INTRODUCTION

Who is the Right?
By Nikhil Aziz and PRA Research Staff

Now you tell me, how can the law be unlawful? Ridiculous nonsense. Serves them right, being thrown in jail.¹

–Mrs. Gupta to Dina Dalal.

What constitutes ‘harm’ is, of course…determined by the state and the law; and the state and the law will define harm in the shadow of the dominant ideology of power.²

–Upendra Baxi.

In reality, those who control the State make the laws, and it is they who define what harm is and is not and therefore what is and is not harmful. It follows, then, that the definition of what is a crime, and who is a criminal, what is or is not legal, is determined by those who control the State, define harm, and accordingly make the laws. While the State has a major impact on all aspects of citizens’ lives in modern times, it especially does so in the area of law and order—because the modern State has monopolized both the defining and the administering of law and order, including using force and violence, and the imposing of punishment. The State, thus, literally holds the keys to incarceration. The criminal justice system, which is part of the overall Prison-Industrial Complex, is an intrinsic part of the State. Control of the State, therefore, means control of the criminal justice system. Since 1980 and the election of Ronald Reagan, the Right controls the State in the United States, and thus it controls the criminal justice system.

This does not mean that if the Right were to lose control of the State and the criminal justice system that the system itself would crumble, or be dramatically different—because the problem is structural not superficial. Since the first colonists set foot on the shores of what is now called the United States of America, the political, economic, and social structures of U.S. society, including the U.S. State, have been based on systems of oppression that enable one group of people to enjoy privilege and to hold and exercise power over others; and these systems have been ideologically justified. From the expropriation of land from sovereign Indian nations and the genocide of Indian peoples, to the establishment of slavery and indentured labor, to the denial of equality for women (including the right to vote), to widespread homophobia, there have always been institutionalized forms of oppression.

Since the very beginning, however, there have always been voices resisting this oppression and calling for progressive social change. And progressives have consistently pointed out the irony that the ideas we value so highly—freedom, equality, democracy, and justice—are undermined by those practices that do not apply these values to everyone equally. These progressive voices have been countered throughout U.S. history by political and social forces calling for retaining the status quo, which privileges the wealthy, Whites, heterosexuals, and men; and that supports an imperialistic and militaristic international agenda while opposing social and economic equality and justice within the United States. At Political Research Associates (PRA) we call the forces
that generally defend this status quo the Political Right (or Right Wing movements). For the most part, even with major contradictions, the Left is the mirror opposite of the Right.³

Liberals: Can’t Live with Them, Can’t Live without Them

Within the Left, we also distinguish between progressives who question systemic oppression and work to dismantle it; and liberals who tend to be reformist in their views and strategies. Liberals and liberalism (which is the ideology liberals draw their inspiration from) generally address only the symptoms not the disease of social and economic injustice, only the effects rather than the roots of oppression and repression. Therefore, many liberals, while vociferously opposing individual acts (and individual effects) of racism, sexism/patriarchy, heterosexism/homophobia, and classism/capitalism, systematically fall short in taking the next step in challenging the institutionalized forms and systemic nature of these oppressions that are deeply rooted in U.S. society and culture. Welfare and affirmative action, which many liberals support, are examples of programs that are sorely needed in the absence of social and economic justice in our society, but they are in the final analysis band-aids that do not radically treat the entrenched structural and systemic oppression and injustice in society. In some cases, liberals might be opportunistic in their acceptance or even support of oppression—for instance, President Clinton’s support for policies such as welfare reform or the federal Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA). Sometimes, when they are fearful, liberals step away from issues and ignore the Political Right’s oppression or repression; for instance, during the beginning of the McCarthy Era with its witch hunts for Red subversives after World War II.

In the case of free trade policies, many liberals are complicit in furthering or bolstering economic oppression, not so much because they are trying to ride on the back of popular opinion, but because they actually believe in unregulated free trade and unrestrained free market capitalism. Likewise, in the case of foreign policy, many liberals do not question the institutional racism inherent in U.S. foreign policy, and in the idea that the United States is rightfully the world’s most powerful economic and military power that dictates what the rest of the world should do. And in the case of criminal justice and the Prison-Industrial Complex, many liberals, mostly White, support “tough-on-crime” policies out of a combination of White Fear (see box on White Fear) and because, many of them also accept the conservative argument that criminals are individuals that choose to commit crimes and do not question the root causes of social and economic oppression that give rise to what gets classified as crime in the first place. In all of these above cases liberals have often moved lockstep with the Right.

But still, liberals are a vital ally for progressives to have because at many other times they, working with progressives, have moved the State away from pursuing the most blatantly repressive techniques, tactics, and policies against people, especially those who have historically been excluded or marginalized, such as the poor, immigrants, ethnic and racial minorities, and women—even as the Political Right has moved U.S. society toward supporting increased oppression and the U.S. State toward employing increased repression. While it is true that liberals do not fundamentally challenge the basic tenets of capitalism and free market ideology, it is also the case that liberals often oppose its excesses, and the excesses of the State. And when in power, liberals have often provided the vital breathing room for progressives to do the difficult work of systemic social transformation. What progressives need to realize is that meaningful social change has more often than not occurred when progressives and liberals have come together as allies. Progressives need to remember that they need liberals—but that they also need to hold liberals accountable.
The Right

The modern Political Right, especially since the 1970s, has effectively reframed a whole series of issues in a way that has moved federal and state governments toward an increasing level of repression. While successfully establishing their framework, the Political Right has managed to hide its own role in the process. What this means is that even as the arguments of the Political Right have become widely accepted, the way it actually created this situation has been overlooked. Many “average Americans,” mainly middle class Whites, now simply accept arguments for repressive measures—mandatory minimums, “three strikes and you’re out,” etc.—as “common sense.” As a result many liberals, particularly those in electoral politics, have “gone with the flow” in supporting such repressive measures. But it is crucial to realize that while many liberals may have followed what they think is popular opinion, many others, especially White wealthy or middle class folks, themselves benefit from a system that privileges them and maintains the status quo of racial and social inequality. And thus, they do not question the systemic roots of injustice and oppression.

Progressives and those who are working for social and economic justice need to illustrate how the current criminal justice system, and the criminalization of the poor, racial minorities, immigrants, all of which have deep roots in U.S. history benefits those who—and this includes middle class and wealthy White liberals—have historically enjoyed privilege and held power in U.S. society.

If we seek to challenge a situation, it is useful to understand how that situation was created, so that we can develop successful ways to frame arguments, which show that a different—less repressive—approach is possible and desirable. Studying different sectors of the Political Right to see how their arguments have convinced both society (including many liberals) and the government that increasing repression or oppression is acceptable, is thus necessary. While the Right alone is not culpable for economic and social injustice, particularly at the systemic level, it certainly plays a major role in perpetuating and increasing it.

At a very basic level PRA defines the Right as those groups and individuals that actively oppose social equality and economic justice within a society. There are of course exceptions to any generalization; right-wing libertarians oppose economic justice but often support social equality, for

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"The contemporary right is not new; it is a direct descendant of earlier right-wing movements, especially its immediate predecessor, the Old Right," according to Jean Hardisty. "It is primarily a white, middle-class movement; the policies it advocates benefit the white middle and upper classes. It manipulates working-class people by providing scapegoats for their frustrations and appealing to their fears." Hardisty calls this process “mobilizing resentment.” The Right is much more complex than a simple conspiracy of conservatives, though much of its success can be traced to the fact that the leaders of its many sectors make a point of working together, and developing strategies and tactics in private meetings. The Right shamelessly promotes a populist anti-elite message which has the effect of masking its anti-working class agenda—an agenda that in reality only benefits wealthy people.

"At PRA, we are often asked how we define the right wing. In the U.S., there is an identifiable right-wing agenda...Central to the agenda is White supremacism, preservation of individual wealth in a setting of free market capitalism, preservation of rigidly traditional religious and family structures, and defense of U.S. military hegemony. There is virtually universal agreement that para-military White supremacists or neo-Nazis are right wing. More subtle distinctions are required when right-wing groups operate within mainstream U.S. culture. For example, an organization uses the slogan ‘Environment as if People Matter,’ which sounds innocuous (and even pro-environment). But the group’s vicious attacks on the environmental movement, its revealing financial backing, and its demonstrations timed to coincide with Earth Day, bespeak a hidden agenda—in this case, the defense of profits and policies now being challenged by the environmental movement."
example LGBT rights on grounds of the right to privacy. The Right includes groups that define democracy, or the nation, in a narrow way to exclude various communities, such as the poor, people of color, immigrants, women, and gays and lesbians. They also include groups that demonize, scapegoat, and deny equal rights to those they seek to exclude. The Political Right in the United States is a complex network of social and political movements that now controls the Republican Party, the government (through Republican majorities in Congress and the Bush Administration), and indeed much of the country. While the Right is not limited to a single political party in the United States, for the most part it has found a home in the Republican Party over the last 40-50 years. The Democratic Party continues to have conservative members, especially from but not limited to states in the South; and these members represent the right-wing in the Democratic Party.

It is important to remember that the Right is not monolithic. It is not one institution or group. It does not think in one way. It does not always agree on every issue. It does not have a single agenda. No one single individual or organization controls the Right or funds it. Sometimes, the different groups within the Right disagree on issues that can be quite divisive. Yet, on other fundamental issues, the Right is in basic agreement. For example, it is generally in favor of a free-market capitalist economic system, “traditional” or “family” values, and a strong role for government in maintaining law and order within the country (through increased policing) and U.S. domination abroad (through a strong military and a web of conforming allies).

Sometimes, the Right opposes the government and the system (the system is the various arms of the government including the Congress, the Administration, the judiciary, the bureaucracy, the military, and the police, plus societal institutions such as the media, churches, etc.) and seeks to change the status quo. An example would be the struggle to overturn Roe v. Wade, the U.S. Supreme Court decision that made abortion legal. At other times it supports the system and the government and fights to maintain the status quo, as in when it supports the efforts by conservative lawmakers to define marriage as a relationship between one man and one woman.

The Right is a social and political movement with many different components; each of which is a vital arm of the movement’s infrastructure and plays an important part in the movement’s overall mission. Some of the most significant components of the Right include the following:

**National Organizations** such as the National Rifle Association or the Christian Coalition are often the most visible arm of the Right. They are usually groups with large memberships and big budgets. Focus on the Family in Colorado Springs, for example, has its own zip code and a budget that runs over a $100 million/year.

**Local Activists**, who are often members of these national organizations, are the foot soldiers (or grassroots activists) of the Right. They are sometimes not that obvious because they are our neighbors, the people on the local Parents Teachers Associations or school boards. As the rank and file members of the Right, they are instrumental in providing financial support and, more importantly, in providing political support during elections. In a 2000 survey, self-identified Christian Evangelicals, for instance, accounted for between 25-45 percent of the U.S. population. And while not all of them vote in a bloc, within the Republican Party the Christian Right is the single largest organized voting bloc (40 percent of George W. Bush’s electoral support in 2000 came from it), accounting for its influence.

**Think Tanks** such as The Heritage Foundation, which published the “Mandate for Leadership” in 1980, a document that served as the blueprint for President Reagan’s domestic and foreign policies, are in a sense the brains of the Right. But besides national level think tanks like
Heritage or the libertarian Cato Institute, almost every state in the country now has at least two right-wing think tanks that are linked in two overlapping networks. One is primarily secular right-wing libertarian in orientation, while the other is affiliated with the Christian rightist Family Research Council (FRC). In Massachusetts, for example, there is the Pioneer Institute, a right-wing libertarian think tank that has been extremely influential in pushing for privatization in the state, especially in the areas of public education and public health; and the FRC affiliated Massachusetts Family Institute, which has been a leading anti-gay marriage voice.

**Media and Publicity outlets** are part and parcel of the Right’s arsenal. Early on, the Right realized that to successfully get its message out, it needed not only to have an effective message and frame, but that it also needed to control the medium. Christian Right groups vigorously lobbied to have federal ownership restrictions removed in order for them to be able to purchase radio and television stations, as well as print media. Today, the Rev. Pat Robertson’s Christian Broadcasting Network combines religious programming with regular newscasts that have a decidedly Christian fundamentalist slant to millions of viewers worldwide. Similarly, *The Washington Times* daily newspaper is owned by the Rev. Sun Myung Moon’s Unification Church, which also owns the global newswire service, the United Press International.

**Foundations** have poured hundreds of millions of dollars into right-wing institutions and causes in a very strategic way. They fund the national organizations, media and publicity campaigns, individual ideologues and think tanks, and programs for recruiting and training youth. Some of the large conservative foundations include the Coors Foundation, the John M. Olin Foundation, the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, and the group of Scaife Family Foundations.

Ideologues are the thinkers and visionaries of any movement, including the Right. While the think tanks usually focus on policy, the ideologues emphasize the long-term vision, mission, and direction of the movement. William F. Buckley, Jr., the founder and editor emeritus of the
National Review is one such thinker whose ideology of Fusionism in the 1950s brought together three sectors of the Right in the United States around the themes of anticommunism, “traditional values,” and free-market capitalism. William Bennett is another such ideologue writing frequently on issues of morality in America. Bennett was the “Drug Czar” under President George H.W. Bush.

Spokespersons are some of the most visible individuals on the Right. They are usually media-savvy, well-credentialed, sometimes young, and oftentimes women, people of color, or gay who present the Right’s perspective on any given issue to the general public. People like Ann Coulter, Dinesh DeSouza, Star Parker, and John Paulk take the Right’s message to the public through speaking engagements at college campuses, appearances on television talk shows, and by writing books or articles in newspapers. Their presence and activism serves to show the Right as being more than straight White old men. It is also harder to accuse the Right of being opposed to equality for women, people of color or being antigay when women (Coulter), people of color (DeSouza, Parker), or [ex]gays (Paulk) are the ones advocating policies that would result in the denial of full equality to women, people of color, and gay people.

Cultural Workers are extremely important recruiting tools for the Right, especially among young people. Christian Right or Far Right rock bands and composers create music that serves as a medium for their message. For instance, there is a Christian Rock band called Hammertown, and also a Far Right hate music group by the same name.

Three Major Sectors of the U.S. Political Right

Another way to understand the Right is to look at it in terms of its different sectors. What we mean is that since the Right is not monolithic, and various groups within it have different ideologies (or belief systems) and agendas, it makes sense to distinguish them based on what they stand for. At PRA, we draw on Sara Diamond’s basic division of the Right into three broad sectors—Secular, Christian, and Xenophobic—and then sub-divide them further to account for differences within each. Sometimes these sectors come together to work towards common goals and sometimes they oppose each other based on their values and principles. For example, White nationalist groups within the Xenophobic Right are overtly racist and have a racist agenda, whereas Christian Right and Secular Right groups disavow overt racism. For the Xenophobic Right race is the central framework and primary issue; for the Christian Right it is gender and sexuality.

Different sectors of the Right also interact differently with the State. The Secular and Christian Right are currently the two sectors that control the State. Whether in the White House, the Congress or the courts, it is representatives of these two sectors that are currently in charge. For the most part, they seek to influence and control the State through electoral politics. Groups within the Xenophobic Right are often skeptical of the State and see the State itself as a problem; and have often been targets of State repression themselves.
The Secular Right is, in some ways, the most difficult to comprehend. While not all right-wingers are secular, many secular rightists are moderate and not very conservative Republicans; with many being libertarians who are fiscally conservative but liberal or moderate on social issues. To complicate matters, secular rightists can also be conservative Democrats. Moderate Republicans include individuals like former secretary of state Colin Powell, Senators Olympia Snowe and Susan Collins, both of Maine, Lincoln Chaffee of Rhode Island and Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania. On certain social issues such as affirmative action or a woman’s right to have an

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<th>THE PATRIOT MOVEMENT AND ARMED MILITIAS</th>
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<td>• The Patriot Movement began growing in the early 1990s...[as] farm and ranch economies essentially collapsed, with transnational agribusiness swooping in to buy out thousands of family-owned operations.</td>
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<td>• Hard Right groups spread conspiracy theories in this region while corporate media and policy makers for the most part ignored the plight of residents who saw their way of life devastated.</td>
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<td>• Extreme Right groups such as the Posse Comitatus laid part of the groundwork for the Militias during this period, but so did existing patriot groups.</td>
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<td>• Patriot social movements involve as many as 5 million Americans who believe that the government is manipulated by subversive secret elites and is planning to use law enforcement or military force to repress political rights.</td>
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<td>• Spurred by anger over [the deaths of survivalists at Ruby Ridge, ID and cultists at Waco, TX during confrontations with the FBI and other federal agents], the Patriot Movement spun off the Militia Movement as an armed wing.</td>
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<td>• Armed citizens Militias quickly emerged in all 50 states and according to a tally kept by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), there were 224 Militia units in 1995. At its peak during this period there were between 20,000 and 60,000 active participants.</td>
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<td>• The Militia Movement should not be primarily defined by antisemitism or White supremacy...There are elements of White supremacy and antisemitism in the Patriot Movement, but not in the same form or force as the Extreme [Xenophobic] Right, and in some cases barely distinct from prejudice found in sectors of ‘mainstream’ society.</td>
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<th>WHERE THE MILITIAS RECRUITED</th>
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<td>• Militant right-wing gun rights advocates [like NRA members], antitax protesters, survivalists, and right-wing libertarians.</td>
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<td>• Christian Patriots, and other persons promoting a variety of pseudo-legal “constitutionalist” theories.</td>
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<td>• Extreme Right organizers in White racist, antisemitic, or neonazi movements, such as Christian Identity, the Posse Comitatus, and Aryan Nations.</td>
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<td>• The confrontational wing of the antiabortion movement.</td>
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<td>• Apocalyptic millennialists, including those Christians who believed the period of the “End Times” had arrived and they were facing the Mark of the Beast, which could be hidden in supermarket bar codes, proposed paper currency designs, implantable computer microchips, Internet websites, or e-mail.</td>
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<td>• The dominion theology sector of the Christian Evangelical Right, especially its most militant and doctrinaire branch, Christian Reconstructionism.</td>
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<td>• Advocates of “sovereign” citizenship, “freeman” status, and other arguments rooted in a distorted analysis of the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth Amendments, including those persons who argue that a different or second-class form of citizenship is granted to African Americans through these amendments.</td>
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<td>• The most militant wings of the anti-environmentalist “Wise Use” movement, county supremacy movement, state sovereignty movement, states’ rights movement, and Tenth Amendment movement.”</td>
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abortion, moderate Republicans are more in line with liberal Democrats than others of their fellow Republicans who might be ultraconservative. Similarly, some liberals in the Democratic Party who are part of the Democratic Leadership Council are more in line with many Republicans on issues such as free trade, welfare, and “tough on crime.” Senator Joe Lieberman of Connecticut, former president Bill Clinton, or Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts would be examples.

The Christian Right is currently one of the most loyal and influential voting blocs within the Republican Party. Dr. James Dobson (Focus on the Family), Rev. Jerry Falwell (founder of the Moral Majority), and Rev. Pat Robertson (founder of the Christian Coalition), Tim La Haye (coauthor of the bestselling novels from the Left Behind series), and Beverly La Haye (founder of Concerned Women for America) are some of the more well-known figures within the Christian Right. Former attorney-general John Ashcroft is an example within electoral politics. We further sub-divide the Christian Right between Christian Nationalists (who are more numerous) and Christian Theocrats. Nationalists believe that the United States is God’s chosen nation, which has been undermined by secular liberals, feminists, and homosexuals. They oppose reproductive rights, equality for gays and lesbians, sexuality education, and support prayer in schools, etc. Theocrats go a step further and believe that Christian men are ordained by God to run society. Hardliners within this sub-sector support biblical law as the law of the land, and treating non-Christians as second-class citizens.

Finally, there is the Xenophobic Right, which includes militant, overtly racist groups such as White supremacists, Ku Klux Klan members, racist skinheads, and neonazis. Although numerically small at present, it is a serious political movement in some rural areas; and its propaganda promoting violence reaches into major metropolitan centers where it encourages alienated young people to commit hate crimes against people of color, immigrants, Jews, and gays and lesbians, among other targets. Overt racist ideology, however, is often repackaged in coded language by other right-wing sectors—called New Racism by scholar Amy Ansell—and the involvement in electoral politics by Pat Buchanan and David Duke serve as a bridge between the Xenophobic Right and more mainstream conservatives.

Knowing your opposition means you’re better prepared to counter its arguments and challenge its agenda and policies. For an extended look at the Right and all of its sectors and major actors, please visit PRA’s website http://www.publiceye.org.
Why We Focus on the Right, the State, and the System
By Palak Shah, Nikhil Aziz, Ph.D., and Pam Chamberlain

The term “ideology” refers to a set of ideas and principles that various groups consciously adopt (or accept as natural), hold, and seek to propagate, much as people do religious beliefs. Ideologies usually describe power relations, including how power should be allocated, and they provide the rationale for maintaining “social order” through a system.

Oppressive ideologies and systems such as authoritarianism, patriarchy, sexism, homophobia, heterosexism, White supremacy, racism, capitalism, and imperialism are embedded in the U.S. criminal justice system. This is because the criminal justice system is a part and product of the State and society we live in, and these ideologies are foundations of that society and State. At the same time, the criminal justice system legitimates and reproduces these ideologies of oppression that in turn help to maintain and expand the power of the Right, the State, and the criminal justice system itself.

While the Political Right did not invent oppressive ideologies, it is important to differentiate between those institutions and groups that reflect and reproduce these ideologies, and those that actively seek to sustain them. The modern Political Right remains the single largest force organized in defense of oppressive ideologies—and it is sophisticated enough to reject blatantly oppressive ideas and policies that are no longer culturally acceptable.

An excellent example of how oppressions are interlinked and how they are maintained by related systems is provided by activist and scholar Suzanne Pharr. She notes that sexism is the system through which the ideology of patriarchy (the “enforced belief in male dominance and control”) is maintained, and homophobia, economics, and violence are weapons that sexism uses to maintain itself. But as Pharr writes, “we have to look at economics not only as the root cause of sexism but also as the underlying, driving force that keeps all oppressions in place. In the United States, our economic system is shaped like a pyramid, with a few people at the top, primarily white males, being supported by large numbers of unpaid or low-paid workers at the bottom. When we look at this pyramid, we begin to understand the major connection between sexism and racism because those groups at the bottom of the pyramid are women and people of color. We then begin to understand why there is such a fervent effort to keep those oppressive systems (racism and sexism and all the ways they are manifested) in place to maintain the unpaid and low-paid labor.”

The intersectionality of different oppressive ideologies and systems occurs not only because the groups being oppressed by each are connected, such as women and people of color but also because, as Pharr observes, “in order for this top-heavy system of economic inequity to maintain itself, the 90 percent on the bottom must keep supplying cheap labor. A very complex, intricate system of institutionalized oppressions is necessary to maintain the status quo so that the vast majority will not demand its fair share of wealth and resources and bring the system down. Every institution—schools, banks, churches, governments, courts, media, etc—as well as individuals must be enlisted in the campaign to maintain such a system of gross inequity.” This is true within an individual country as well as between countries, as is reflected in the unequal power relations between economically advanced countries and those in what is called the Third World.

It is important for progressives to understand, as Pharr points out, that “there is no hierarchy of oppressions. Each is terrible and destructive. To eliminate one oppression successfully, a move-
While the Political Right did not invent oppressive ideologies, it is important to differentiate between those institutions and groups that reflect and reproduce these ideologies, and those that actively seek to sustain them. The modern Political Right remains the single largest force organized in defense of oppressive ideologies—and it is sophisticated enough to reject blatantly oppressive ideas and policies that are no longer culturally acceptable.

Institutional power, i.e., the power over, and control of society’s institutions, and economic power, which enables control of those institutions, Pharr reasons, “requires the use of violence and the threat of violence. Institutional violence is sanctioned through the criminal justice system and the threat of the military—for quelling individual or group uprisings.” Most institutions, groups, and individuals in our society reflect, in some way, regardless of intent, tendencies of these ideologies that, unconsciously or not, affirm the State’s ultimate power and authority, the “inferiority” of people of color, women and poor people, or the inherent value of strong punishment. Many people support these ideological concepts even when they don’t consciously self-identify as supporters or proponents—and, as a result, these extremely powerful ideologies are invisibilized. The system itself reinforces these beliefs, and some observers or participants in the system see “evidence” of their beliefs played out in the streets, the courts, and the prisons. And the ideologies start to intertwine, reinforcing each other, so that it “makes sense” to hold negative beliefs about “criminals,” whether they be immigrants, people of color, women and/or poor.

Central to the maintenance of the criminal justice system and, in fact, the modern State itself is the idea that the State alone has the legitimate power to maintain law and order within society, and to regulate, detain, and punish those who threaten that law and order. However, while the State might be a neutral player in theory, in reality it is controlled by those with power and privilege. And those who control the State make the laws.

The current criminal justice system is characterized by the desire to maintain total physical, emotional and psychological control over the people under the system’s control. A major ideology that supports this approach to criminal justice is generally known as authoritarianism; and looking at authoritarianism in the context of the criminal justice system enables us to see how an abstract theory plays out in reality. Authoritarianism is an oppressive system that uses force, violence, or the threat of violence, so that those in power are able to maintain social order and control. An authoritarian approach believes that through violence and repression an individual can be forced to conform to a set of behaviors—or face punishment. This is evident in the way our society punishes those who deviate from what the State and society deem as appropriate or moral. The criminalization of homosexuality through codified laws or the climate of hostility engendered through moral codes is a clear example of how those who deviate from what is deemed normal are subject to punishment or violence.
Authoritarianism plays out in many ways in the current criminal justice system but it is most apparent inside prison walls. The physical conditions that prisoners face are brutal and inhuman. The act of restricting human beings to small cages is only the most obvious form of control. Even the most intimate daily human functions are monitored and controlled in prison. Strip searches, controlled movement, regulated visitors, lock-downs, regulated supplies such as toilet paper and showers all add to an environment of total physical and psychological control. In addition, the explosive growth of the prisoner population has resulted in the practice of double and even triple bunking prisoners in cells too small for even one person. The most extreme form of control occurs in the “supermax” prison, where prisoners spend almost all of their waking and sleeping hours locked in small windowless cells sealed with solid steel doors. In some supermax facilities, because of technological “innovations,” prisoners might go days or weeks without any human contact.

The criminal justice system reproduces and legitimizes various forms of violence and the threat of violence to control both imprisoned and free people. Police forces, F.B.I. and C.I.A. agents, Immigration and Border Patrol personnel, and correctional officers enjoy and actively exercise the State’s legal authority over the use of force. The use of physical violence is rampant, normalized, and rarely questioned. Only the most egregious acts of violence and police brutality—such as the 1991 videotaped beating in Los Angeles of Rodney King, who sped away from police in defiance of a signal to stop, and was beaten 56 times with police batons and sustained 11 skull fractures and brain and kidney damage; the 1997 beating of Abner Louima, an innocent Haitian immigrant in New York City, followed by another beating in the police station in which he was sodomized with a plunger handle; or the 1999 killing of Amadou Diallo, a Senegalese immigrant who was shot with 41 bullets when he reached in his pocket at his apartment for what turned out to be his wallet—surface briefly in media coverage. Sexual abuse is also rampant in prisons, jails, and detention facilities, and rape or the threat of rape is condoned as a way of punishing or controlling prisoners.

The threat of prison and/or violence serves as a way of policing not only behaviors but enforcing the State’s ideology as well. Those who disagree with or challenge the State are met with swift and severe punishment, and in many cases, social or physical death. For example, during the 1950s, communists were persecuted, and, in the case of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, executed by the government. In the 1960s, the FBI used COINTELPRO with the aim of sabotaging and destroying the Civil Rights, Black Power and American Indian movements. Even today, despite the U.S. government’s claims to the contrary, more than 200 political prisoners remain behind bars.¹³

As Angela Davis observes, “We thus think about imprisonment as a fate reserved for others, a fate reserved for the ‘evildoers,’ to use a term recently popularized by George W. Bush. Because of the persistent power of racism, ‘criminals’ and ‘evildoers’ are, in the collective imagination, fantasized as people of color. The prison therefore functions ideologically as an abstract site into which undesirables are deposited, relieving us of the responsibility of thinking about real issues afflicting those communities from which prisoners are drawn in such disproportionate numbers. This is the ideological work that the prison performs—it relieves us of seriously engaging with the problems of our society, especially those produced by racism, and, increasingly, global capitalism.”¹⁴
ORGANIZING ADVICE: Challenging and Defeating the Right

Q&A WITH NIKHIL AZIZ, PH.D., PRA’S DIRECTOR OF RESEARCH

Palak Shah, Editor of the Defending Justice Activist Resource Kit talked to Nikhil Aziz, PRA’s Director of Research about why it is important for progressive activists and people in general to learn about the Right.

PS: Why should people learn about the Right?

NA: The Right is more than hooded men in white robes. The average right-winger in the United States is not a cross-burning Ku Klux Klan member or a gun-toting NRA member. It can, literally, be the guy or gal next door. Like you, she might have a job and a couple of kids in school. Like you, he may go to church and softball games, and worry about his kids’ future. Unlike you, she might never have come out on the street in a political demonstration or debated an opponent on talk radio. All he might do is to regularly write his representative in Congress whom he faithfully votes for every election. The point is that there is no stereotypical right-winger.

Even if all the KKK and NRA members, and their families, had voted for those politicians that put in place the policies that are rapidly increasing incarceration, gutting entitlement programs, and disenfranchising large numbers of citizens, that alone would not be enough to put those politicians in power. Their support base is much wider, and made up largely of ordinary Americans. It is easier to identify elected politicians, government officials, or heads of corporations as responsible for various policies that we oppose, but harder to identify their support base—the millions of “our own fellow citizens, organized effectively into right-wing social movements over many decades, [that] play a key role in sustaining the existing political-economic system.”

At Political Research Associates, we aim to tell you who that is, why someone might support such policies, and how you might mobilize effectively against such an agenda. But to challenge your opposition you have to know it, and know it well. And to do that, you have to “become familiar with the names, the faces, methods of operation and, perhaps most importantly, the underlying philosophies of right-wing movements.”

PS: Are all right-wingers the same? Do they all have the same views?

NA: No. Actually, the Right is full of contradictions, but what complicates matters further is that the Right is not one monolithic group that has one common view. It seems to have contradictory positions on a number of things, including the nature of government and the use of government power. How is it, for instance, that many right-wingers oppose abortion as the taking of life, but support the death penalty? The distinction they draw is between what they perceive to be innocent “pre-born” life and the criminal guilty. Or, why does the Right support tough law enforcement when it comes to drug use but seemingly looks the other way at corporate fraud? What is important to understand is that underlying these apparent contradictions are “consistent patterns in the Right’s orientation towards the [S]tate.”

PS: What does this mean?

NA: Well, let’s take social and economic policies as an example to explain what this means. The Right wants the State (that is the government + the bureaucracy + the military + the police + the judiciary + other arms of government) to ban abortion and sex education (if it goes beyond advocating abstinence). It opposes federal funding of childcare and hate crimes laws that would include violent crimes against gays and lesbians. But on other issues the Right opposes the State, as in when it tries to make the wealthy pay a larger and fairer share of taxes or when it imposes environmental regulations on corporations. The underlying issue, then, is not really about being for or against government but rather about being for or against what government does or should do.

When we understand that, we can quickly see that across the board “the Right favors a strong role for the [S]tate when it comes to enforcing order at home or abroad, be that through the means of the military, police or religiously inspired codes of conduct. At the same time, the Right wants the [S]tate to refrain from distributing wealth, power and legal rights more equitably throughout society.”
PS: But Bill Clinton supported welfare “reform” and was all “tough on crime.” And he is a liberal. So why does this whole Left-Right thing matter?

NA: It is true that President Clinton and many liberals supported a lot of the measures and policies during the 1990s that we progressives opposed, including the way welfare was “reformed” and the increasingly harsh and punitive role of the criminal justice system. This is not entirely surprising because when it comes down to the wire, liberals (and liberalism, which is the ideology that inspires liberals) address only the symptoms not the disease of social and economic injustice, only the impacts not the roots of oppression. And at a very fundamental level, what we are talking about is not one individual President or a particular government but a system of oppression that is deeply rooted in our culture and society. Patriarchy/Sexism, Racism/Xenophobia, Homophobia/Heterosexism, Classism/Capitalism, and other ideologies and systems of oppression exist in society regardless of who is in power—conservative Republicans or liberal Democrats—and the only way these can be overcome is through transforming society itself not simply through “regime change.” Societal transformation, however, doesn’t happen overnight. And that is why, as PRA founder Jean Hardisty has argued, liberals and liberalism are important, because it allows progressives some “breathing room” to organize, mobilize, and continue to work towards the long term goal of societal transformation, ending systems of oppression, and achieving social and economic justice.

Besides, systems of oppression don’t stand entirely independent of other factors. They are constructed, validated, and perpetuated by ideology—our beliefs and ideas about how a society should be structured, what role a government should play, how we as individuals living together in a society should relate to each other, and such. Right-wing ideology, that is the Right’s vision of social, political, and economic relations, is diametrically different from a progressive ideology of social and economic justice and equality.

PS: But then how come a right-winger like Pat Buchanan opposes NAFTA like we do?

NA: Pat Buchanan is a right-winger, and he does oppose NAFTA, but not like we do. When sections of the Right oppose free trade and corporate-led globalization they don’t oppose it for the reasons progressives do. Their opposition to NAFTA doesn’t come from their opposition to the stranglehold of big business on labor in the United States or in Mexico, or low wages in China or India. They oppose it because they fear that international treaties like NAFTA might limit the independence and ability of the ruling class in this country to make decisions that affect ordinary peoples’ lives. Or, they fear that cheaper labor from other countries would cut into the profits that U.S. corporations make. But instead of saying that publicly, they drive a wedge between U.S. and Mexican workers by scapegoating lower-paid Mexican workers as responsible for taking away your jobs. Even though, in reality, neither Mexican nor American workers had a say in designing and implementing NAFTA and both opposed it for pretty much the same reason—it would hurt them.

PS: Why isn’t this more well-known?

NA: The mainstream media, which as you probably know is corporate-owned, generally thrives on events rather than issues. Plus, since it is corporate-owned and controlled, it does not seriously question policies that are or might be opposed to corporate interests. As a result the “news focuses on unusual actions taken by unusual people.” When an anti-abortion activist murders a doctor, or a neonazi blows up a building, that person is identified as “the Right.” It is easy to not only identify him but also to dismiss him as an irrational extremist and to deal with him under the law. “What escapes most media coverage are the routine ways and means through which the Right keeps its foot soldiers prepared to strike when it is time to vote, lobby, or protest. Most of this activity happens outside official political channels. It happens in Wednesday night church meetings and over weekday Christian call-in shows.” This superficial coverage also enables and directs the general public to question the symptoms.

PS: How powerful is the Right today?

NA: The Right is not over. It is all over. In the United States today, the Right controls the White House, both houses of Congress, and has a 5-4 majority on the Supreme Court that could get even more solidified. Its power appears unstoppable, as do its policies—all the more reason for you to understand it, in order to be able to effectively challenge and defeat it. The Right has been successful for many reasons, but one major reason is that it has tapped into a real feeling of anger, disillusionment, and
insecurity felt by ordinary Americans. Some of these fears, like bleak economic futures, declining pay scales, and terrorism are legitimate. Others, like the backlash of historically privileged groups to the demands for social and economic justice from marginalized groups, are not. In both cases, however, the feeling of grievance is real. What the leadership of the Right has done is to channel this insecurity into attacking scapegoats (poor people, immigrants, minorities, and women), and successfully framed or cloaked its divisive messages to receive widespread acceptance.

PS: What do you suggest those seeking to challenge the Right should do?

NA: PRA suggests that progressives, especially activists, need to do five things in furthering their agenda for a just and equal society:

- Challenge the scapegoating, prejudice, and myths that the Right engages in, and counter the frames it uses to cloak its divisive messages to make them become the accepted norm.

- Identify real alternatives that are responsive to people’s legitimate concerns, needs, and fears, including of those people who do not identify as progressive or even liberal.

- Form broad and diverse community-based coalitions, and work in solidarity to achieve social and economic justice and societal transformation.

- Push liberals to move left and bring them into coalitions to challenge systemic and institutionalized oppression.

- And in order to do all of this, recognize and understand the Right and impart a clear analysis of its agenda and policies.