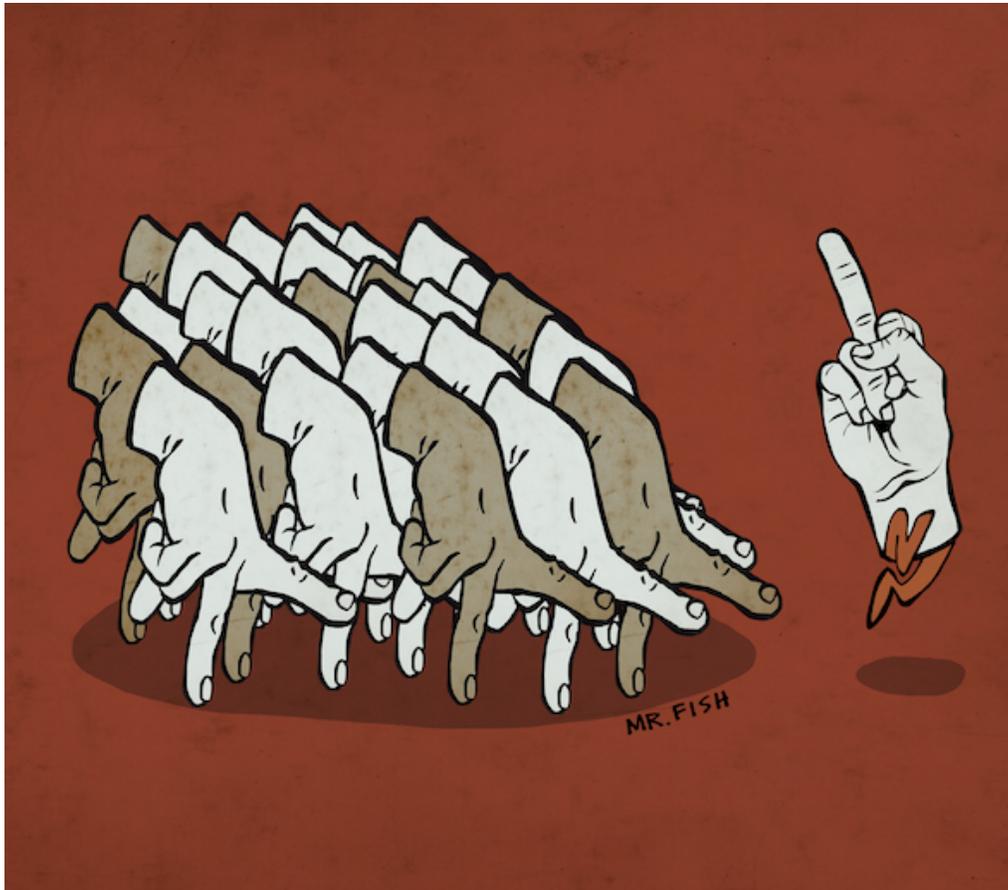


## Building the Institutions for Revolt

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By **Chris Hedges**



Mr. Fish / Truthdig

Politics is a game of fear. Those who do not have the ability to make power elites afraid do not succeed. All of the movements that opened up the democratic space in America—the abolitionists, the suffragists, the labor movement, the communists, the socialists, the anarchists and the civil rights movement—developed a critical mass and militancy that forced the centers of power to respond. The platitudes about justice, equality and democracy are just that. Only when power becomes worried about its survival does it react. Appealing to its better nature is useless. It doesn't have one.

We once had within our capitalist democracy liberal institutions—the press, labor unions, third political parties, civic and church groups, public broadcasting, well-funded public universities and a liberal wing of the Democratic Party—that were capable of responding to outside pressure from movements. They did so imperfectly. They provided only enough reforms to save the capitalist system from widespread unrest or, with the breakdown of capitalism in the 1930s, from revolution. They never addressed white supremacy and institutional racism or the cruelty that is endemic to capitalism. But they had the ability to address and ameliorate the suffering of working men and women.

These liberal institutions—I spend 248 pages in my book “[Death of the Liberal Class](#)” (<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=131166027>) explaining how this happened—collapsed under sustained assault during the past 40 years of corporate power. They exist now only in name. They are props in the democratic facade. Liberal nonprofits, from [MoveOn](#) (<http://front.moveon.org/about/#.WHwG5FzRHfY>) to the Sierra Club, are no better. They are pathetic appendages to the Democratic Party. And the Democratic Party, as the community organizer Michael Gecan said, is not a functioning political party but “a permanent mobilization.” It is propped up with corporate money and by a hyperventilating media machine. It practices political coronations and manipulates voters, who have no real say in party politics. There are, as the political philosopher [Sheldon Wolin](#) ([http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/sheldon\\_wolin\\_and\\_inverted\\_totalitarianism\\_20151101](http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/sheldon_wolin_and_inverted_totalitarianism_20151101)) reminded us, no institutions left in America that can authentically be called democratic.

But, even more ominously, the militant movements that were the real engines of democratic change have been obliterated by the multi-pronged assault of communist witch hunts and McCarthyism, along with deindustrialization, a slew of anti-labor laws and deregulation, and corporate seizure of our public and private institutions. This has left us nearly defenseless.

The corporate state ignores the suffering of the majority of Americans. It rams through policies that make the suffering worse. This is about to get turbocharged under Donald Trump. Institutions, the courts among them, that once were able to check the excesses of power are slavish subsidiaries of corporate power. And the most prescient critics of corporate power—Noam Chomsky, Ralph Nader and others—have been blacklisted and locked out by corporate media, including a public broadcasting system that depends on corporate money.

We will have to build movements and, most importantly, new, parallel institutions that challenge the hegemony of corporate power. It will not be easy. It will take time. We must not accept foundation money and grants from established institutions that seek to curtail the radical process of reconstituting society. Trusting in the system, and especially the Democratic Party, to carry out reform and wrest back our democracy ensures our enslavement.

“Power is organized people and organized money,” Gecan told me [when I interviewed him](#) ([http://www.truthdig.com/avbooth/item/chris\\_hedges\\_talks\\_with\\_michael\\_gecan\\_build\\_organizations\\_empower\\_20170101](http://www.truthdig.com/avbooth/item/chris_hedges_talks_with_michael_gecan_build_organizations_empower_20170101)) in New York recently. “Most activists stress organized people and forget organized money. As organizers, we stress both.”

“We think the issues are, in a sense, the easy part,” said Gecan, who is the co-director of the [Industrial Areas Foundation](#) (<http://www.industrialareasfoundation.org/>), the largest network of community-based organizations in the United States. He is also the author of “[Going Public](#)” (<http://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/58847/going-public-by-michael-gecan/9781400076499/>): An Organizer’s Guide to Citizen Action.” “When we go to a place like East Brooklyn, or South Bronx, or the west side of Chicago, you can take a ride around the neighborhood and see many of the issues right up front. What we can’t see is—is there a fabric of relationships among institutions and leaders in those areas? We spend the first year, or two, or three, building that. Identifying leaders. Identifying institutions that are actually grounded in those communities. Doing training with leaders. Raising money so that the organization doesn’t run out of money right at the start.”

“We don’t take government money,” he said. “We want independence. We want ownership. We want people to have skin in the game. We want people to be able to walk away from any situation they want to, to confront anyone they want to, without worrying about having their budget being slashed or eliminated. So we stress both. Organized people and organized money is essentially building the foundation of the organization first. And then, once that’s fairly solid, we begin identifying issues through a real, deliberate process of house meetings, individual meetings, soliciting to people. And not just doing a poll in the community. [We find out] what do you care about? What are you concerned about? By asking people what they are concerned about and are they willing to do something about it.”

This process of institution building permits organizers and activists to eventually pit power against power.

“The decision-making in those situations is not about merit, how nice you are, or how deep the need is,” Gecan said. “It’s about do you have enough power to compel a reaction from the state or a reaction from the corporate sector. When people say what are you building around, I say we’re building around power.

People who understand power tend to have the patience to build a base, do the training, raise the money, so when they go into action they surprise people.”

The corporate press echoes the pronouncements of the power elites. It is blind to the undercurrents and moods of the wider society. It did not anticipate the election of Trump any more than it did the financial crash in 2008. It does not report on the lives of ordinary men and women. It shuts out their voices and renders them invisible. And it—like the power structure—will be among the last to know that the bankrupt social and political systems that sustain it are collapsing. Once the ruling ideology, in our case neoliberalism (<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/15/neoliberalism-ideology-problem-george-monbiot>), is understood by the public as a tool for corporate and oligarchic pillage, coercion is all the state has left.

I asked Gecan what characteristics he looks for in identifying leaders. “Anger,” he shot back. “It’s not hot anger. It’s not rhetorical anger. It’s not the ability to give a speech. It’s deep anger that comes from grief. People in the community who look at their children, look at their schools, look at their blocks, and they grieve. They feel the loss of that. Often, those people are not the best speaker or the best-known people in the community. But they’re very deep. They have great relationships with other people. And they can build trust with other people because they’re not self-promotional. They’re about what the issues are in the community. So we look for anger. We look for the pilot light of leadership. It’s always there. It’s always burning. Good leaders know to turn it up and down depending on the circumstance.”

If we are to succeed we will have to make alliances with people and groups whose professed political stances are different from ours and at times unpalatable to us. We will have to shed our ideological purity. Saul Alinsky (<http://www.cbsnews.com/news/who-is-saul-alinsky/>), whose successor, Ed Chambers (<http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/edward-chambers-community-organizing-unforgiving-hero>), was Gecan’s mentor, argued that the ideological rigidity of the left—something epitomized in identity politics and political correctness—effectively severed it from the lives of working men and women. This was especially true during the Vietnam War when college students led the anti-war protests and the sons of the working class did the fighting and dying in Vietnam. But it is true today as liberals and the left dismiss Trump supporters as irredeemable racists and bigots and ignore their feelings of betrayal and very real suffering. Condemning those who support Trump is political suicide. Alinsky detested such moral litmus tests. He insisted that there were “no permanent enemies, no permanent allies, only permanent interests.”

“We have to listen to people unlike ourselves,” Gecan said, observing that this will be achieved not through the internet but through face-to-face relationships. “And once we’ve built a relationship we can agitate them and be willing to be agitated by them.”

The homogenization of culture in the wake of the death of the local press and local civic, church and other groups has played a large part in our disempowerment, Gecan argues. We have lost connection with those around us. We do not fully understand the corporate structures of power that wreak havoc with our lives both nationally and in our communities. And this is by the design of the corporate state.

“Over seventy-five years the process of community dissolution that took place in Back of the Yards has been mirrored in thousands of U.S. communities,” Gecan wrote of Alinsky’s first community organization, [Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council](http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/100.html) (<http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/100.html>), founded in 1939 in Chicago. “Everywhere the tightly-knit worlds of a dozen or so blocks—where workplace, church, neighborhood, recreation, tavern, and political affiliation were all deeply entwined—have given way to exurban enclaves, long commutes, gathered congregations, matchmaker websites, and fitness clubs filled with customers who don’t know one another. A world where local news was critically important and closely followed—often delivered by local publishers and reporters and passed along by word of mouth—has been replaced by the constant flow of real and fake news arriving through social media. A world of physically imposing and present institutions and organizations has morphed into a culture of global economic dynamics and fitful national mobilizations built around charismatic figures.”

“You have to organize who is in front of you,” Gecan said. “Not who used to be in front of you. In places like Chicago, Cleveland or Baltimore, the congregation used to be very robust. Congregations that were strong are weaker. We’re still organizing with them but still looking at different institutions. Schools are institutions. They’re more complicated, but they’re institutions in those neighborhoods. We’re recruiting schools in many places; sometimes it’s housing groups. Sometimes we build new institutions called East Brooklyn Congregations or United Power for Action and Justice. We’re recruiting the best of the existing,

we're working with the existing to reconnect with people and expand. And we find new institutions. It has to be institutional in some way."

Gecan concedes that America's future under a Trump presidency, and amid democratic institutions' collapse and climate change, is bleak. But he warned against falling into despair or apathy.

"In 1980 in New York, all the liberal establishment, the entire establishment, was saying New York would never be as strong as it once was," he said. "It was called benign neglect. They wrote off parts of New York permanently in their minds." But community groups, including Brooklyn Congregations, which built 5,000 low-income homes, organized to save themselves.

"Our organizations and our leaders simply didn't accept that judgment from the elites," Gecan said. "Things are tough, hard, but we're going to build an organization. We're going to identify things we can correct and correct them—with government if we can, or without it. We'll raise our own money. We'll figure out our housing strategy. We'll hire our own developer and general manager. It's about being more flexible and plastic about solutions. It's not relying on what the state or market says is possible. It's creating your own options."

Institution building is possible only if you "engage institutions or create newer and better ones—whether it's churches or civic unions," he said. Without these, the power in the other two sectors—corporate and governmental—dominates.

The state, he said, has learned how to manipulate familiar protest rituals and render them impotent. He dismisses as meaningless political theater the kind of boutique activism in which demonstrators coordinate and even choreograph protests with the police. Activists spend a few hours, maybe a night, in jail and then assume they have credentials as dissidents. Gecan called these "fake arrests." "Everyone looks like they've had an action," he said. "They haven't."

He called the choreographed protests sterile re-enactments of the protests of the 1960s. Genuine protest, he said, has to defy the rules. It cannot be predicable. It has to disrupt power. It has to surprise those in authority. And these kinds of protests are greeted with anger by the state.

No movement will survive, he said, unless it is built on the foundation of deep community relationships. Organizers must learn to listen, even to those who do not agree with them. Only then are organization and active resistance possible.

"Three things have to be happening in great organizations: people have to be relating, people have to be learning, people have to be acting," he said. "In many religious circles, there's some learning going on, there's a little bit of relating going on, but there's no action. There's no external action. And it's killed many institutions. In a lot of activism, there's a lot of acting but there's not much relating or learning, so people make the same mistakes again and again."

"I was in Wisconsin during the [Gov. Scott] Walker situation (<http://www.occupy.com/article/protesters-descend-madison-rejecting-gov-scott-walkers-anti-union-law#sthash.2xjY28Ft.dpbs>) and the reaction to it," he said about the 2011 protests by union members and their supporters. "They did 23 major demonstrations. Fifty [thousand], 70 [thousand], 100,000 people. After the second or third I said to those people, why are you doing all this? Because as you do these, you can't be building relationships in local communities. And you don't know what your own members are thinking about this situation. It ended up being unfortunately the case."

"Can we rebuild unions?" Gecan asked. "We can. It takes time. And we're doing it in some parts of the country. Can we rebuild civic life in our cities? We have and will do more. Can we take these people on? I know we can. But it will take different tactics. It will take some very unconventional allies that will surprise people."