

How to think about power (especially if you have some)

By Farhad Ebrahimi

For the Chorus Foundation, exploring the relationships between economic, political and cultural power has been a game-changer for their climate philanthropy.

In the social change world, we tend to use the word “power” a lot. But it’s not always clear what we’re referring to. Even when it *is* clear, what’s often *even clearer* is that we’re not referring to the same thing.

I’ve come to the conclusion that what we’re collectively referring to is an *ecosystem of power* – one in which there are different forms of power that behave and interact with each other in different ways.

An ecosystem, of course, is not just a list of things but rather the web of relationships among those things. And, while it can certainly make sense to focus on a particular part of an ecosystem, that focus is always going to be most effective when made in the context of the whole.

REALITY CHECK

Fifteen years ago, I was what you might call a “single-issue” guy, and my issue was climate change. I would tell you why it was the most important thing for me to be working on. I might have even told you why it was the most important thing for *you* to be working on. I was super fun at parties.

For the past 12 years, however, I’ve been running the Chorus Foundation. And as I’ve shared in the past, we’ve learned a tremendous amount from our grantees from over a decade of climate funding.¹ Most importantly, we’ve learned that the fundamental challenge of climate change isn’t identifying the

best policy or the most promising technology or the scariest science. It’s generating the political will to enact the best policy, adopt the most promising technology and heed the scariest science.

This realization led us to take a closer look at the landscape of power:

- The lack of organized **political power** on the part of the U.S. climate movement.
- The entrenched **economic power** of the fossil fuel industry.

- The deep **cultural power** of doing “business as usual” in places where that business has historically been done (e.g., the cultural footprint of the coal industry in Appalachia).

HOW WE THINK ABOUT POWER

What we’ve learned from our grantees over the years has had a tremendous impact on how we think about our work. It’s all about power now and no longer just about climate change. As a result, our mission statement now hinges on the following:

We support communities on the front lines of the old, extractive economy to build new bases of political, economic and cultural power for systemic change.

For us, political power is the ability to influence or control collective decision-making. When folks say “power” without any kind of qualifier, this is usually what they’re referring to.

We define economic power as the ability to produce, distribute, trade or consume goods and services. Economic power is most commonly recognized by some of its sources, e.g. the control of capital, the ability to organize labor or access to natural resources.

And cultural power is the ability to influence or control how we perceive and what we believe about the world around

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Ongoing work of grantee partners, such as Communities for a Better Environment's organizing to hold Chevron accountable for environmental justice impacts in Richmond, California, continue to inform the work of Chorus Foundation. Photo by David Gilbert, Amazon Watch.

us. It's a trick of our current system to misrepresent culture as simply a product; culture sets the parameters for what we believe is possible – not to mention what we believe is right or wrong.

Each of these 3 forms of power constitutes an ecosystem unto itself. For example, while some political donors may think of political power strictly in terms of elections, they are but 1 component of the overall ecosystem. Not all forms of political power need to work through established channels – nor should they, given the ways in which existing systems can marginalize or exclude certain voices. There is also people power: the ability to influence collective decision-making through protest, direct action and nonviolent civil resistance.

And each of these forms of power can be leveraged to build the others. Economic power can provide the nec-

essary financial resources to build political or cultural power. Further, political power can enact policies that either expand or contract the opportunities to build economic or cultural power. But we must do more to highlight the profound effect that culture has on our sense of what "politics" or "economy" are in the first place. Our culture – which is to say, our perceptions, beliefs, values and norms – undergirds literally every political or economic endeavor we might pursue.

THIS UNDERSTANDING OF POWER AFFECTS OUR WORK IN 4 WAYS

1. We need to situate ourselves in the larger ecosystem of power.

As funders, we fundamentally hold economic power. Chorus believes that this is the result of an economic system that is inherently extractive and exploitative.

Private philanthropy requires wealth inequality, and wealth inequality requires the extraction and consolidation of wealth. We must reckon with the fact that our very existence is the byproduct of systemic injustice and inequity. (See, I'm still super fun at parties!)

With this in mind, it behooves those of us in philanthropy to check our desires to build or leverage political and cultural power for ourselves. Political donors, I'm looking at you right now. But let's be honest, it's not like institutional philanthropy is entirely innocent, either.

2. We need to be explicit about who we're supporting to build power and to what ends.

At Chorus, we support organizations that build power in communities that have historically had power used against them, e.g., communities of color, Indigenous communities and working-class communities. We believe that asking these communities to turn out for things that are "in their best interest" without also building power in their favor is at best insufficient and at worst deeply problematic.

Our mission statement refers to building power for "systemic change," but what we're really talking about here is building power for a just transition.² Systemic change, when taken by itself, is actually not all that remarkable; systems change all the time. In fact, we might say that change – or transition – is inevitable. But justice is not.

One of things we've learned about climate change is that a clean energy transition is not necessarily a just one; if you're getting thrown under the bus, it doesn't really matter if it's solar-powered. We need to be clear on what we're saying NO to, what we're saying YES to, and how we get from NO to YES in a way that respects the dignity and meets the needs of everyone involved.

Just transition is clearly a critical demand from an equity perspective. But it's also the right strategy for multi-

issue work: It identifies root causes, it connects multiple issues and it weaves multiple strategies into something much bigger than the sum of its parts. I can think of no better framework in which to animate a place-based power-building strategy for systemic change.

3. It's critical that we support organizations to build all 3 forms of power in the broadest strategic sense.

To do this, we'll need to use all the tools in the toolbox because building multiple forms of power requires multiple kinds of resources. At Chorus, we started as a 501(c)(3), but we've since added a sister 501(c)(4) to support organizations that participate explicitly in electoral politics, as well as an aligned investment portfolio – all as coordinated pieces of the same strategy.³

This means that our investments must be held to the same criteria: Not only do we ask for beneficial social or environmental impacts, we ask how our investments might build or leverage economic power for the same communities that we support with our grantmaking.

4. We need to be clear on which decisions are appropriate for us to make.

We have a tendency in philanthropy to determine the “best” policy outcome on our own and then shop around for grantees as if they were nothing more than service providers to achieve that outcome. We also tend to impose our own issue silos on our grantees as if compartmentalization were somehow an effective approach to systemic change.

These practices need to stop.

If our grantees are going to be successful in building durable, lasting, multi-issue progressive power, then we need to give them the ability to navigate the entire ecosystem of power themselves. One of the easiest ways to do this is to provide long-term, general-operating support. At Chorus, we've organized our entire grantmaking strategy around such support.

WHAT'S NEXT FOR US

Our journey continues in the following ways.

We're continuing our line of inquiry around decision-making.

We're working with our grantees to explore radically democratic approaches such as activist-led grantmaking and participatory budgeting, and we're learning from folks such as the Boston Ujima Project. If being mindful of power dynamics is a first step, then our ultimate goal is to share decision-making power with our grantees and the communities that they're accountable to – if not hand it over entirely.

We're challenging the assumption that we should be the ones to see any return on investment.

We're supporting cooperative, nonextractive loan funds that are owned and controlled by the very communities they serve. We have been deeply inspired by The Working World in particular. A grant is ultimately a consumptive unit of economic power; you use it, and then it's

gone. A truly just transition will require that we learn how to hand over productive units of economic power as well.

We're pushing ourselves to study the implications of cultural power more deeply.

This applies both to our own grantmaking as well as to the landscape of cultural power within philanthropy itself. What are the unspoken assumptions in our sector? What could it look like to challenge those assumptions?

Ultimately, we're interested in a just transition for the philanthropic sector.

If our goal is to support truly transformative work, then it stands to reason that we ourselves will need to transform.

If these ideas resonate with you, then we'd love to talk. In the meantime, please check out NCRP's “Power Moves” toolkit, which helps funders determine how well they can build, share and wield power for equitable outcomes; as well as Justice Funders, a partner and guide for philanthropic transformation. ■

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Notes

1. Farhad Ebrahimi, “What we've learned after a decade of climate funding, and what we're doing instead,” Medium, November 30, 2015, <https://medium.com/chorus-foundation/what-we-ve-learned-after-a-decade-of-climate-funding-and-what-we-re-doing-instead-e29c945c8ce0>.
2. Learn more at <https://climatejusticealliance.org/just-transition/>.
3. To learn more about 501(c)(4)s, read this primer by the California Association of Nonprofits: <https://calnonprofits.org/publications/article-archive/616-what-should-nonprofits-know-about-501-c-4-organizations-especially-in-an-election-year>.

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