people, and organizers the space to develop their ideas, but on condition that this was done with a political objective in mind: the advancing of not only themselves or their ideas, but of the conservative movement. The proof of this, for them, was whether or not these intellectuals, attorneys, and media people took on or took out a part of the liberal or progressive organizational infrastructure and agenda.

A lot of people on our side like to use the word “Republican” to talk about the Right. But Grover Norquist like to say “we’re conservatives, not party people.” The difference is important. They are movement people, not party people. If you’d like to get a better sense of what we might call the anthropology of the right and its think tank culture, you can read David Brock’s *Blinded by the Right*. Brock spent years as a hatchet man for the right and got mugged by reality. He writes about the inner workings of this tough and focused

and ruthless support network that also supports, nurtures, and develops its talent. The right didn't invent the leveraged career path, but they do it well, far better than we do.

And yes, they are ruthless, which led one of my friends to say once, quite understandably, "we don't want to be like them." Well, of course we don't want to be like the right—all mean and hierarchical and greedy. But we need also to think about the fact that we are in a fight where the common ground is disappearing, a big fight, and figure out how we can be effective.

Also, think about this: when the right wing law and economics movement, which is the DNA of the libertarian movement, first got going, they talked a lot about *community*. Yes, you heard me right, the right wing fretted, deeply, about how to go about building an emotional and spiritual bond among their members—and these were the economists! Hayek put together "a community of scholars" in the Mont Pelerin Society (their secretive group formed to discuss the concepts of conservatism) in 1947.

There is a linkage between this and what goes on in the camp of our adversaries today, e.g. in the Federalist Society.

The Heritage Foundation, which moved into beautiful new space this year in Washington, devoted *half of its physical space to intern housing*. Just think of what that says about the important the right attaches to nurturing and political community. Philip Truluck, Heritage's COO, has said "it's amazing how much influence you can have on an intern's long-term thinking in 2-3 months."

Now, I know we don't have \$40 million a year and a huge endowment to do that, but I still think we can learn from it and use the resources, the people resources, we have much better.

One more point on this sub-theme: How do we think about community? What is the balance between affirming ritual and debate, in what we do? Are we intellectually tough with one another?

So, in conclusion, we need to build think tanks on our side, of many hues, that can rise to the challenge of what the right has done over the past thirty years. This will take foresight, patience, and strategic sense. No shortcuts.

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