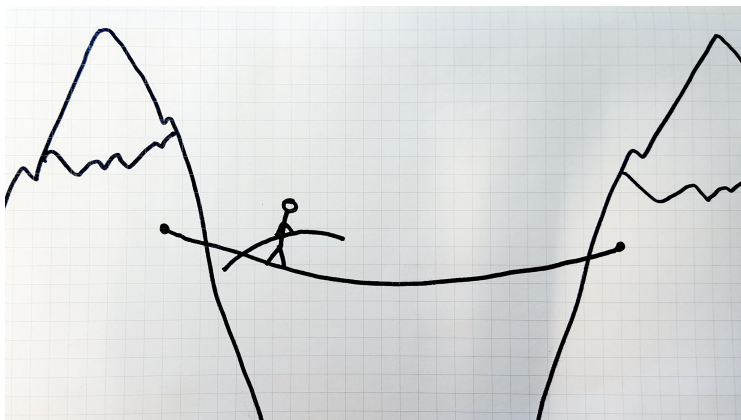


4 Things That Struck Me After Visiting Political Spaces in 14 US Cities



by Richard D. Bartlett

Earlier this year I spent 9 weeks touring the US with my partner. We stopped in Boston, Providence, Indianapolis, New York City, Washington DC, Tucson, Los Angeles, Santa Barbara, San Francisco, Oakland, Eugene, Portland, New Orleans, and Asheville.

We met folks in many different political spaces. Many of them do not self-identify as “left”, or even as “political”, but I’d say they’re all “organising”, and all of them share the “values of the left”: social justice, environmental justice, racial justice, etc.

I don’t know the collective noun to describe what they have in common so I’ll just list some of their keywords: grassroots, social entrepreneur, community development, cooperative, anarchist, activist, civil servant, journalist, consensus, sociologist, organisational development, movement building, artist, permaculture, non-hierarchical, cohousing, think tank, network, researcher. *Part of the struggle is that we’re lacking good names for what to call “us”. The new political actors in Spain call themselves “organised citizens” which I really like.*

This trip was a huge experience. I’ve been digesting for two months and still feel like I’m just getting started. I have

a strong urge to share some of my reflections, even the ones that are only half-digested. If you don't have capacity for a long read, you can skip to the end to see my conclusions :)

I may turn a nice phrase now and then but please keep in mind that I'm not a journalist. This is a highly subjective snapshot of my current thinking. I'll try to not masquerade as a social scientist or pretend to be objective.

I'm a White male outsider, so my sample is skewed and my biases are large. It was a high-speed long-distance trip, so most of my encounters were shallow. I'm going to say a bunch of challenging stuff, so if any of it triggers your rage button, my invitation is for you to take a breath, assume positive intent, and if possible, share constructive feedback to help me learn.

1. The welfare state makes a much bigger difference than I imagined.

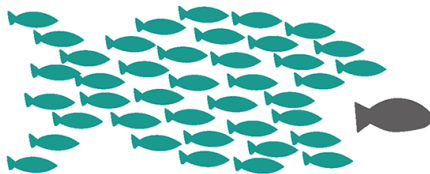
I grew up in a welfare state. After 30+ years of uninterrupted neoliberal economics, it is a pretty threadbare and punitive kind of welfare these days. But still, our socialised healthcare and unemployment systems protect a huge number of people from the worst consequences of bad luck or bad decisions.

Let me give you an example: my collarbone was broken in a traffic accident recently. I was evaluated in the field by an emergency first responder, shuttled to hospital by an ambulance, X-rayed and diagnosed by a specialist, and prescribed painkillers, a sling, and rest. I was back home within about 3 hours start-to-finish, and I think I had to pay a total of \$3, for the drugs. We have a “no fault” socialised accident insurance scheme, which means the cost of accidents is covered by taxes, and nobody gets punished for honest mistakes. So that night, the driver of the car who hit me visited my house with a hot meal and a genuine

apology. Everything about this story is ludicrously fantastical to my friends in the States.

Until I visited the US I didn't appreciate just how much difference the welfare state makes to people's choices. Social welfare makes it safe to fail. When you're safe, you can try risky things, like starting a co-op, prototyping a community currency, or running for local office. I felt the economic forces in the US pushing people into self-preservation mode, with little left over for creative or social endeavours. Frankly, I didn't find as much practical, local mutual aid work as I expected.

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We've known forever that organised workers have more power than the fat-cat boss. Organised citizens have more power than the oligarch. But you can't organise hungry people: first they need to be fed. This is why it is so important for organisers to work in the economic plane.

Trade unionists know this. The Black Panthers knew it too. It's old news, but it was brought into stark focus for me as we encountered hunger and homelessness on a scale I couldn't imagine existing in a wealthy country.

So if I were organising in the US, I'd **focus on material needs first**: improving the economic security of members and agitating for political change to shift the playing field for everyone. In practical terms, this could traditional workplace organising or fresh approaches like starting savings pools to wipe bad debt, or livelihood pods to mutualise the income of precarious workers. I saw signs that some social justice movements are heading in this direction, e.g. see Cooperation Jackson, the economic justice policy of the Movement for Black Lives, and the work of the New Economy Coalition.

Silicon Valley could be a massive leverage point here, if you can drag entrepreneurs' attention to solving real material problems (which means dragging investors away from their obsession with 100X returns). See Zebbras Unite, Indie.VC and Platform Coop for optimistic signs on that front.

2. The “race awareness” I have from growing up in Aotearoa New Zealand does not translate into the US context at all.

I call my homeland Aotearoa New Zealand. That’s two names stuck together, representing my understanding that we are **two societies** stuck together by Te Tiriti o Waitangi (the founding document of our country). Where I’m from, biculturalism is not a radical position, it’s a common experience.

In addition to te tiriti, there’s te reo (*the language*), whakapapa (*genealogy traced back to the first arrivals*), tikanga (*protocols and ways of being*), marae (*meeting grounds*), and many more tāonga (*treasures*) for Māori and Pākehā (*foreign*) people to draw strength from. *By the way: as a result of decades of language activism, it’s really common for Pākehā folks to know these words.*

I don’t want to gloss over the ongoing harm done to Māori by the arrival of Pākehā. Colonisation leaves many of the same bruises wherever it grips around the world. Māori

population was literally decimated as their land was expropriated by White immigrants. Within these brutally constrained boundaries though, Māori culture, language, identity, and values are thriving.

Many of the most potent organisers I know in Aotearoa New Zealand are Māori. They have a kind of credibility and tireless energy that I interpret as the result of having their roots planted in a living breathing alternative to capitalist modernity. **Their political demands are grounded in lived experience of a different social order.** One of the tragedies of genocide and slavery in the US is that it has cut off most Black and Native folks from that source of energy.

Before I visited the US, I thought about slavery mostly in terms of **racist subjugation**: the horror of having one people forced to serve the will of another. I hadn't considered the trauma of **cultural dislocation**, of being ripped from your land and ancestry, often with no way of tracing your bloodlines back home.

In Aotearoa New Zealand it is comparatively easy for me to encounter another self-governing autonomous culture. Te Ao Māori (the Māori world) is visibly distinct from Te Ao Pākehā. From time to time I'm invited to visit. The

invitations come more frequently as I learn how to be a good manuhiri (*guest*). The closer I come to Te Ao Māori, the more I'm able to imagine an alternative to the individualistic, disconnected, suicidal society I inherited.

I believe there is so much to learn when autonomous cultures encounter each other, without one trying to consume the other. These lessons are particularly urgent with the current rise of nationalist authoritarianism.

If I were working in the US I'd need new methods to make these encounters. I guess the first step would be to work with Black-led organisations, like the Kheprw folks I wrote about in April. I knew while I was in their spaces I was invited into a different logic, to use different language and tactics in pursuit of different aims. The *feeling* at Kheprw was unique among all the spaces we visited: encouraging, inclusive, optimistic, alive, connected. That is what "autonomy" feels like to me.

3. *Activist spaces are weakened by self-censorship.*

I was quite disturbed by my experiences in some activist spaces. I've been chewing on it for weeks, and the best way I know how to describe it is *censorship*: the feeling that there are important things not being said. I'll try to explain...

Over the past decade, as I started to understand my role in patriarchy, one of the first things I learned was **how to stop talking**. This is a great step! Wow, when I'm not talking, I can listen! I don't think anyone can be an effective ally to feminists without completing this first challenge.

So it is good to learn how to share space, but there is much more to being a good ally than shutting up. In my understanding of justice, it's not enough for me to stop participating in oppression and violence, **I have to get in the way**.

Coming to terms with oppressive systems like patriarchy and white supremacy is really hard work for anyone. It

takes a lot of study, self-interrogation and conversation. As a White man, it's really easy for me to mess up. The conversation can feel like walking a high-wire: one false step from me and we all topple down into this immense chasm of historical trauma. *Ah fuck sorry, what I meant to say was "I respect you and I have your back" but I can see how you heard "I want to be your White Knight"*.

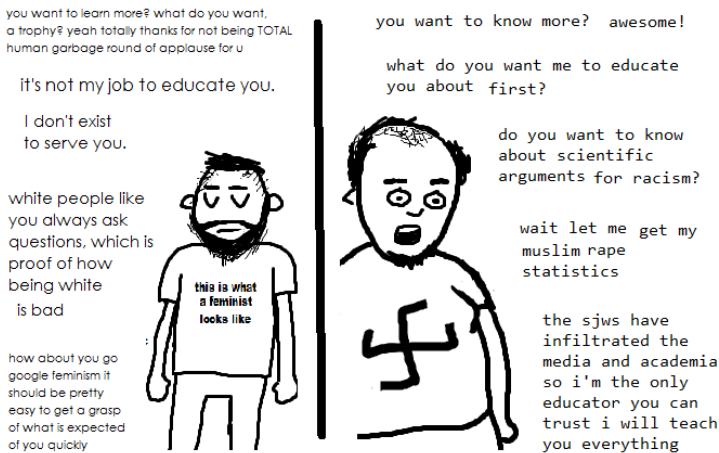
Even with the best intentions, I know I've done a bunch of harm by showing up to a traumatic conversation without enough knowledge or consideration to keep it safe for everyone. The only way I've learned how to do that less, is by *practice*. Over the last few years I've found a few people that are *willing* to have those clumsy conversations with me, so I don't have to inflict my learning experience on whatever activist meeting I happen to be in at the time.

I think that's what I mean by the *censorship* I picked up in some of the political spaces we visited. Folks don't seem to have good spaces to learn in, so they shut their mouth to avoid causing harm. If I'm not comfortable talking about sexism it's safer to say nothing.

At best, censorship results in reduced capacity. People with more privilege have more opportunity to shape the

world, so we need to learn how to talk about oppression unapologetically.

At its worst, censorship turns to rot, resentment and shame, which is a resource that neo-fascist recruiters know how to exploit. Trump said it is cool to be sexist again, and I'm sure a ton of men breathed a sigh of relief.



This one is not constrained to the US, so I have a sense that it might be my work for the next few years. Just as [SURJ](#) is hosting spaces for mostly White folks to learn and organise against White supremacy, I'm thinking I want to

host spaces for mostly men to learn and organise against patriarchy.

4. *I'm no help to anyone when I'm in shock.*

In the States I found myself repeatedly saying “Y’all don’t know how to grieve!” Time and time again I met people who were *organising*, when I think the best thing they could be doing is *recovering*. When we left Indianapolis, I wrote this piece about grief, trauma and shock.

It took me weeks to appreciate the irony: *ohhhh, I'm in shock too!*

I left the US behind me the way you leave a wildfire: sprinting in terror, not looking back. I was invited to Barcelona for the OpenDemocracy Team Syntegrity. A couple days in to the event, I was knocked over by a massive wave of feeling, crying on the couch as I tried to explain some of what I’d seen in the US.

The place is so fucking terrifying! We met folks in Arizona who are working against border militias, people who are openly *hunting for humans* the way other folks hunt for deer. The day after we left Portland two people were

murdered on a train in broad daylight after confronting a racist loudmouth. In California (a state with a multi trillion dollar economy), we saw thousands of people living in tents and makeshift shelter. The situation is fucking drastic, with many indicators that things are going to get worse.

The sheer scale of injustice and suffering stunned me. I could only start to make sense of it once I got far far away. With the privilege of distance, I could escape the daily assault and start to process the experience. There's no way for me to reckon with this kind of stuff without first feeling the sting of hot tears, the ache of empathy, the despair of powerlessness. I need to *feel my feelings* first, before I can act strategically.

For a more informed perspective on the role of trauma and therapy in political organising, I hugely recommend this article by liberation psychologist Megan Clapp: [Harnessing Pain and Burning It as Fuel for the Revolution](#).

One of the most brutally effective techniques of the Trump administration is to keep the resistance in shock: if you keep lashing people with *urgent* concerns, they'll never get

to the *important* work of building counter-hegemonic alternatives.

So if I were organising in the US right now I'd be looking for spaces to *grieve* and to *heal*. I've heard phenomenal things from people who have engaged with The Work That Reconnects so I'd start there.

Phew...

I'm feeling a degree of clarity I've been struggling for since last November. I have a set of bullet points I can hold in one hand:

- Follow the leadership of women and People of Colour.
- Focus on material needs. (Make allies in Silicon Valley.)
- Practice having difficult conversations without traumatising people.
- Find space to deal with my own trauma.
- Break out of urgency and into dreaming, scheming, strategising mode.

What strikes me now in writing this, is just how extraordinarily privileged I am to have the peace and space for contemplation and dialogue. My clarity is the product of thousands of miles of travel, hundreds of conversations, days of writing. The major question I'm left with is *how on earth can folks in the US find the **peace** to make sense of the present and dream of a future worth fighting for?*

And shit, I'm crying again.

p.s. If you want to encourage me to keep writing: please recommend this story, and if you're able, throw some coins in my hat on Patreon

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