

# ***Giant Whispers: Narrative Power, Radical Imagination and a Future Worth Fighting For...***

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## **Abstract**

Given the centrality of narrative to the human experience, any strategy to create change must assess the interaction between storytelling and relationships of power. This essay explores the application of narrative power analysis to social movement struggles in the current context of intersecting global crises. Touching on examples from the 2010 U.S. Social Forum to the framing battle around the climate destabilization, the essay examines the power of collective imagination to create new types of alliances, articulate visionary demands and catalyze transformative changes.

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## **Narrative Power Analysis**

Beyond our much-hyped opposable thumbs and our ability to stand erect on two feet, humans are unique in the animal kingdom for our relationship with narrative. We humans are storytelling animals, constructing our social reality through our ability to create, interpret, and contest stories about the world around us and our place within it. We think, dream, remember, and believe through the filter of narrative.<sup>ii</sup>

Embracing the centrality of narrative to how the human mind operates has significant implications for anyone working to challenge the status quo. This insight is the foundation of “narrative power analysis” —an analytical framework for assessing the interactions between narrative and relationships of power. Since all power relationships have a narrative component, any strategy to create change—shift power—must both understand and engage the realm of narrative.<sup>iii</sup>

Radical organizers and theorists have known for a long time the most powerful weapon the elites have in maintaining the status quo is their claim on the future. Behind their fighter planes and police batons, underlying their divide-and-conquer tactics, fear-mongering and slow death-of-a-thousand-pay-cuts is the status quo's grand bluff: inevitability. The elites implicitly tell us that the status

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quo— injustice, inequity, war, destruction—is just “the way things are” and can't be changed.

*You can't fight city hall.*

*Humans are intrinsically racist and violent.*

*Unlimited economic growth is the only way to achieve prosperity.*

*There will always be war.*

Narrative power analysis helps us examine how over time historic power relations wrap themselves in symbiotic mythologies of control that define the public discourse, justify the elite agenda and maintain hegemony. Through the legitimizing influence of these control myths, the system banishes its critics to ghettos of irrelevance and impossibility. Bodies can be broken, starved, tortured, imprisoned, and killed. But our minds can be stolen in far more subtle contests. At its most effective, power manipulate identities and co-opt dreams in order to rationalize the status quo, no matter how unjust or pathological.

Those of us working deep inside the consumer-fixated societies of North America have the challenge of building on a stolen past. Our struggles happen literally on stolen land and in the shadow of imperialisms past and present, where the (often) unacknowledged wounds inflicted by conquistadors, cowboys, and corporate actuaries still bleed. The same white-washed colonizer myths that mask the genocidal origins of our nations have also rendered invisible the historic role of organized social movements in resisting oppression, and winning many of today's rights and privileges. Pathways towards a better future must wind through the contested past. The lessons of our predecessors, when unearthed and revitalized, strengthen our claim on the very futures for which they fought.

### **Radicalizing Imagination**

All fights for true change begins with the ability to envision a different future. Through this lens, imagination—the ability to craft new ideas, images, and possibilities—is a core element of all meaningful work for social, cultural, and political transformation. But imagination comes in infinite flavors and can serve any agenda, whether it's the dream of a more just world or the cruel ingenuity of the torturer's tools. So, to be specific, let us refer to imagination's application in supporting liberatory social change as the *radical imagination*, that is, imagination that has been radicalized to focus on the roots of systemic problems.

The radicalized imagination is the wellspring from which inoculations and escape hatches from the control myths of the powerful can emerge: the

toppling of unrecognized assumptions, the dreams of slave revolt, the fantastical possibilities of (r)evolution, the spark of ‘what if?’ that grows into the conflagration of ‘this must be!’

I envision the radical imagination as an eternal flame that burns at the heart of transformative movements. First comes the opportunities for people to share their stories through which they can identify their collective experience and common problems. As people organize together they can craft a common vision—shared narratives to express their radicalized imagination—and their dreams of something better can become more urgent, compelling, immanent. Fellow commiserators can become collaborative instigators, and daydreams of liberation can materialize as goals, strategies, and actions. This process of creating collective belief in an imagined future is one of the critical areas where organizing relies on narrative to unleash the co-creative power of an organized constituency. When that brighter future seems possible enough, a radical goal can go from an ignorable crazy idea to a visionary horizon that inspires struggle and sacrifice.

Radical imagination is the rocket fuel of social change. It can make the invisible visible by contrasting “norms” that hide in blinded plain sight with more compelling alternatives. Radical imagination is the ether of possibility that helps resistance proliferate and deepen into collective identification with a different social reality. It provides the blueprints for collective motivation: possibility made tangible, a destination worth journeying towards, or the ability to articulate a goal worthy of commitment. Radical imagination is our best weapon against the status quo’s oft-repeated claim that “There Is No Alternative.”<sup>iv</sup>

### **Facing the Slow-Motion Apocalypse**

We find ourselves in a unique era. Unfettered, globalized corporate capitalism has dragged our planet into an ecological endgame. As the planet’s basic life support systems buckle under the weight of capital’s industrial footprint, cracks are spreading not only in the system’s physical operating structures, but also in the control myths that have helped bolster them.

Our current era is a *slow-motion apocalypse* – the gradual unraveling of the routines, expectations and institutions that comfort the privileged and define the status quo. But by apocalypse we are not referring to a certain flavor of Christian ideology’s much foreshadowed Jesus-the-Sequel-world-ending-cosmic-smack-down. Rather let us dig a little deeper to the original Greek word *apokalypsis* combining the verb “kalypso” meaning to “cover or to hide,” with the prefix “apo” meaning “away.” In this context the word apocalypse literally means to “take the cover away,” or to reveal something that has not been

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seen.<sup>v</sup> The intersecting crises of the 21st century—most visibly driven by looming ecological collapse—are laying bare the contradictions and inadequacies of the dominant culture.

The unavoidable visibility of crisis opens up political space. These can become moments of “psychic break” — 9-11, Katrina, BP’s Gulf oil disaster—when unique events challenge mass assumptions and expose the limitations of conventional wisdom. As we see more eco-spasms, resource grabs, economic disruptions and mass displacements, the myths that glue the system together will strain under pressure and more people previously unconnected to social movements will be open to new ideas and interpretations. But what forces will harness the inevitable psychic breaks of the near future? As the slow-motion apocalypse accelerates, will the fallout trigger progressive change or fuel right wing backlash? Will the crises of the future unleash popular momentum for social transformation or will they serve as an excuse for mass manipulation and repression by desperate elites struggling to maintain business-as-usual?

The fight to answer this question will occur on the lopsided terrain defined by the corporate-controlled media, repressive state power and the entrenched interests of the elite. Crisis may create opportunity but, unfortunately, crisis alone doesn’t level the playing field for social justice. We face not only escalating technologies of social control but also even more sophisticated propaganda techniques for normalizing these mechanics of repression. There is a booming perception-management industry with plenty of highly paid professionals working to carefully invoke and exploit the historic control mythologies of fear, greed, and isolation to ensure the “solutions” to any given crisis do not challenge the status quo.

Our movements must swim upstream against the dominant culture’s strong currents of racism, sexism, homophobia, alienation from nature, and the normalization of violence. History has shown us all too clearly that if we allow the elites to frame popular understanding of a crisis they will deflect blame onto those least responsible but already too marginalized to effectively defend themselves. Hence, in the U.S. we have seen right-wing efforts to scapegoat poor people of color and defame the Community Reinvestment Act to explain Wall Street’s housing bubble. Islamophobia is used to sell imperial resource wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. While the immigrants, on whom the current economy depends, are criminalized and blamed for unemployment.

### **Winning the Battle of the Story**

As advertisers learned long ago, people will only go someplace they have already been in their minds. Imagination helps us fill in the gaps of possibility

between now and then, perhaps and indeed, maybe and yes. Currently, many of the best storytellers and image-crafters in our culture are hired guns that sell us an imagined vision of ourselves, complete with the appropriate brand of carbonated beverage, designer jeans, or suitably inspirational political candidate.

In a macro sense, the radical imagination is always engaged in the “battle of the story”—the wide-ranging fight to frame the big debates and assign relevance and meaning to current events and issues. Whose stories will be heard? Which points of view will become accepted as conventional wisdom? Which will be marginalized and dismissed? Will collective desire be harnessed for the common good, or hijacked for private gain? These are the real-world implications of narrative power. If our movements are going to win the battle of the story against the system’s corporate spectacles and fear-mongering manipulations, we need to scale up both our skills and our infrastructure.

The best way to build this capacity while keeping it anchored in democratic and accountable organizing is to grow it from the ground up. In this day and age every activist’s toolbox and every social change organization’s strategy should include an applied understanding of narrative power: how to analyze dominant culture stories, reframe issues, and craft effective messages.

Building the skills of grassroots activists provides an essential foundation for effective movements but it is only a first step in a broader strategy for social justice movements to contest the dominant stories of mass culture. To win major structural changes in society our movements need to apply the same rigor to the realm of narrative power analysis as many movements bring to analyzing economic and political power relations.

Already many organizers are crying out for better mechanisms to help diverse constituencies build shared understandings of the control mythologies that undermine their efforts. Not only can common analyses of these obstacles help us amplify and reinforce one another’s stories, they can also help accelerate the process of building alliances, identifying collectively held beliefs and setting shared goals.

But the work of distilling different visions into common stories that serve the range of engaged interests is difficult work that must confront deeper issues of representation, self-determination and the tension between short and long-term political goals. To support diverse constituencies in articulating a common narrative requires infrastructure: the development of new spaces, processes and institutions.

Fortunately many long-term organizers are thinking along these ambitious lines and reclaiming the central role of narrative strategy in movement building. One particularly exciting initiative that bubbled up at the 2010 United States Social Forum<sup>vi</sup> is the Echo Justice participatory research project. This grassroots effort will gather information from organizers in the field about how they frame their struggles and will begin a narrative map of the control myths that obstruct systemic change in the U.S. The initial pilot project, which is being shepherded by movement support groups like the Center for Media Justice<sup>vii</sup>, Praxis Project<sup>viii</sup>, Movement Strategy Center<sup>ix</sup> and *smartMeme*<sup>x</sup>, used the Social Forum's People's Movement Assembly process<sup>xi</sup> to instigate deeper conversations about the role of transformative framing and shared storytelling across our different struggles and movements.

In order to have vibrant and effective movements the radical imagination must not only inform our vision but also provide an ongoing impetus to innovate our movement building. Strategy and analysis certainly require their rational and quantitative components, but in an era as volatile as the present our movements must also embrace fluidity, improvisation and paradox. The radical imagination is the impulse that leaps between unexpected synapses, bridges between different cultures, and offers a portal between distant worldviews. To remain true to its spirit we must remember to constantly reassess our own assumptions, whether they govern organizational form, the terms of the debate, or our definitions of allies and opponents. We must grow movements that are hard-wired to adapt.

### **Polishing the Chains of the Climate Crisis?**

As a number of theorists have pointed out, it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine a truly different one.<sup>xii</sup> Indeed as the escalating ecological crisis makes the end of our current world increasingly obvious, the role of the radical imagination in articulating an alternative world is growing more urgent.

There is a future out there to be reclaimed from the global capitalist death spiral, but unfortunately many current initiatives for reform lack the imagination needed to honestly address the scale of the crisis.<sup>xiii</sup> Tragically, too many efforts are attempting to transform the status quo by metaphorically slapping organic, fair trade green paint on our current global doomsday machine. One painfully clear example can be found in the current fight to address the climate crisis. As movements around the planet have mobilized to expose and denounce the effects of climate destabilization on communities, cultures, and ecosystems around the world, global elites have responded by claiming they will solve the problem.

However, when we look past the cynical distractions, the propaganda stunts, and the accounting tricks, their substantive proposals merely exploit the crisis to escalate the very policies and practices that have pushed the planet to the brink: continued economic growth within the current paradigm of corporate-controlled globalization. We're told that only a global carbon market can avert catastrophe. In other words, we should embrace the effective privatization of the atmosphere as well as further commodification of forests, soils, and grasslands, and trust the financial sector to manage (a.k.a. speculate on) it for the "common good."

Hand in hand with the story of the all-powerful market is the control myth that technology will save us. Whether it's the overt lies like "clean coal" and "climate ready" genetically engineered crops or the synthetic biology industry's sinister efforts to create novel life forms that will produce a biofuel panacea, the system has an ever growing list of quick techno-fixes to sell us.<sup>xiv</sup>

Even more ominously, the urgency of the crisis is being increasingly hijacked to package the idea (previously to be found only on the fringe and in science fiction) of massive uncontrolled experiments to "geoengineer" the planet as a legitimate policy option.<sup>xv</sup> The future imagined by the status quo asks us to embrace desperate (though profitable) gambles (presumably counter-balanced by a quieter focus on lifeboats for the rich) that do little to prevent ecological devastation and mass suffering. Will we accept that future?

The words of South African anti-apartheid and anti-privatization organizer Trevor Ngwane are an apt reminder of the role of radicalized imagination in setting the terms of a struggle: "we must abolish, not polish the chains of global apartheid."<sup>xvi</sup> The way we define the problem determines what solutions are possible. In the climate fight, this is at the heart of the framing battle. Elites present the climate crisis through a reductionist lens as merely a problem of too much carbon in the atmosphere while completely ignoring the underlying issues of justice, equity, and ecological sanity.

Meanwhile the 'official' climate movement has been dominated by a loyal opposition of largely northern, policy, and access-oriented NGOs who, although (mostly) well intentioned, have failed to reframe the debate or popularize an understanding of the root causes of the crisis. But increasingly, as more global movements begin to unite under the banner of climate justice, there is a different story to tell. The terms of the debate are being reframed from seeing the climate crisis as an isolated issue, to understanding the disruption of the climate as merely the most visible symptom of a much larger problem: our global system of growth-addicted, fossil fuel-driven, corporate capitalism that is

undermining *all* the life support systems of the planet. When this framing of the problem is accepted it becomes clear that we will never re-stabilize the climate without addressing the root causes of the problem through fundamental shifts to our economy, political systems, and cultures. This is why one of the over-arching and unifying messages coming out of global movements fighting for a just response to the climate crisis is “system change NOT climate change”.

If we really want to do more than polish the chains that shackle our communities, the natural world, and our collective future, we must find ways to radicalize the imagination of a broadening cross-section of the public. Particularly, as the visibility of the ecological crisis weakens the dominant control mythologies, our movements must provoke and sustain a mass re-imagining of what is possible. We need strategies to popularize the plethora of tangibly better alternatives, both longstanding (in many cases ancient) practices of sustainability as well as those in process of experimentation. In the words of African poet Dorothea Smartt, the answer to There Is No Alternative (T.I.N.A.) is T.A.B.O.O.—There are Billions of Options.<sup>xvii</sup>

We need to keep the focus on the question of how to redirect all our energies, currently harnessed to the destruction, exploitation, and violence of the extraction-driven globalized world, into the hope, dignity, and sustainability of a restoration-based, localized future. The era of monocultures—whether of the land, political representation, or of the mind—must end and make way for what the Zapatista movement has so eloquently named “a world where many worlds fit.”<sup>xviii</sup>

### **On The Paradox of Giant Whispers**

The radical imagination should not be confused with aesthetic navel-gazing or purely academic speculation that is artificially segregated from our struggles. To help guide us it must retain its fiery spark within campaigns, interventions, and the daily work of organizing for collective power. Movements are far more than just shared imagination—they require mechanisms for mass organization, decision making, skill sharing, leadership development, and institutions that concretely support collaboration and resource sharing. However, without the shared vision of radical possibilities for profoundly different futures we cannot set our collective sights high enough to overcome denial, resist despair, and escape the myth of powerlessness.

At times the radical imagination may seem to be only a whisper, but let us remember the true power of a whisper: hushed, seductive, open to different interpretations, more an invitation than a demand. A whisper can be as far from



silence as a scream. We whisper when we seek to spread a conspiracy, share a secret, or avoid detection. We whisper when it matters.

Perhaps the whisper can provide us with a template, both metaphoric and concrete, for how to communicate about the greatest elephants in our collective room. But only if our whispers can become giant enough to overcome the background hum of distraction, privilege, and denial; giant enough to amplify the screams of suffering, rage, and horror that are so easily ignored in mass culture.

A giant whisper is a virus, an uncontainable message, a potent meme with the ability to spread, adapt, and translate among different contexts. A whisper turned paradoxically giant might escape the paralyzing pop culture spectacle of shrill one dimensionality that maintains the complicit separation between victim and onlooker, activist and audience, spectator and participant. With some experimentation, determination, and luck, our movements may slowly enlarge the murmurs of possibility into the giant whispers of shared belief, collective yearning, and, ultimately, transformative action.

Given the scale of the ecological crisis, our networks of local resistance, innovative initiatives, and disparate alliances must grow into the most diverse, powerful, creative, wide-ranging, and transformative force in human history. The work of midwifing the future will require the creative labor of literally billions of people. Different communities, cultures, and localities must find their own ways of navigating these challenges, but a common denominator will, by necessity, be the ability to collectively re-design our economies, political systems, and social realities from the ground up.

We all know that it will be far from easy. But I draw comfort from the hope that, inside all of us, the generative mysteries of the radical imagination are already birthing the blurry visions of the futures we are going to build. Whether in the dramatic moments when social movements directly confront the status quo, the ongoing campaigns of resistance or the day to day efforts of crafting more resilient communities, a future worth fighting for is emerging.

Around the world so many of us already feel it, taste it, dream it. The great re-imagining is already under way.

## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> **Patrick Reinsborough** has been involved in campaigns for peace, the environment, indigenous rights and economic justice for over twenty years. In 2002 he co-founded the *smartMeme* Strategy & Training Project as a vehicle to explore the intersections of social change strategy, imagination and narrative. *SmartMeme* has trained over 3,000 grassroots activists and partnered with over 100 organizations to win campaigns for justice, democracy and ecological sanity. He is the co-author of *Re:Imagining Change—How to Use Story-based Strategy to Win Campaigns Build Movements and Change the World* (PM Press 2010 - <http://www.smartmeme.org/book>). Patrick spends his time fighting for a better world, parenting, playing music for his friends, and wandering through the urban wilds of San Francisco. You can find out more about his work and download tools & other strategy resources at <http://www.smartMeme.org>.

<sup>ii</sup> The body of literature on the power of stories and their role in cognitive function is vast and diverse. A good overview article is “The Secrets of Storytelling: Why we love a Good Yarn,” by Jeremy Hsu *Scientific American*, September 18, 2008. Some useful resources for political application are Drew Weston’s *Political Brain* (Public Affairs, 2007) and a number of texts by George Lakoff including *Metaphors to Live By* (University of Chicago Press 1980) and *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think* (University of Chicago Press 2002)

<sup>iii</sup> The term Narrative Power Analysis comes from the work of the *smartMeme* strategy & Training Project ([www.smartMeme.org](http://www.smartMeme.org)) and can be more deeply explored in *Re:Imagining Change — How to Use Story-based Strategy to Win Campaigns, Build Movements and Change the World* (PM Press 2010) by Patrick Reinsborough and Doyle Canning. Other great books for exploring the application of narrative to social movements are Francesca Polletta’s *It was Like a Fever: Storytelling in Protest and Politics* (University of Chicago Press, 2006) and Stephen Dumcombe’s book, *Dream: Re-Imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy* (The New Press, 2007).

<sup>iv</sup> TINA—there is no alternative—is a phrase coined by British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in the early 80’s as part of her austerity campaign of shredding the British welfare system, instituting mass privatization and challenging organized labor.

<sup>v</sup> Edinger, Edward F. *Archetype of the Apocalypse: Divine Vengeance, Terrorism, and the End of the World* (Open Court, 1999)

<sup>vi</sup> <http://www.ussf2010.org>

<sup>vii</sup> <http://centerformediajustice.org>

<sup>viii</sup> <http://www.thepraxisproject.org>

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ix <http://www.movementstrategy.org>

x <http://www.smartMeme.org>

xi <http://www.ussf2010.org/pma>

xii The most well know articulation of this sentiment comes from Frederic Jameson and is usually quoted as "It is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism" as when it is quoted in the introduction to *Contours of Climate Justice: Ideas for Shaping New Climate and Energy Politics* in *Critical Currents* no 6. October 2009 edited by Ulrich Brand, Nicola Bullard, Edgardo Lander & Tadzio Mueller Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation Uppsala: Sweden Pg 12. However Jameson is rumored to have disclaimed the quotation.

xiii For an detailed analysis of the role of imagination in political struggles check out the author's essay *Decolonizing the Revolutionary Imagination* published in *Globalize Liberation: How to Uproot the System and Build a Better World* Ed. David Solnit (City Lights Press 2004)

xiv For a good summary of "false solutions" to the climate crisis check out *Rising Tide North America's Hoodwinked in the Hothouse: False Solutions to Climate Change* available at <http://www.risingtidenorthamerica.org/special/fsbooklet.pdf>. Other resources for tracking the rebranding of failed GMO seeds as "climate ready" can be found by following the ongoing work of Food First/Institute for Food and Development Policy [www.foodfirst.org](http://www.foodfirst.org) and the Organic Consumers Association [www.organicconsumers.org](http://www.organicconsumers.org). To learn more about the latest developments in the emerging field of synthetic biology check out the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholar's [www.synbioproject.org](http://www.synbioproject.org). For critical analysis on the implications and potential dangers check out *Extreme Genetic Engineering: An Introduction to Synthetic Biology* a report by the global technology watchdog ETC Group January 2007 available at <http://www.etcgroup.org/en/node/602>

xv For a good backgrounder on geoengineering technologies and proposals check out *Retooling the Planet: Climate Chaos in a Geoengineering Age* a report by the ETC Group Dec 2009 <http://www.etcgroup.org/en/node/4966>. For updates on the ongoing resistance to geoengineering check out the international H.O.M.E. campaign [www.handsoffmotherearth.org](http://www.handsoffmotherearth.org).

xvi Trevor Ngwane is the Organising Secretary of the Anti-Privatisation Forum, Johannesburg. He has been prominent in anti-apartheid, anti-debt, global justice networks for some years. More information about his organizing and analysis can be found in his article "Sparks in the Township" *New Left Review* July-August 2003 pg 37-56

xvii The poem "Killing TINA, embracing TABOO" by Dorothea Smartt can be found at <http://blog.platformlondon.org/content/killing-tina-embracing-taboo-writings-walls-6>. She credits Sai MuRai for coing the acronym T.A.B.O.O.

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<sup>xviii</sup> The Zapatista movement is well chronicled but one new and very important addition to the body of literature is Jeff Conant's *A Poetics of Resistance: The Revolutionary Public Relations of the Zapatista Insurgency* (AK Press 2010)

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