

Movements in a new America

Contributed by Ben Helphand
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A special issue of InTheFray Magazine.

The voting booth is often touted as the way that Americans can change their society â€” the site where democracy plays out in its purest form. But we live in an era where electoral politics has been diluted, its power leeching into the hands of pollsters and lobbyists. So where does this leave democracy? If one vote per citizen is not enough to overcome the influence wielded by corporations and the wealthy elite, then where should we look to find the new face of political engagement?

When our democratic institutions fail us, when citizens lose their ability to speak and be heard, Americans organize. Political and civic associations form a kind of test kitchen for democracy. It is here that we serve up new and classic combinations of citizen participation. The debate within these groups over organizing tactics is not just a matter of touchy-feely outreach and political correctness. It is a struggle over the very nature of democracy.

In this special issue of InTheFray Magazine, we take a look at this process in action. How do today's social movements organize themselves? In what ways are organizers dealing with the fragmentation of American society â€” its separation into bickering identity groups, its division into silos of single-issue organizations toiling in isolation? Has this generation of activists come up with innovative ways to bond communities and bridge their divides?

This month, we begin with a series of four articles. In "The new 'crisis' of democracy," we speak with the legendary and activist Noam Chomsky about the recent, encouraging signs of political protest around the world, and the barriers and backlash that continue to stand in the way of real change. In "The end of old-school organizing," Victor Tan Chen looks at United for a Fair Economy, a Boston-based economic justice group that has staked its success upon reaching out to communities of color, winning over sympathetic wealthy elites, and bringing the white working class back to progressive politics â€” a tall order for even the most visionary of activists. In "Elisabeth Leonard, Raging Granny," Henry Belanger profiles a veteran peace and justice activist whose life story shows us how much â€” and how little â€” the struggles against oppression have changed over the years. And in "World Trade Barricade," Dustin Ross and Victor Tan Chen offer us a glimpse of last month's protests in Cancun, where thousands of farmers and anarchists and environmentalists from around the globe converged to demonstrate against the World Trade Organization and its alleged bias in favor of "free-trade fundamentalism."

In November, we'll follow up with two more updates to our Special Issue. The stories to come include:

- A list of the Top 10 social justice organizations in the country â€” compiled by the editors with the help of activists across the country â€” and a chance for readers to choose their own favorite activists and groups.

- Maureen Farrell's profile of the Catholic Worker, a group that since the days of its legendary co-founder, Dorothy Day, has striven to "obliterate" the distinctions that separate the poor from everyone else.

- Tamam Mango's look at Palestinian Media Watch, a media advocacy group that is organizing individuals across geographic lines in a decentralized, democratic fashion.

- Victor Tan Chen's analysis of the global justice movement, which shut down Seattle in 1999, helped derail trade talks in Cancun last month, and is mobilizing for another huge protest next month in Miami.

- An interview with renowned Indian environmentalist Vandana Shiva, author of *Stolen Harvest: The Hijacking of the Global Food Supply* and founder of Navdanya, a movement for agricultural diversity and farmers' rights.

Ben Helphand

Projects Editor, InTheFray Magazine

Chicago

p.s. You'll notice a new look and feel to the magazine. Our redesigned site offers a range of new features, including a regularly updated blog (the reincarnation of our old "Pulse" department), the ability to post comments directly after articles, personalized user identities, automated printing and emailing of our online content, and a better-integrated Readers' Forum. We ask for your patience in the coming weeks as we work out the remaining bugs on the new site. Please send any feedback to webmaster-at-inthefray-dot-org.

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TOPICS > SOCIAL MOVEMENTS >

"The Other Superpower"

By Jonathan Schell. Published in *The Nation*. March 27, 2003.

URL: <http://www.thenation.com/doc.mhtml?i=20030414&s=schell>

"The Second Superpower"

Explanation of the term "second superpower" and its recent use by *The New York Times*. From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia.

URL: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_Superpower