If someone challenges that what I'm talking about isn't really socialism, I can refer back to the foundational slogan that, "socialism means workers' control over the means of production." To me, workers' control means *democratic* workers' control. Certainly, different people have different visions of socialism. But if we find the idea of worker democracy appealing, we can seize the concept of socialism for our own uses and sculpt it to satisfy our own desires for justice, equality, and freedom.

Conclusion

Expect to finish the conversation without them agreeing with you. End it on a light or positive note instead of a sour one. Undoing a lifetime of propaganda about capitalism and socialism will take a lot more than a single conversation. Your short-term goal is to stimulate enough curiosity that they want to have this conversation again in the future. Hopefully as your union organizing makes gains your conversations about socialism will too, and these things will reinforce each other as theory and practice develop together.

We'll overthrow capitalism when we've transformed our minds and our social relations and not one second before. It'll take at least a lifetime to get there, and each step along the way is essential. Rather than aim for immediate victory in these conversations, play the long game and enjoy the ride.

The Question for an Organizer Is What the Wing Is for a Bird

"You can get all your ideas across just by asking questions, and at the same time you help people to grow and not form a dependency on you. To me it's just a more successful way of getting ideas across." – Myles Horton in conversation with Paolo Freire in the book *We Make the Road by Walking.*

Myles Horton co-founded the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee in 1932 and developed a model of popular education that played an important role in stimulating the bottom-up leadership of both the 1930s labor movement and the 1960s civil rights movement. Horton paid close attention to crafting and wielding questions as an essential tool of grassroots organizing.

When I observe someone organizing around a political or workplace problem, the first thing I pay attention to is how they are asking questions. Is the organizer just asking questions to pull the other person into the conversation without really listening to them? Is the organizer just waiting their turn to say what they think the answer is? Are the questions just a subtle way for the organizer to control the conversation? Bad question-asking is as useless and harmful as trying to boss other people around.

Rather, good question-asking is for a grassroots organizer what the wing is to a bird. More than a tool, it is the basic appendage the organizer uses to maneuver through social relationships and political ideas. Like a sparrow that dives and weaves through thick forest with ease, so does the adept organizer use questions for every dip and turn. Both flight and posing good questions promote a freedom to explore.

Yet, organizing discourse pays scant attention to question-asking. Organizing guides will tell you what questions to ask in certain circumstances, and while I think such guides are often very useful (I write about traditional 1-on-1 organizing conversations for confronting workplace problems at tinyurl.com/OrganizingConversations), there's also a more fundamental way that good organizers use questions.

Question-asking can be a mode of communicating ideas. On its surface, asking questions might only seem appropriate for an organizer when the organizer doesn't know something. On the contrary, asking questions is also effective when the organizer does know something.

> *"So I just found that if I know something well enough, then I can find a way in the discussion that's going on to inject that question at the right time, to get people to consider it. If they want to follow it up, then you ask more questions, growing out of that situation."* – Myles Horton

Organizing is about bringing people together to take action to solve common problems (I use the term "organizer" to refer to anyone who does this, not as a professional designation or self-appointed authority). But before people can take action together, they have to understand their social context and how their power can be leveraged by coming together with others. Asking questions is that part of organizing that generates shared understanding that makes collective action possible.

> *"I use questions more than I do anything else. They don't think of a question as intervening because they don't realize that the reason you asked that question is because you know something. What you know is the body of the material that you're trying to get people to consider, but instead of giving a lecture on it, you ask a question enlightened by that. Instead of you getting on a podium you put them on a podium."* – Myles Horton

Reformulate Ideas as Questions

Let's make this concrete with a simple example. In a traditional 1-on-1 organizing conversation there's a place in the conversation where the organizer should warn people against the dangers of being loose-lipped about plans to take collective action against the boss. Say a group of workers are planning to walk into the boss's office before shift change to demand that some workplace problem be addressed. Many workplace actions have been scuttled by workers who are eager to fight back and excitedly tell a few too many people what they're planning to do. The

address the reasonable concern about what this means for larger economic structures and how it contrasts with capitalism where bosses have all of the formal authority. I would respond by tying what's good about workplace socialism (aka, democracy) to what's good about the idea about larger scale applications of socialism writ large (aka, democracy).

"[Affirm:] Surely, socialism isn't some land of make-believe where we all declare ourselves millionaires. [Answer:] Instead of having a small clique of rich people decide what's best for everyone, what if everyone had a say in these decisions? I think people making decisions based on their own needs and sense of fairness, while far from perfect, is a better idea than letting rich people make decisions for everyone based on how much personal profit it will bring to them. If workers making decisions together at work is socialism for the workplace, then workers making decisions together in society is socialism for everyone. [Redirect:] Do you think that's possible?"

There's a million different directions this can go, but whatever direction they decide to take this conversation, it's worth tying it back to some idea of worker democracy. One reason worker democracy seems so foreign at first is that workers are typically given so little influence over decisions. You don't want to get stuck trying to imagine every little detail about what organizational structures would make a workplace or society more democratic.

But you do want to emphasize that people making informed and collective decisions is actually pretty natural. When people have done the hard work to build the power to demand their voice be heard, then setting up forms of democracy is the easy part. It's straightforward to imagine workers at a staff meeting deciding that safe sidewalks are important and directing the boss to fix the issue. While how this process works at larger scales can require a little creative thinking, in my experience it's pretty easy to piece together some basic ideas of how worker democracy might operate logistically. Whatever the scale and whatever the issue, socialism is the idea that people should have democratic control over decision-making.

Common Reactions to the Idea of Workplace Socialism

Before people agree with an idea that's new to them, they need to go through all of the objections that come to mind. People objecting is a natural way of processing their thoughts about a new idea, so do your best not to get defensive. When you listen and show respect to people then they are more likely to be open to new ideas.

"*If we had a competent boss, they'd understand how important this issue is and they'd deal with it and then we wouldn't have this problem. It seems a lot more practical to get a better boss than to overthrow the whole economic system.*"

The hope for a benevolent boss is the most common response I run into when trying to tie immediate grievances to larger economic systems.

Try to gently challenge what they say and prompt them with questions about what it would be like to think about this differently. The method of affirming their concern, answering the question in my own terms, and then putting the question back to them is useful for these kinds of conversations.

I could reply with, "[Affirm:] Yea, that does sound like a tall task. [Answer:] The way I see it, it's socialism when we as workers get what we want. So whatever it takes to get what we want, I'm for it. If we cause a stir and they give us a new boss who fixes the icy sidewalks, good for us. But I don't think a new boss will fix the other problems we're facing, like increasing healthcare costs. [Redirect:] What if we started small and achieved a small degree of socialism by getting the sidewalks fixed, then we fought for more socialism in getting a decent raise, and then fought for even more socialism by getting an affordable healthcare plan, and we just kept fighting for what was good for workers?"

"*Ok, but if we let the workers decide everything we'll just give ourselves huge raises and then the company will go broke and we'll all lose our jobs.*"

Good, we're making progress now. They've temporarily conceded that workplace socialism is a good thing for workers. Now we just need to

common result of oversharing such sensitive information is that word gets back to the boss and workers get individually called into the boss's office to be yelled at, disciplined, or fired. But if the organizer goes around insisting to coworkers, "Don't tell our plans to anyone," that can feel bossy and patronizing.

Rather than expressing this idea to coworkers in the form of a direction, it's best to reformulate this idea in the form of a question. "What do you think the boss would do if they heard about our plans?" The organizer already knows the answer, but that's not what's important. In response to such a question, the coworker will think through the power dynamics at work. Most workers have a pretty strong and intuitive sense of how a hostile boss will respond if they learn about worker plans for an action. When given the opportunity to think that through, most workers will realize for themselves the importance of not letting this info get into the wrong hands. What's important about expressing ideas as questions is that it encourages people to think for themselves about their circumstances. When they come to the idea by reflecting on the situation for themselves, then they'll believe it much more firmly because they'll know *why* they believe it.

To demonstrate further, let's continue the example. Say the boss is out sick on the day workers are planning to march into their office. Perhaps the organizer thinks it's best to delay the action until the boss is back instead of trying to take action against the assistant supervisor. Rather than going around commanding everyone, "We must not do this today and wait for the boss to be back," it's much more effective to just ask coworkers, "Should we go ahead with our action or wait until the boss is back?"

If a coworker expresses an idea that the organizer is unsure about, the organizer can respond again in the form of a question. A coworker might declare, "This issue is too important to wait, we have to act today." Resist the urge to respond with a directive ("We must wait") or counter-statement ("Acting today would be ineffective"), and instead respond again with a question. An organizer can ask, "Do you think the assistant supervisor has the power to give in to our demand?"

The Logic of Question-Asking

Walking through thought-processes together using questions and checking in at each step for agreement, alternative ideas, and resolution, is a very different form of discussion from presenting complex ideas all at once and then debating people about them. The latter is the approach that people take when they mistake the task of the organizer as forcefully persuading people of things.

Let's synthesize the main ideas from the examples and discussion above by distilling the logic of good question-asking. **If you have an idea you want to express to others in an organizing context, you can turn it into a question by first backing up and asking yourself why you think that idea is valuable.** For example, perhaps you think it's worthwhile to wait until the main boss is back at work because the assistant supervisor doesn't have the power to concede your demand and will have to relay the demand back to the main boss anyway. But if the main boss hears the demand only second-hand from the assistant supervisor, they won't feel the pressure of the action in the same way as if they heard the demand directly from the workers in the context of an action.

In thinking through why an idea is valuable, you tease apart the assumptions and reasons that underlie an idea and how that idea relates to the needs of a particular situation. Once you understand the assumptions and reasons for why you think something, only then are you able to pose a focused question inviting your coworker to consider those assumptions and reasons for themselves.

Question-asking invites others to investigate ideas together instead of just presenting finished conclusions that others feel pressured to agree or disagree with in the moment. Productive disagreement and possible resolution are made smoother when the underlying assumptions and reasons are explicit instead of murky or hidden.

The logic of good question-asking can be turned into a formula:

having a better workplace and living in a better world, as many people are, this kind of conversational expansion can come quite naturally.

Even if you set it up well, introducing the big -isms of capitalism and socialism into these conversations will always be a little awkward at first. Whatever issue you want to discuss, it can be less presumptuous to pose it in the form of a question first. "Well, that's capitalism for you. Do you think this would happen under socialism?" Socialism is such a loaded term that people might respond to this question in a thousand different ways, but there's no other way to get into the big political questions without confronting these terms.

Rather than get lost in the weeds about the reasons for the collapse of the USSR or what their uncle told them about Marxism, I prefer to try to keep the discussion of socialism focused on the matter at hand. If you start with all the baggage, you'll spend all of your time wrestling with people's deeply ingrained, preconceived notions about socialism rather than opening up new lines of inquiry. Rather, use the issue at hand to prompt them to think through the question of socialism as it relates to them in the here and now.

At some point they'll get confused about what socialism has to do with the icy sidewalk, and they'll ask you, "*What do you think socialism means?*" That's when you can give a workplace-level definition of these terms. **Capitalism is when the boss has total authority to tell the workers what to do. Socialism is when workers discuss, make decisions, and then carry out together what they think is best. In other words, socialism is worker democracy.**

Then tie this definition directly to the problem at hand. "Capitalism is workers getting injured because the boss won't prioritize clearing the sidewalks. Socialism is workers discussing and deciding what's safe and taking action to demand the boss fix it."

Then invite them to respond. "Or at least that's what I think socialism is. What do you think?"

Talking to Your Coworkers about Socialism

As socialists we spend most of our time talking about socialism with other socialists, whether in our radical book groups or with our activist friends. When it comes time to talk to non-socialists about socialism, we often stumble as we apply our activist-talk to our neighbors and coworkers who aren't part of the radical scene. Rather, we should adapt our conversational strategies to the needs of the current context and moment.

Socialism in the Workplace

As with all union conversations, when talking with coworkers about socialism it's best to start with what is immediate, concrete, and strongly felt. Rather than bring socialism up out of the blue over lunch, bring it up when talking about some problem at work that you and your coworkers are dealing with. Imagine it's winter and ice on the stairs and sidewalk at the worksite has led people to fall and injure themselves and the boss hasn't prioritized shoveling and salting the walking surfaces. This is a workplace problem but also a capitalism problem.

Oftentimes you'll want to explore the more practical sides of this problem, like how the problem arose, why the boss isn't fixing it, and what you're going to do about it together as coworkers. But sometimes there will be space to connect grievances to larger political questions.

"Why do you think the boss isn't fixing this?" "If the boss isn't fixing problems to make work safe and go smoothly, what are they even there for?" "What would it be like to work somewhere where the workers actually had real input on what they did all day?"

You don't want to hit your coworker over the head with a lecture on capitalism every time they complain about something. But if they respond to these open questions, you can find ways to gradually zoom out from discussion of the specific grievance to the larger systems that created that grievance. *Follow their curiosity* and provide opportunities to think through the grievance in larger and larger terms. If your coworker is genuinely interested in not only fixing the immediate problem but also in

1. ***Start with an idea*** ("We shouldn't tell our plans about action to anyone not involved in the action itself.")
2. ***Break the idea down*** into its assumptions and reasons ("If the boss hears about our plans, our action will be undermined and our demands will not be won.")
3. ***Pose a question*** that asks people to think through the assumptions and reasons for themselves ("What do you think would happen if the boss heard about our plans?")

To extend this formula to navigate disagreement, the formula can be extended simply as:

4. If the organizer and the worker disagree ("It doesn't matter if the boss hears about our plans because we're going to take action no matter what"), then the organizer's task is to ***formulate a response in the form of a question*** to further investigate the underlying assumptions and reasons that are at the root of the disagreement ("What if the boss fires one of us before we get to the action?")

The organizer's task isn't to use questions for just one part of the discussion, but to link together a series of questions that leads to more developed ideas and plans.

Giving Direction to Your Question-Asking

Notice also how this form of question-asking has a directionality to it. You're not just asking random questions in a scattershot manner to "open up space for discussion" for its own sake. Rather, the questions you are asking provide a path and possible destinations. By paying close attention to the assumptions and reasons that underlie the ideas being considered, you can calibrate your questions to the precise areas of potential disagreement and potential gaps in shared understanding that would impede movement towards collective action.

Thus, good question-asking requires the organizer to keep one eye on the current state of the conversation and the other eye on where the conversation is going. With those two things in view, the organizer can

pose questions that lead from point A to points B, C, and so on. The general direction is from isolated and varied opinions about a workplace problem to one of shared understanding, from a place of collective inaction to one of collective action.

It's also important that the organizer invite pushback in the case of real disagreement, slow down when there's no obvious way forward, and be willing to drastically change direction when new ideas require it. The organizer should not tell everyone what to think and do but should stimulate a group of people to think and act together.

This all may sound difficult to manage in real time within the context of an already complicated organizing situation. But it's also something anyone can start doing and get better at with practice. This communication pattern is what many good organizers have learned to do instinctively.

The degree of familiarity and trust between workers will dictate the speed at which these conversations go. If you've never talked with a particular coworker about a workplace issue before, you might have to proceed more slowly as you examine more basic assumptions about the problem and reasons for taking action. However, if a group of workers have worked alongside each other for years and have taken action together before, these conversations can proceed quickly.

Some people might be suspicious of this form of question-asking as being dishonest or manipulative. Certainly, a manipulative person can use the power of question-asking to deceive and mislead people. However, there's a totally open and honest way to use these tools as well. In asking questions, the organizer should not feign ignorance or hide their intentions.

> *"I've never hesitated to tell anybody what I believe if they ask me. I see no reason to tell them before they get ready to listen to it, and when they ask a question, then they're ready to listen to it. I just don't see any point in wasting your energy trying to force something on people."* – Myles Horton

Asking people about and listening to them talk about:

- … their experiences. 40%
- … the reasons why they think what they think. 20%
- … what they think. 10%

Telling people about:

- … your experiences. 18%
- … the reasons why you think what you think. 10%
- … what you think. 2%

You'll notice I made the percentages add up to fit the 70/30 rule, the heuristic used in organizing conversations that says you should spend 70% of your time listening and asking questions and 30% of your time talking. I know it is rather silly to assign precise percentages to each element of political conversations, but I do think this helps illustrate how these elements interact and work together.

Telling people what you think is of marginal importance relative to every other part of political conversation. It only meaningfully contributes to the conversation in a context in which everything else is given the greater and proper weight.

The liberal discourse of the marketplace of ideas places all the emphasis on the beliefs and the reasons and very little on personal experience. Oddly enough, personal experience and our specific interpretation of that experience determines what we believe. The fact that the most important thing is so de-emphasized in common discourse is the main reason why so much political conversation is so frustrating to so many people.

If we learn to value our own and other people's experiences as essential parts of our beliefs, our conversations will not only be more meaningful to all involved but also more likely to point towards transformative change. When this is combined with an awareness of how social relations affect political conversation, radicals can break out of the inertia and isolation that we so often face when we first try to give voice to our ideas.

start to fling empty political generalities at each other. The best thing to do when you recognize this is to step back and ask them about their experience with the issue. The worst thing to do is to take someone's disinterest or defensiveness as a sign that you have to try harder to convince them and talk at them even more and tell them what you think in even stronger terms. Like a pesticide to the pollinating bees in a field, this destroys growth instead of fostering it.

The Proportions of Political Conversation

Despite my railing against it above, when it's done right, telling people what you think is helpful in *very small doses*. You don't want to hide your beliefs, but the basic points of one's beliefs can usually be stated in a few words. Avoid repeating what you think over and over or trying to map it out in all its little details.

Telling people *why* you think what you think, i.e. the reasons behind it, can be effective in small doses. Giving reasons for your ideas helps people see why those ideas make sense, but focusing too heavily on reasons in the abstract can make them seem irrelevant to the real world. Telling people the personal and concrete experiences behind why you think what you think is good in medium doses. Experiences are the beams and pillars of one's larger worldview. Just like the weight-bearing features of a building are both invisible and what hold it together, personal experiences are the hidden dimension of people's political beliefs that undergird them.

The rank of importance of 1. experiences, 2. reasons, 3. beliefs in political conversation applies in the same order to the other person as it does to yourself. So the most effective thing to do is to ask people about their own experiences and what they think about them. The next effective thing is to ask people for the reasons why they think what they think. Occasionally you want to ask people what they think, i.e. the direct statement of their beliefs, if it isn't coming up naturally.

All of these things are good in political conversation as long as you keep them all in the right proportions. Here's some back-of-the-envelope estimates of what percentages of your conversation should be devoted to.

Political Education

The above examples are framed in terms of concrete organizing challenges, but the same logic of question-asking also applies to broader political discussion. What's important about both kinds of conversation is people thinking through the ideas for themselves.

Let's briefly consider another example. One common response from others that I often run into when discussing seemingly intransigent social problems is the desire for a better leader to fix the problem for us. While I think having better official leaders who can do all the hard work for us is appealing, I don't think it's worth investing much hope in on its own.

Using the above formula:

1. Start with an idea ("Having better official leaders won't make us better off in the long-term")
2. Break the idea down into its assumptions and reasons ("If we invest all of our power in wanting better leadership, we as people are still powerless to solve problems on our own and we become dependent on outsiders.")
3. Pose a question that asks people to think through the assumptions and reasons for themselves ("Do you think it's more important to have the ability to solve our own problems or to have authorities who can solve our problems for us?")

In my experience, people often just don't believe that communities themselves can solve social problems because that doesn't fit with the dominant narratives we've been told. The objection I face when advocating grassroots social movements as a better solution to social problems is people's disbelief that grassroots social movements are powerful or even possible. To attack the root of this disagreement you can attack the dominant narratives about history that underlie it. Rather than lecturing people about the history of social issues and movements, it's better to keep using questions. Using the above formula, one could ask "How did workers, women, people of color, etc… come to have more rights today than in the past?"

Being Proactive with Questions

The hardest part for me of using questions like this is not being reactive. I often have strong reactions when people express ideas that are contrary to my own deeply held values. When I react in disagreement by meeting others' ideas with forceful rebuttals, the conversation loses its openness and the strategic power of question-asking is squandered.

Every time a conversation ends in frustrating disagreement, I reflect back on where I got reactive and argumentative. I reflect back on what questions I could have asked that might have kept the conversation open. The goal is not to force others to agree with me, but to stimulate curiosity and exploration of new ideas that can loosen preconceived notions and make coming to shared understanding more possible. Only through practice, reflection, and a continuing desire to have more generative conversations with others have I learned to have more patience and self-awareness to ask better questions in the moment.

Question-Asking in Practice

Question-asking is useful when someone with more experience and knowledge of a subject is trying to communicate ideas to someone newer to that subject. As a rule of thumb, the more experience and knowledge I have on a topic compared to the person I'm talking with, the more I rely on questions. In such circumstances, I can go a long time posing question after question, often only expressing my thoughts as statements when the other person asks me a question.

However, the same overall logic of question-asking applies when two people of similar degrees of experience and knowledge are talking, or even when you are using question-asking as the person with less experience and knowledge on a subject. When I'm talking with another person with a similar level of experience and knowledge on a subject, questions alternate more evenly with back-and-forths. When I know something I can express it as a question, but when I'm processing some idea in the moment, I often need to think out loud in the form of statements.

When people get stuck in the middle of a political conversation, it's often because the expression of their ideas as they make sense given their own experiences has no connection with the way others make sense of ideas due to their different experiences. Baffled that the other person doesn't immediately understand these ideas the way they do, they resort to repeating the idea over and over. As obvious as this may seem, everyone is different, so much so that the bare expression of political ideas is almost totally worthless on its own. No one cares that you don't like cops or you think everyone should have healthcare or whatever. It just won't register with anyone else, and we should expect it won't unless we put effort into really connecting with someone.

Assuming the social-material factors listed above are met to some degree, you have to put effort into relating ideas to people's lived reality. It can help to articulate how your own lived experience has shaped your views on an issue and then explore with your conversation partner what their own experience has been on an issue. When they offer interpretations of those experiences that you think are mistaken, try to offer a different way of looking at it or how it played out differently in your own experience.

It's easy for political conversations to get abstract and removed from people's day-to-day lives and where people's preconceived ideas are strongest ("entitlements are bankrupting our country"). Trying to counter their ideas by responding with your own abstract generalities ("the government needs to take care of people") most often triggers a back-and-forth on terrain where people's perceived loyalties are entrenched. Rather than just repeating the same arguments that drone on endlessly on TV news channels, you constantly have to bring the conversation back down to earth, back to their and your own lived experience, back directly to those immediate things that they and you care about. Whether the discussion is about something large in scale or small, general or specific, try to keep it tethered to the concrete where people are more likely to be able to open up new lines of thought and challenge old beliefs.

For the record, I make these mistakes plenty too and have come to quickly recognize that glaze in someone's eye when they lose interest in my telling them what I think or the defensive tension in someone's brow when we

of people's social existence helps us determine who is more worthwhile to engage with in political conversation.

Three factors are key. The first factor is your personal relationship with people. Those you have some kind of social relationship with are more likely to take you seriously and be interested in talking with you about complex and potentially touchy subjects. Complete strangers have no real reason to invest energy or expose vulnerability to someone they are unlikely to ever interact with again. If you have a lot of extra time you want to throw in the trash while having no political effect, arguing with strangers in person or on the internet is a pretty good way to achieve that goal.

The second factor is the degree of shared life conditions. Labor unions have the potential to be very powerful precisely because they unite many people who have very similar conditions at work. Other kinds of shared conditions include those who live in the same apartment complex or neighborhood, those with similar relations to patriarchy and white supremacy, those with similar hobbies, and so on. People living and working under shared conditions have common points of reference, often have shared grievances, and have implicit shared interests in making things better.

The third factor is the potential of people to take action together to make their lives better in some respect. This is a factor that consists of the overlap of the prior two factors, as those who you are in relationship with and those who you have shared conditions with are the people you are most likely and well-positioned to take action with to create some change in your community. Labor unions, tenant unions, community groups, these are the organizational forms that can breed radical thought and action.

Personal Experience is the Lens through Which People See

The marketplace of ideas metaphor focuses on ideas in the abstract and weakens our ability to think strategically, which requires paying close attention to our social relationships and conditions.

I find question-based conversations in all their forms to be thrilling, as exploring political situations and ideas with someone creates so many possibilities for new ways of seeing the world. When I'm doing this effectively, the other person I'm talking with experiences the thrill of new ideas and possibilities as well, and often they will begin to use questions in the flow of the conversation in this way too.

Conclusion

Ella Baker is another one of my question-asking inspirations. Barbara Ransby's biography *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement* shows how Baker helped build the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the student wing and militant flank of the civil rights movement. SNCC engaged in many of the highest-risk, highest-reward actions of the era, such as sitting in at segregated lunch counters and riding segregated interstate buses in the face of violent white mobs. By providing the leading edge of direct action organizing that eventually toppled Jim Crow, SNCC was one of the most influential grassroots organizations of the 20th century. SNCC's militancy was not molded by charismatic authority or conformity to dogma but was fostered by an intense curiosity about how to make the world a better place. As Ransby writes:

> *"According to SNCC member Prathia Hall, Baker's style of teaching was a lesson in itself. She 'was a consummate teacher, always opening us to new understandings,' Hall remembered. 'It was never the pounding, 'you must do this, you must do that,' but by raising a question and then raising another question and then helping us to see what was being revealed through the answer was her mode of leadership. She was the one who taught us how to organize … to organize in such a way that when we left, the people were fully capable of carrying on the movement themselves.' Baker taught by inquiry and by example. She did not tell people what to do or think; she guided them toward answers and solutions by teasing out the ideas and knowledge that already existed within the group, and within individuals, and then by encouraging people to express that information in their own words. She was also patient enough to allow this process to unfold.*

Echoing Hall's and Ladner's observations, a former Spelman College activist, Lenora Tait-Magubane, recalled, 'Miss Ella would ask questions, key questions … and sometimes people don't recognize or appreciate this as leadership…. She would sit there and she would literally almost let a meeting fall apart. People were at each other before she would intervene, because she wanted the decision to come out of the group and not be hers. She would say: 'Well, what about so and so?' or 'Well, have you thought through this or that?' She was always pushing people to think and challenging you.' Mary King, a young white woman whom Baker recruited to SNCC through her YWCA work and who worked closely with Baker in Atlanta, remembers her mentor as a powerfully effective teacher. 'With Socratic persistence, in her resonant and commanding voice, she would query, 'Now let me ask this again, what is our purpose here? What are we trying to accomplish?' Again and again she would force us to articulate our assumptions…. She encouraged me to avoid being doctrinaire. 'Ask questions, Mary,' she would say.'"

How Social Conditions and Personal Experience Shape Political Conversation

There's a hard pill to swallow for people who first get interested in radical politics: No one cares what you think. "Oh, so you don't like white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy?" For the most part, nobody cares.

I've seen countless instances of someone expressing a radical belief to others with the hope of being agreed with or at least sparking an engaging discussion. But most commonly we are met with blank stares and utter disinterest, and we falsely take this as evidence that nobody cares about social issues or that there's nothing we can do to change people's minds.

This kind of experience runs counter to a lot of mainstream discourse about how ideas in the abstract are really important and that all you have to do is say them out loud to spread them around to others. The preeminent liberal metaphor of the "marketplace of ideas" says that ideas compete with each other in the sphere of public discourse and the better ideas come out on top. The implication is that with merely the correct arguments and the right ideas, people can change the world. This belief, in one form or another, is the dominant liberal mode of thinking about social change. At the macro-level leaders with the right ideas will supposedly be elevated to positions of authority and then will make the best decisions. At the micro-level people will supposedly agree with good ideas just by being exposed to them.

Unfortunately, there is no ethereal marketplace where every abstract idea is evaluated according to criteria of objective truth, where everyone then shops around for the best ideas in their pure form. Rather ideas are embedded in social and material contexts that determine their meaning and potency. Politicians with lots of corporate lobbying money frequently defeat politicians with good ideas, and people respond to ideas not according to some abstract measure of their quality but rather through the lens of social relationships, personal experience, and perceived self-interest. Ideas are then only made real in the world through their concrete effects. The world is not a contest of ideas, but a contest of power.

So having the "right" ideas on its own isn't worth much. This is why neither the Nobel Prize Committee nor your coworkers care much what you think. To actually advance political ideas we have to engage people not just as minds suspended in the clouds of pure thought but also as social animals in particular economic contexts.

Below I analyze the way political ideas exist within specific social contexts, how personal experience shapes our beliefs, and how to create the right dynamics for spreading the ideas we hold dear.

The "Who" of Political Conversation

While the marketplace of ideas makes no distinctions about who we should engage with (i.e., anyone can buy or sell from anyone else), taking account