**Headline:** How Inclusionary Social Movements Succeed

By Colin Greer and Eric Laursen

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**Source:** Human Bridges

**Credit Line:** *This article was produced by* [*Human Bridges*](https://observatory.wiki/Human_Bridges)*.*

**Tags:** Politics, Identity Politics, North America/United States of America, Social Justice, Immigration, History, Women’s Rights, Economy, GOP/Right Wing, Democratic Party, Opinion

**[Article Body:]**

Social movements are powerful engines for change, and they coalesce around a vast range of issues, causes, and communities. But they fall into two basic categories: inclusionary and exclusionary.

Inclusionary social movements attempt to “widen the ‘we.’” That means they work to expand the circle of power, securing the allegiance of a widening galaxy of groups by appealing to their material needs and desire for participation and empowering them to make decisions, thus building a caring society and driving democracy forward. The examples are legion, especially in the U.S. postwar decades: the labor movement, civil rights, women’s rights, LGBTQ+ rights, AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), and the anti-nuclear and environmental movements.

Exclusionary social movements attempt to concentrate power and privilege in a narrow but fiercely loyal category of people. They do so by embracing—in the most negative form—the three perennial drivers of individual and social development: the impulse to bond, the scarcity mind, and historical and trans-historical trauma. The Ku Klux Klan and other racist movements of the first half of the 20th century are examples of social movements driven by the scarcity mind, as are the Tea Party and today’s Christian nationalism, QAnon, and MAGA.

The driving force behind inclusionary and exclusionary social movements is a desire to control the center of power. We define the center as not just the government and the commercial sector, but the common sense that people carry with them: how they view the world and human society, and what they believe is their responsibility toward them. The degree of influence they exercise over the center—their ability to govern—is also the degree to which a social movement can realize its vision for the whole society.

Given their desire for control, movements inevitably clash, and in the process, attempt to expand their base by building off their adherents’ antagonism. The New Deal/Great Society administrations exploited the hunger for change provoked by the Great Depression to build a coalition that eventually spanned farmers, industrial workers, and underserved racial and ethnic groups and brought about enormous social advances. The conservative [1971 Powell Memorandum](https://scholarlycommons.law.wlu.edu/powellmemo/) was, in effect, a blueprint for building popular opposition to the New Deal/Great Society consensus. The waves of right-wing populism that followed moved the Republican Party toward nativism and xenophobic nostalgia while targeting the inclusionary impulse as un-American.

**Is There Hope for a New, Inclusionary Social Movement?**

Inclusionary and exclusionary impulses occupy two poles on a spectrum of social and political consciousness: the former, as historian Linda Gordon writes, driven by disappointments, the latter by grievances.

With a malignant, grievance-fueled, exclusionist social movement in the political ascendancy today, this may seem to be a less-than-ideal time to launch (or relaunch) a movement founded on inclusivity. Any effort to do so must confront toxic elements, including:

* Rejection of empathy for poor, marginal, and traditionally disempowered groups;
* Alienation from a wider collective social identity not centered on grievance;
* A punishing brand of religiosity;
* Loss of faith in government as a tool for implementing broadly inclusionary social programs; and
* A culture of debt and austerity that reinforces the scarcity mind.

There are reasons to believe, however, that a new inclusionary movement is not only possible but also practical. While political polarization and an appeal to nativism and culturally narrow nostalgia have enabled exclusionary movements to gain and consolidate power over the past five decades, they only paper over an increasingly widespread understanding that people’s material needs are being ignored. This manifests itself as:

* Immiseration: an eroding standard of living for working-class Americans;
* Vast economic inequality and barriers to upward mobility, affecting even the upper-middle-class;
* Relentless austerity, creating a sense that the economic and social problems the government traditionally has addressed are insoluble;
* The undermining of basic services—Medicaid, Disability Insurance, and public infrastructure—that an increasingly broad range of people have come to rely on materially and morally; and
* Alienation generated by the right’s relentless efforts to keep its base loyal by scapegoating racial and religious minorities and the LGBTQ+ community.

Addressing these disappointments is impossible without the widest possible social consensus. That being the case, they constitute an invitation to propose changes that bring society back together, even when the dominant movement is authoritarian and exclusionary.

There are deeper resources as well that an inclusionary movement can draw upon:

* A reservoir of goodwill and legitimacy that popular government enjoys even in the worst of times.
* The historical achievements that confirm social policy driven by inclusionary social movements can improve the lives of the majority.
* The plasticity of the human mind. Our minds are more flexible, capable of more transformation and growth than we think, and human interaction is often the leverage that enables us to change our minds.
* The persistence of variety. While the range of political and economic structures on offer has lately appeared to narrow, this has not been the case for most of human history. Even today’s mainstream political parties—in the U.S., Republicans and Democrats—were founded in opposition to the existing political establishment or in a conscious effort to address issues and conditions it was ignoring. There is no reason to believe our choices or our inventiveness are more limited now.

This places the inclusionary impulse in the mainstream of our expression as a human culture: something that an exclusionary movement can only occupy partially and temporarily.

**The Challenge of the Third Force**

Exclusionary social movements have been the fuel that drives every reactionary turn from the end of affirmative action to anti-immigrant backlash to the defunding of government at all levels. But any fuel requires a match to ignite it. The match in this case is the Third Force.

The Third Force consists of society’s elites: propertied individuals and families who accumulate most of the national wealth, control access to it, and pass it on as inheritance, and the institutions that defend and promote their interests. It occupies the deepest seats of power and manipulates the state and the public to its ends. Its objective is to minimize its required contribution to the common good and maintain the governing power’s devotion to the state-capitalist system.

The Third Force is not a social movement, however, but a power vector. It achieves its ends by two routes:

* **Exploiting the three drivers:** By leveraging the impulse to bond, the scarcity mind, and historical and trans-historical trauma, the Third Force nurtures the growth of exclusionary movements that feed off these forces financially, and encourages them to direct their resentments against marginal groups that benefit, however inadequately, from government social programs.
* **Capturing social movements:** The Third Force tends to promote exclusionary movements, with which it has the most natural ideological affinity. But it can also capture inclusionary movements when reliance on elite knowledge and resources creates distance between movement leadership and goals.

At the global level, the Third Force has succeeded over the past century in promoting a succession of economic regimes that augment its ability to accumulate wealth: the gold standard, the postwar Bretton Woods monetary management system, the dollar-based system of floating rates that followed, and the neoliberal regime of fiscal austerity that has now prevailed for decades. At the national level, the Third Force fights to deepen its influence over the electoral process and the media: for example, the elite class bankrolled the lawsuit leading to the 2010 *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* decision that enabled corporations and other outside groups to spend unlimited money on elections.

The end result of the Third Force’s constant application of pressure is to turn society and its economy into what social scientist Peter Turchin has called a “[wealth pump](https://peterturchin.com/book/end-times/)” that enriches elites at the expense of everyone else.

**Self-Inflicted Wounds: How Inclusionary Social Movements Undermine Themselves**

The Third Force, especially in tandem with an exclusionary social movement, poses a formidable barrier to any inclusionary movement seeking power. At the same time, weaknesses in inclusionary movements can make them vulnerable to manipulation and undermine solidarity.

**Letting the Third Force in:** Once an inclusionary movement has matured and is recognized as a viable political opposition, it finds itself competing for society’s political and cultural center. To do so, it requires greater resources to continue growing and carry on the struggle on a larger scale.

This makes it a magnet for the Third Force, which will seek to influence the movement’s leadership by exploiting its need for money in exchange for diluting its commitment to the practical needs of its base. Political power becomes an end in itself, as the leadership becomes alienated from its base and comes to rely on coercive measures to maintain its position. This, in turn, allows malignant elements to assert themselves.

**Failing to understand the big ask:** Every social movement passes through three phases: grassroots movement, campaign, and government. Face-to-face meetings in private homes and community spaces—the proverbial “kitchen table”—are where new, more inclusive communities and social visions begin to coalesce and build goodwill, where, in the words of philosopher Theodor W. Adorno, they can “make what is being lost and invisible a reality of thought.”

At some point, the movement will pose a “big ask”: an undertaking that is critical to one or more segments of its coalition but is especially difficult for other groups to endorse. This could be helping another ethnic or religious group obtain rights they were previously conditioned to think belonged to their members alone, or agreeing to treat that group’s members as their equals in the job market. In either case, the movement and its leadership must listen carefully to other groups’ concerns and be prepared to answer the question, “What’s in it for us?”

Understanding and responding effectively to the big ask is essential to keeping an inclusionary movement together as it widens. Failing to address the needs and desires of all groups in the coalition conveys to the public that they are not being heard and that the leadership is not representing them strongly and sincerely. This becomes all the more likely when the leadership comes under the influence of the Third Force.

**Failing to celebrate the inclusive movement’s achievements:** These achievements, while never unchallenged by the Third Force and exclusionary movements, embed themselves in the culture and become part of its way of life. When the leadership no longer sees celebrating its role in building a freer, more inclusive society as compatible with its desire to retain power, it loses touch with the process around which the inclusive movement initially coalesced.

Over time, the movement’s rank and file forget that the goals around which they solidified—the right to vote, security in old age, the right to organize, and freedom from racial and gender discrimination—were not the work of the government but their own, attained as a social movement.

“The fact that these achievements are under attack,” Linda Gordon argues in her 2025 book, *Seven Social Movements That Changed America*, “should not keep us from celebrating what was accomplished—and understanding that these gains were produced by a social movement.”

Celebrating these accomplishments does not mean glossing over failures. Rather, the movement must continually explore how it can build on the lessons from its past successes to create a civic solidarity that doesn’t rely on the allocation of blame.

**Failing to value local knowledge:** As we noted earlier, inclusionary social movements are built at the kitchen table and around kitchen table issues, as perceived by the public who experience them and who, most often, best understand how to address them. Mobilizing public support is done most effectively when it is informed by this local knowledge. Often, however, as the movement grows and becomes more professional organizationally, the leadership comes to disdain local knowledge in favor of elite opinion. The perceived distance widens between the leadership and the movement’s base, who come to feel that their experience and their contribution are being shunted aside.

Once in government, the leadership may experiment with giving local bodies more direct control of services that address community needs and the opportunity to apply local knowledge to meet those needs. This results in a more democratic decision-making process, more equal power relationships, and better feedback about the government’s work.

Unfortunately, these initiatives seldom receive the time, attention, or funding needed to chalk up successes and build a constituency. This was the case with the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), which was established in 1964 and ran many of the Great Society programs under Lyndon B. Johnson’s presidency. Subsequent Republican administrations were able to dismantle the OEO without much opposition from the groups it served.

The effect of this cycle is to alienate the base and brand the movement as a vehicle for the technocratic elite.

**Failing to universalize promises:** When progress for one segment of the movement is seen as mitigating progress for another group, exclusionary elements are encouraged, and cultural differences can overwhelm the universal messages that keep the movement together.

Insisting on the rights of women, people of color, immigrants, gender nonconforming individuals, and other marginalized groups to equal participation and representation in the movement and its campaigns is essential to fulfilling the movement’s promise to these groups. The challenge is to balance this demand for the rights of the marginalized with an understanding of the adverse threads of experience that have converged for white Americans, from concrete issues like economic precarity and loss of workers’ clout in the jobs market to a perceived loss of status as both members of a dominant group and citizens of a dominant global power.

Balancing the concerns and demands of all sides of the movement is especially difficult in an austerity environment in which allocation of resources is framed as a zero-sum proposition. Previously marginalized groups—such as working-class whites—who gained a measure of social and economic advancement, in part by pressing their demands as members of a specific ethnic group and as part of a larger working class, forget that they themselves have benefited the most from government programs and initiatives aimed at promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion.

They can be manipulated into a state of social entrapment as the impact of that prior success becomes embedded in their expectations, and they blame the government for their current downward mobility, rather than the economic order and the impact of policies benefiting the Third Force. These groups can then be maneuvered into a scarcity mindset and fail to see that other groups—for example, Hispanics, Asians, and African Americans—are making the same demands they once did, simply because, as working-class people, they share the same vulnerabilities.

In the face of these tensions, fostering a moral logic of just distribution becomes increasingly difficult. Refocusing on the common material needs that sparked the inclusionary movement to begin with is critical to reviving a universal message. One element of this is to emphasize forgiveness and restitution, encouraging working-class whites to view racial and gender differences as part of human experience and expression and embrace them as embracing themselves.

**Failing to consider the continuing impact of malignant bonding, the scarcity mind, and trans-historical trauma:** These drivers are latent in inclusionary as well as exclusionary movements; ignoring them can erode the leadership’s affinity with portions of the public, causing the movement to lose momentum even when it is winning significant victories.

Guarding against this should be a conscious part of any inclusionary movement’s organizing and outreach strategy; otherwise, the three drivers can open a channel for an exclusionary movement or movements to regain momentum. Examples include the purging of radical leaders in the labor movement during the McCarthy era and, most recently, efforts by corporations and major universities to accommodate the political programs of the party in power. Such actions, seemingly politically expedient, erode the movement’s base and rob it of momentum.

However, the three drivers can be resisted and reversed, inspiring a new inclusionary movement. For example, by focusing the movement’s message on actual conditions of scarcity rather than searching for a marginal group to blame. Doing so is challenging but not impossible. Earlier, we noted the plasticity of the human mind and the persistence of variety in our political and economic structures. And in our [first article](https://observatory.wiki/Widening_the_%E2%80%98We%E2%80%99), we noted Benjamin Libet’s demonstration of the “free won’t” (as opposed to free will): humans’ capability to veto predictions generated deep in the brain.

**Failing to respect the boundaries of the holding environment:** The term “holding environment” was originally used in psychological literature to describe the conditions making for a healthy childhood. We borrow it here to delineate a social and political context in which the people feel emotionally understood, their disappointments and grievances recognized and taken seriously, and they are actively involved in a common quest to actualize a universal set of values reflected in a shared common sense.

Also referred to as the caregiving sector, the holding environment is a constant in social life, existing at all times, whether the center is dominated by exclusionary or inclusionary movements. But it typically does not call attention to itself as a distinct force in society. As such, it forms the necessary basis—the legitimation—for any social movement that seeks to develop an inclusive response to the three drivers of individual and social development. It does so by generating a reserve capacity: a store of trust and assurance, otherwise known as goodwill, which a social movement can draw upon when its goals are in sync with the holding environment’s social function.

On a practical level, the holding environment consists of delivery systems and volunteer networks reflecting people’s impulse to engage in mutual aid. These have ranged historically from labor unions to volunteer organizations, like AmeriCorps VISTA, Habitat for Humanity, and Points of Light, to local food banks, coalitions for the homeless, Boys and Girls Clubs of America, volunteer fire departments, and social services affiliated with religious institutions. Less formal community initiatives like Food Not Bombs and grassroots disaster relief efforts that arise in response to catastrophes, like Hurricane Katrina and the fires that struck Los Angeles County in January 2025, flow from the same impulse and address similar needs.

While social movements are inherently political, the holding environment operates in a non-political, “civic” dimension. Critical to any inclusionary social movement’s success, however, is its ability to establish an unformulated solidarity with the holding environment, which enables it to draw on the latter’s reserve capacity. This ability derives from its adherence to moral and ethical imperatives that are inherent in the holding environment.

Foremost among these is the shared mission of ameliorating the conditions of the neediest. Frequently, these also include:

* Ensuring that everyone has access to vital services (for example, education, housing, health care, and public safety);
* Ensuring that all members are cared for in the event of a natural or artificial disaster; and
* Ensuring that everyone feels that someone will listen and respond if they have a grievance or pressing need.

Together, adherence to these imperatives ensures that everyone feels they partake of a basic goodwill expressed through the community and have the opportunity to better their position.

Both exclusionary and inclusionary social movements attempt to form an affinity with the holding environment: the former by promoting charitable organizations (for example, Points of Light) as the most appropriate to address the needs of those considered worthy, without involving the government, the latter by advocating a universalist approach, leaving no one behind, often with the aid of the government (for example, Social Security, Medicare).

This unformulated solidarity has the most to offer to the success of inclusionary movements because the holding environment’s grounding in the impulse to engage in mutual aid bolsters the movement’s goal of building a caring society around a wider “we.”

But in either case, an unformulated solidarity should remain just that, respecting the independence of the holding environment; a social movement that attempts to turn this affinity into a stronger and more formal organizational tie risks losing access to the holding environment’s reserve capacity.

**Conclusion: Nurturing Inclusivity in Dark Times**

Inclusionary and exclusionary social movements inevitably clash. Every movement, no matter how successful, will at some point meet resistance and experience at least partial reversal. Its goal, then, must be to sustain its period of ascendancy long enough to achieve its principal goals and to embed these so deeply in the social structure that they are irreversible.

Even in periods when an exclusionary movement dominates, the seeds of a new, inclusionary movement are always sprouting, nurtured by the achievements of the last period of inclusionary dominance. To stay in command of the center long enough to achieve its goals, it needs to maintain a high level of public support. It can only do so if it pays attention to and draws on local knowledge, actively resists co-optation by the Third Force, and takes care not to fall victim to the self-inflicted wounds we detailed above.

If it can avoid these pitfalls, an inclusionary movement, once it acquires a share of power or forms a government, has the opportunity not just to reform the system but to remake and redirect it, bringing about profound social and cultural change. This is, in part, because addressing people’s practical needs, making them feel that they are listened to and represented, instills in them a greater acceptance of cultural diversity. Not only can the movement then become more inclusive, but so can society.

*Note: This is the final article in a three-part series on the role of social movements in bringing about transformative change. The other articles in the series are “*[*Widening the We*](https://observatory.wiki/Widening_the_%E2%80%98We%E2%80%99)*”* *and “*[*The Growth of Malignant and Exclusionary Social Movements*](https://observatory.wiki/The_Growth_of_Malignant_and_Exclusionary_Social_Movements)*.”*