Needed: A Progressive Story

Instead of an endless platform of policy ideas, progressives need to tell a shared narrative.

by AMITAI ETZIONI

In preparing for the 2010 midterm elections, we need a progressive summit, to compose a shared narrative and shared positions. Currently, progressive groups are pulling in different directions, favoring distinct tactics, promoting their own rationales. True, despite all the talk about a “progressive movement,” there is no way to cobble the various progressive groups into one coherent force. However, one can find what political philosophers call “overlapping consensuses.” That is, instead of seeking one agreed-upon platform and strategy, progressives should identify major points all can agree to promote. Participants in the new coalition would understand that many of their agenda items would not be supported actively by many of the groups involved—and, in turn, they would not be expected to promote the entire agendas of other groups. Each group in the coalition would avoid adding its desiderata to the common pile, making it unwieldy and apolitical. Only those items all groups favor will be accommodated: above all, a shared narrative and a shared strategy.

The Missing Narrative

Successful movements have a narrative that usually takes a historical form. The narrative provides an account of the forces that got us into our predicament and the rising forces that will save us, and an image of the more perfect union we are going to reach once we put our shoulders to the wheel.

The most effective narratives follow the same pattern, one that is found in the Bible and in Marx. Once, we were in a state of grace (the Garden of Eden, the early commune); we sinned (took a bite from the forbidden apple, technological developments advanced a new ruling class); we must atone for our sins (pray, organize); and we will return to nirvana (the Garden of Eden, a stateless commune). Call it the U-turn of the human narrative. (Obama followed this script when he pointed out, during his first State of the Union address, that in 2000 we had a budget surplus; we were doing well. He then found a great deficit on entering the White House and was forced to increase it some; we sinned. But he promised to lead us back to virtue, by lowering the deficit. Not a very ennobling and a rather minor narrative, but one that conforms to the tried-and-true pattern.)

I could not agree more with Katrina vanden Heuvel and Robert L. Borosage (“Change Won’t Come Easy,” Feb. 1) that we need to pay more mind to values and ideals and less to policy-wonking. Narratives are a way to explore values and ideas, often in a historical (real or imagined) context, or in the form of an evocative allegory that reaches people who would not join a policy debate even if all football games were canceled and all the soaps were turned off.

Conservatives have two such narratives that have been highly successful. This is of much importance because, for decades, there have been at least two self-declared conservatives for every American who identifies as a liberal. According to the economically conservative and libertarian narrative, the United States was doing well until the government expanded, first under Franklin Roosevelt and then in the 1960s. Cutting it down will solve our problems. Social conservatives hold that American society was doing well until the sexual revolution of the 1960s. If we just return to the good old days, when divorce was restricted, abortions were illegal, etc., virtuous America would be restored.

The fact that these narratives are terribly familiar is a reflection of their strength. To conservatives, they need not be spelled out or justified. They are taken as established truths. Moreover, they provide a ready-made context for numerous specific positions.

When I recently scoured the major progressive publications and interviewed a few progressive leaders, I could not find a progressive narrative. I was somewhat prepared for this finding, given that the movement includes groups with different agendas, such as gay, environmental and minority groups. What did surprise me was that, as far as I could determine, not a single one of these groups had a streamlined narrative of its own, one that at least most of its members shared—and that might be shared by others.

What I did find were platformlike statements, replete with hortatory goals—for instance, that “all people should have equal opportunity in life, that all children should be able to go to good schools, and that everyone should have health care” (Mother Jones), or that “all persons should have the rights and opportunity to benefit equally from the resources afforded us by society and the environment” (the Green Party).

Statements like these reflect the noble aspirations and sentiments of their authors but have all the mobilizing power of a sleeping pill. They provide no narrative, no explanation of why we are in such dire straits or how we must liberate ourselves. Even the few I found were too nuanced or contested to provide an effective counter to conservative narratives. The American Prospect calls for “committed, engaged progressives—realistic but committed to the idea that there is greater range

Amitai Etzioni is a professor at George Washington University. He is the author, most recently, of New Common Ground.
for genuinely transformative policies than is often imagined.” It’s a noble notion but not exactly a road map. Ditto for “We believe in the great American traditions of civic responsibility, caring for the down and out, and giving the average person a break…” (Washington Monthly). Bill Moyers put it well, in remarks reprinted in The Nation, when he responded to a long list of desired items provided by a progressive leader: “But America needs something more right now than a ‘must-do’ list from liberals and progressives. America needs a different story” (“For America’s Sake,” January 22, 2007).

True, a diligent reader can find other relevant and sophisticated statements and analyses, but they are hardly as shared within the progressive camp as the conservative narratives are on the other side of the aisle.

Hence, the first task of the progressive movement is to compose a shared narrative. It must include a characterization of who bedevils us: Is it the military-industrial complex? Wall Street? Capitalism? The Christian right? Or…? Who will save us: A rainbow coalition of minorities, feminists and labor unions? A new third party, à la Nader? A youth movement of the kind that served as the core of the Obama election? Or…? And—last but not least: What is the end state we are aspiring to bring about? What is our shining city?

More Than Labels and Networks

Narratives are not to be confused with communication devices or strategies. Often when a movement runs into strong opposition, it is reluctant to examine its key message and tends to assume that the main problem is that the message was not well communicated. Hence the quest for more articulate leaders (like Reagan, Clinton and the master of them all, Barack Obama), liberal antidotes to Rush Limbaugh (like Rachel Maddow) and the emphasis on building networks online.

Special attention is paid to finding new labels. Thus, many Democrats believe that the GOP did well by calling the estate tax a “death tax.” Democrats rushed to embrace such ideas as those advanced by George Lakoff, who holds that people will support Democrats’ tax increases—once they are called “investments.” Such rebranding has its place, but it cannot carry the day if the underlying message is off, and surely if there is none.

Others believe that tweeting, texting and social networking will do the trick, that—in more old-fashioned terminology—the medium is the message. As I see it, improving communication is important, but it cannot be a substitute for having an effective core of ideas, woven into a narrative, to communicate.

A French Lesson?

If a narrative is so important, readers may ask, why don’t you unfurl one? As I see it, the much-needed narrative must arise out of a dialogue among the main progressive thinkers and representatives—because in the process they will have to modify their positions, not necessarily to move closer to one another, but rather toward a new common ground. When I convened several Christian thinkers and left-leaning progressive leaders to talk about sex education, I could not have foreseen that they would agree on “education for intimacy,” a new approach that opposes separating sex education from values education—but makes the central value responsibility for the consequences of one’s act (rather than “saving yourself for marriage”). Similarly, few would have expected that when abortion rights advocates and opponents got together, they would fashion a joint program: they sought to make adoption easier and improve childcare. Indeed, as I see it, to present a narrative not based on dialogue is to invite rejection.

Still, one may ask for a dialogue-starter. Mine draws on a combination of the deliberations of the young Karl Marx and psychologist Abraham Maslow. Society progresses to the extent that it moves from one centered on labor, to one centered on work, to one that nurtures self-actualization. In the early days of industrialization (a stage emerging economies are still in), most people had to labor in jobs that were highly alienating to provide for basic sustenance. However, as these needs were met—initially for some classes and not others—we were able to move to work that is inherently satisfying and gradually to the kind that made more room for social and spiritual pursuits. However, we continue to be caught up in an economic system built around labor, one that makes a fetish out of long hours and the massive use of consumer goods to express affection, gain esteem and to self-actualize.

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We need to transition to a society in which the privileged classes limit labor and consumption and make more room for social and spiritual pursuits. Such a society would be much more open to significant reallocation of wealth from those whose basic needs are met to those who still are lacking, as the first group will no longer find additional satisfaction from earning still more—and will seek to invest themselves in pursuits that are neither labor- nor capital-intensive, for instance, spending more time with their children. In this way, unprivileged classes will be able to catch up.

The last point is particularly likely to be contested because many do not buy what I take for granted—that democratic societies cannot engage in major reallocation of wealth unless one finds a rationale that will lead the privileged classes to go along with such reallocation. As I see it, almost by definition, those in power cannot be forced, but can be motivated, as many children of the rich are, “to do good.” One may ask why we should delay reducing the labor-consumption load on the less endowed. Indeed, in an ideal society they too should be able to enjoy the full measure of the good life immediately. However, the sad fact is that they must first be brought to the point at which their basic needs are met before they can concentrate on attending to their higher needs.

A society that is moving to dedicate ever more of its indi-
vidual and collective energy to higher needs turns out, rather importantly, to also be much more sustainable, environmentally friendly and favorable to climate change mitigation than capitalism, precisely because it is not labor- or capital-intensive.

French society provides a limited model of liberating society: a shorter workweek than that of the United States, Britain and even Germany; a willingness to accept at the same time a somewhat lower income per capita—that is, a lower level of work and less consumption of material goods and services. This in turn makes room for greater “investment” in social and spiritual activities. Indeed, France’s strong network of social services (especially childcare) protected the French from the brunt of the recent economic crisis. It is far from an ideal society, but it provides a preliminary illustration of the kind of society to which I am pointing. Its main shortcomings are that France relies heavily on the state for functions best carried out by communities and voluntary associations, and its commitment to individual rights is far from what it ought to be.

The main enemies of the good society are those who promote the commodification of life, the promotion of consumer goods (and the hard labor that acquiring them requires), as the mainstay of the good life rather than as a source that can be capped for serving basic needs. The main supporters of the good society are those who champion a moderate form of the counterculture, not one that opts out from the work and consumption life but that moves beyond it once one’s basic needs are met. Already close to this position are various green groups, several moderate religious groups and select public intellectuals. Those groups that seek to secure their basic needs that have not yet been served—minority groups and some labor unions—also can find their place in this agenda. The goals of groups that champion individual rights—such as the ACLU, NARAL and LGBT groups—are compatible with the good society because they do not promote commodification, and they benefit more from citizens who are available for public action than from those enslaved by high-labor, high-consumption societies. Finally, groups like Common Cause should find their place here, as campaign contributions are the main way corporations and marketers maintain a grip on our public life.

Forming a shared progressive narrative will serve the movement in the longer run. For now, attention must be focused on the election. As I see it, if each group will seek to support the election of those that champion its wish list—repeal “don’t ask, don’t tell,” ban offshore oil drilling and so on—we will do much less well than if all the groups work hard to elect those that favor a few shared items. Jobs would lead my list, right next to even stronger and truly enforced regulation of Wall Street. Such a drive is likelier to deliver a Congress more supportive of specific agendas of the various groups than a campaign that makes them the centerpiece. Let’s elect generic progressives rather than special interest ones.

Letters

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OVERLAND PARK, KAN.
“Disposable Soldiers” was absolutely heartbreaking. How could this man, wounded in combat, not only be misdiagnosed but treated in a manner unbefitting a human being? To hear that his superiors’ careers “flourished” after this incident is unacceptable. I hope someone with more clout than me can help these soldiers. At least The Nation is listening.

KATHLEEN MORALES

ALLEN, TEX.
These pre-existing personality disorder discharges: they did the exact same thing to me! I have all the documents to prove it but have not found any attorneys with the courage to help.

PHILLIP POPE

NEW YORK CITY
There is no such diagnosis as an “adult onset personality disorder,” as Army doctors have alleged in the case of Sgt. Chuck Luther. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders makes this clear. Sergeant Luther’s symptoms are classic signs of traumatic brain injury and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). It’s troubling to think that he, a decorated soldier who has proven himself in combat, would be deemed ineligible for benefits.

ROBERT LICHTMAN, PHD
Professor of psychology
John Jay College of Criminal Justice

BROOKLYN, N.Y.
As a clinical psychologist who trained in the Veterans Administration, I am particularly chagrined to read of the abuse of diagnostic practices that Joshua Kors describes. Personality disorder is not one diagnosis but rather a category of diagnoses, with extremely broad manifestations. The assertions of certitude by the doctors who labeled Sergeant Luther with “personality disorder” would be laughable were their consequences not so tragic.

MARGARET HORNICK, PHD

COLUMBIA, MO.
I was a sergeant in the 82nd Airborne, one of the first deployed to Iraq. When we were clearing out of the country, there was a lot of paperwork to fill out. Most of it was crap, and most of us were more than happy to sign anything just to get out of there.

But there was one document that was very important. It asked, “Have you ever fired your weapon at a combatant? Have you ever taken fire? Did you at any time fear for your life?” Ninety-nine percent of us checked yes. Then, as they gathered up the forms, they gave us this gem of wisdom: “In case any of you want to change your answers, remember this: there is a two-month backlog to see the mental health providers. If you checked yes, you will be held here for two months before you are allowed to leave. But if you fill out a new form, I am sure we will be able to clear you out of here with no issues.”

Every single one of us filled out a new form and left the country. This comes back to bite you in the ass if you later seek help from the VA for PTSD. I am thankful for reporters like Joshua Kors who get the word out. I hope we can get the government to own up to these shady, underhanded tactics.

DANIEL A. CLARK