



Hegemony How-To: A Roadmap for Radicals

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Hegemony How-To is a practical guide to political struggle for a generation that is deeply ambivalent about questions of power, leadership, and strategy. Hopeful about the potential of today's burgeoning movements, long-time grassroots organizer Jonathan Smucker nonetheless pulls no punches when confronting their internal dysfunction. Drawing from personal experience, he provides deep theoretical insight into the all-too-familiar radical tendency toward self-defeating insularity and paralyzing purism. At the same time, he offers tools to bridge the divide between anti-authoritarian values and hegemonic strategies, tools that might just help today's movements to navigate their obstacles—and change the world.

Hegemony How-To: A Roadmap for Radicals Details

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Author : Jonathan Smucker

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Sean Estelle says

Some of the ideas repeat which in some ways is good - better to have a few core ideas than try to do too much; and at the it could have been tightened up a bit. However, with that said, the way it bounces between theoretical concepts and real-world examples is fantastic, and overall remains extremely accessible. I feel like this will definitely be one of my go-to books to give to both new organizers, and also to friends/comrades that aren't engaged in serious strategic power-building (although the other main contradiction I think is present in this book is that there is more room for productive tension with those whose project in the world is visioning the world we're building for - just because it's not contesting for state power doesn't mean it's not important work, necessarily.) Feeling conflicted even days after finishing it now!

Angie says

An extremely useful, practical book. Smucker pretty skillfully combines experience with theory. He's certainly made theory generally accessible. But, he does have a deep ambivalence towards "identity" politics and has created a clear hierarchy between class politics and all others. Fortunately, this doesn't detract much from the strategies he proposes, although it does undercut his final chapter.

Craig Werner says

Very good, useful, manual for people serious about creating progressive political change. Smucker's roots are in Occupy Wall Street (actually even farther back, but that's the primary point of reference) and he does a good job reflecting on both the strengths and failures of that movement. He's adamant that the left has to stop thinking of itself as "activist," a term that serves mostly to isolate it from the broad coalition that would be needed for real change. Written prior to the 2016 election, the book feels a bit "dated" in specifics, but if you can read past those, it's about as useful a political organizing manual as I've read since Alinsky's Rules for Radicals.

Sonya Huber says

Loved this book. Essential reading for building a non-sectarian movement to reclaim the country. Great organizing framework and fascinating sociological research woven into clear reflections on the pitfalls and potential for political work.

Maxwell says

The book opens with a vivid emotional anecdote from the author about his childhood growing up in

Lancaster County, Pennsylvania (after a great forward by Janice Fine). It is the perfect hook. I found myself drawn in from the first page, relating to the author and his experience growing up in a rural area, and also savoring stories of experiences I could only dream of (hitchhiking across the country at the tender age of 17).

Decades of the author's rich personal and political experience shape this roadmap for radicals. From the author's time in the antiwar movement, to international solidarity work, to his often behind-the-scenes leadership in the Occupy Wall Street movement, I felt like I had a one-on-one conversation with the author about his life, best lessons learned, and how to deploy them to shape my own work in Wisconsin.

A large chunk of the book is focused on meaningful advice (including actual tactics!) on how to get larger swaths of society involved in building the Left in America. That's probably what I found most helpful as someone who is working with an organization that needs to get more people involved. It is sandwiched between definitions of terms that are very academic and were mostly foreign to me. That said, I am VERY glad, indebted indeed, that the author did not dumb down the book and leave out these important terms and concepts. Now, I have a better understanding of them and how they play out in American politics.

Smucker's elucidation of the political identity paradox is quite interesting. When groups form and develop a sense of solidarity, their practice and rituals often pull them away from mainstream culture, and push others away from joining. Very important to be aware of in our work! The idea of prefiguring our movement as we want it to be, instead of operating in institutions that exist, and coercing them with a show of real power to do the bidding of "we the people," is also very meaningful and real in my work.

It ends on a positive note, with a nod to an America for "all of us." Reading this book inspired me to not lose hope, even in such a trying time, as it is written in such an intelligent, hopeful, and thoughtful voice, despite the real setbacks Smucker has faced in his own work, and in the work of broader organizations and movements.

I'll be buying copies for friends.

Job well done. A+!

Aaron Chu says

As someone who feels local to the 717 (Lancaster PA), I was surprised when I picked this book up from San Francisco and started reading it one day only to learn that the author was born and grew up in Lancaster. The book, as explained in the text, takes a neutral political stance to dissect the intricacies and to deconstruct the techniques of how to be political. The book is on point in calling out political actions that can be categorized under identity politics (ex. protest without a cause, without any political strategy, exclusionary inner circles etc.) without taking away its power and meaning those action is taken strategically. There is a lot of content and wisdom in the book and is a must-read for someone who wants to find the best way to contribute to a cause.

David M says

After an extended time away, I'm becoming political again. This book looks like essential reading. A review

from the New Republic

<https://newrepublic.com/article/14233...>

From having spent a couple years in my youth living in an intentional pacifist community, I can certainly testify to the problem he pinpoints. All too often activists are content to make a virtue of their marginal status; to settle for a subculture rather than try and build a movement.

Kevin says

The comrade who recommended this to me warned "the author might be too conservative for you", but as someone involved in political organizing I was curious to see what I could learn from this book and tried hard to keep an open mind. While I did garner some useful insights from it, though, I ultimately came away disappointed.

At the core of the book's argument is a dichotomy between movements primarily geared toward making a righteous but doomed stand and ones that seek to acquire power in order to change society - as the author notes, the use of the word "hegemony" in the title isn't just for show. Much of the left, he argues, is squeamish about power because of a justifiable reaction to its oppressive use by the ruling class, but if we seek to alter the intolerable status quo then we need to move beyond the LARPing of resistance by a self-selecting, insular "activist" class. To succeed we need to bring more than the "usual suspects" into our movements, yet we must contend with the reality that many of our potential allies in the general public are effectively inoculated against us - not just because of the ruling class' propaganda, but also to some extent by self-sabotaging behaviors of our own. The author uses his experience in Occupy Wall Street to illustrate many of these points, seeking to explain how it failed to become a sustainable political force despite a promising start. I think he understates the role of the state's ferocity in crushing the movement through a coordinated nationwide crackdown, but his points about the lack of strategic thinking in the movement that kept it from growing or from resisting repression are entirely valid.

The book's great and possibly fatal weakness was its reluctance to offer firm conclusions - a pretty big failure in something that advertises itself as "a practical guide to political struggle". As I implied above, it is clear that the author is significantly more liberal reform-minded than many in his intended audience, and it seemed as if he feared alienating more radical readers. As persuasively as he argues the need for radicals to seek actual power and to think strategically, he remained curiously vague about what he thinks this entails in practice. For just one example, at several points he urges readers to engage with existing institutions and groups, an idea likely to be controversial with his audience, yet fails to expand on this idea.

Thus the book seemed limited in what it could offer to those further left than Bernie Sanders, yet the author seeks to hide this behind "I'm not saying... I'm just saying..." passages, which feels dishonest. It feels very much as if the author wants to say "you're going to scare people off by talking about honestly about capitalism or endorsing socialist revolution, so rein in your aspirations", but for whatever reason was unwilling to own the implications of his arguments. So, while the book certainly gave me food for thought, I wouldn't recommend it to others enthusiastically.

Jimmy says

Smucker gives us a lot to chew on, but along side a fairly sober autopsy of the left his proposed solutions are a little uneven. The idea that it is possible to simply construct a new metanarrative (which Smucker rests his vision for the future on) is truly fantastic. More complicated visions for winning coalitions have been articulated by post-Marxism, but Smucker's engagement with these is limited (while he draws from Chantal Mouffe extensively his engagement with her concepts is both selective and limited, and no mention whatsoever is made of her and Ernesto Laclau's Hegemony and Socialist Strategy which would seem to be a natural touch-point for this volume; virtually no other theorists of this school are engaged with--neither Gorz nor Young, Mohanty or Fraser).

A worthy--if limited-- read for folks who are interested in building a winning left in the contemporary USA.

Ro says

Pretty good set of arguments and analysis on how progressive/leftist groups need to be less insular and self-satisfied, and take seriously the question of things like building real power (as opposed to always holding symbolic protests) and winning more people to your side and meeting people where they are at, and in general questions of strategy (rather than just developing the Correct Moral Position). Its probably a sign of how rapidly things are changing today, in the summer of 2018, that some of this stuff feels kinda obvious or even out-dated, with the rise of more institutionalized left-wing movements like the Democratic Socialists of America. But even then, much of the advice and analysis in this book is definitely timeless.

The only thing I would have liked to see is more empirical examples and examination of history, although the anecdotes and observations that are present in the book are excellent and weaved in nicely with the more abstract theory.

Brian Stout says

Outstanding: engagingly written, well-organized, comprehensive, and relentlessly focused on how we actually do this in practice. Smucker's general thesis: it's not enough to be right. We (progressives interested in social justice) need to win.

Writing of Gramsci, the great theorist of hegemony and the impetus for the book's deliberately provocative title: "He dismisses utopianists not for the content of their vision of their vision of the future, but for their lack of a vision or plan for how to move from Point A to Point B, from present reality to realized vision."

Aye, there's the rub, and a familiar frustration for any progressive watching the circular firing squad behavior of the social justice left.

As someone interested in the dual challenge of both building an effective social movement and linking that movement to already existing social movement infrastructure, the latter half of the book is especially good. Pragmatic, hard-hitting, grounded in his extensive personal experience and the best available theory.

On moving along the "spectrum of allies" to build a larger base of support: "Leaders have to provide

newcomers with things to do that actually add to the capacity of the burgeoning collective force." (Pg 159) A welcome reminder: it's the job of the movement to attract adherents.

Another passage is worth quoting at length:

"If the kinds of progressive changes we imagine are ever to be realized, it will be through the active participation of large numbers of teachers, nurses, factory workers, barbers, artists, service workers, students, religious communities, civic organizations, unions, allies within the existing power establishment, and, especially, soldiers, veterans and their families.

These participants will come as they are, and as such we must welcome them. They will give what they are willing to give, and we must affirm the smallest contributions (while also constructing 'ladders of engagement' for those who are eager to do more). Social movements that want to attract everyday folks cannot afford to have a high bar for entry. If we are to build a popular movement, we must accommodate a continuum of levels of involvement, as well as levels of political analysis." (Pg. 167)

Smucker also does a good job addressing the importance of storytelling and narrative, and of how to construct an effective and inclusive "we."

The core message of the book is one we progressives would do well to heed. His call for refocusing on movement-building infrastructure, on organization, leadership, strategy, and development is all to the good. Ultimately, however, I found myself wanting more. If the book is after all pitched (at least tongue-in-cheek) to "radicals", then many of us who read it are already in the choir, not just on content but on prescriptions. The key questions in my mind: what is that unifying frame? What is the content of an inclusive we? We've tried appeals based on race (Civil Rights Movement, Black Lives Matter), on class (Poor People's Campaign, Occupy, others), on human rights (the broader anti-war movement), on various forms of group identity (unions, environmentalists, etc). None have proven particularly effective at galvanizing a broad cross-section of our populace. So what else might work? A new initiative is trying beauty (<https://www.andbeautyforall.org>)... I'm not wildly optimistic. An element of the left is focusing on the notion of a "just transition" (<http://www.movementgeneration.org/wp-...>) but it remains far from mainstream.

And what of the "we"? Nationalism rubs many of us the wrong way, so too do narrow appeals to any particular aspect of our identities (gender, race, etc). So where does that leave us? Is it possible to conjure an "us" without a "them"? Many of us don't believe there is a personified enemy so much as a harmful system. But it's hard to fight a system.

Anyway, great as far as it goes. But the real work remains: how to build this thing?

Mary says

Parts of this book were 5-star, and parts of it were meh. Smucker has some very important observations, but also a few oversimplified points. I recommend reading it together with No Shortcuts (McAlevy). Their arguments complement each other nicely.

Evan says

Jonathan Smucker does a great job of threading the needle: being both theoretical and readable. He holds onto nuance and dives into the realms of politics and power analysis, and all the while he speaks with clarity, never getting lost in the insular activist lexicon that he critiques.

I learned a lot from this book. I am a better organizer for having read this book. Smucker shares a number of concrete ways in which we can be better leaders in social movements (being outward facing, crafting messaging that defines the greatest possible "we", etc.). Beyond bulletpoint best practices though, Smucker challenges us to think of how we can move past our small activist circles, "the narrative of the righteous few," and push for hegemonic change.

Thoughtful, challenging, maybe not 'hopeful' in any simple way, but I'm sure as hell glad he's on our side as we do the hard work ahead.

Kai says

there's a lot to like about Smucker's approach here. Hegemony How-To is grounded in a critique of left politics and activism as the terrain of cool kids clubhouse, and a proposition of tactics for winning power by opening to disaffected everyday people. Smucker is totally done with the prefigurative anarchism, the idea that we can win without seizing power. if we really want to win, this isn't good enough. I agree. there are a decent amount of practical steps offered here for organizing popular power, including some of those that make regular leftists shudder (branding!!). aesthetics and language matter, it turns out! this is good. this is a helpful book, clearly written, for an audience it can truly help.

but there's something here that is just a little bit off here, and i can't quite place my finger on it. is it the formal language (a la Laclau and Mouffe) that lacks any political content? is it the absence of a strategic analysis of state power, or party politics? is the account of identity and subjectivity a bit too fluid? i dunno. anyway. good book.

Moti Rieber says

By an Occupy Wall Street activist and progressive organizational specialist. Pertinent critique of OWS (too focused on the symbolic, not enough focused on building an infrastructure that could continue and build on the powerful beginning). Argues that the left must get better at fighting for power as opposed to being a self-righteous social club. There are many people who could agree with us, or who pretty much already agree with us but haven't been activated, and it's up to us to give them a means and a motivation to get engaged. Not so much a how to, more of a why to, or a what to. Really worth reading for people who are into building left political power.
