

New Rules for Radicals: 10 Ways To Spark Change in a Post-Occupy World

The world is changing quickly, and we need to help steer it according to our shared values -- our vision of what might be.

By Sara Robinson, February 1, 2012



Photo Credit: Nick Turse

This article was copied from Alternet.org in it's entirety. I like the article not as a guide to revolution, but because of the broad applicability of these rules to every endeavor in life...

The first rule is this: The world is different now. The rules have changed.

Since Occupy, we all understand this. Nothing works now the way it did even just a couple of years ago. Political tactics that haven't budged public opinion in years — like petitions and big street demonstrations — are suddenly working again. Narratives that seemed unassailable — like the primacy of free markets and low taxes — are being openly questioned. Doors that used to be closed to us are now opening. The media that once ignored us is now starting to listen. The conservatives are shaken and fumbling, stuck on autopilot and unable to re-route away from their old course even as disaster looms dead ahead. What's going on here?

What's going on is that we are (finally!) in the first giddy months of a deep-current sea change in American politics, the kind of realignment that happens once every several decades. This change has put us into a whole new political era, one that runs by an entirely new set of rules — and one in which a great many impossible things may, all of a sudden, become possible.

The reasons for this shift are complex and wonky, and are the stuff of other articles. But we all sense it, and we all want to know what it means.

As a Silicon Valley brat-turned-futurist, I've spent a lot of my life in a culture that churned constantly with this kind of upending, unending change. There are things tech people know in their bones, survival

strategies and cultural knowledge and habits of mind and specific attitudes that allow one to stay loose and adaptive in times of turbulent transformation.

So, with that, we are already on to Rule Two, which is really the most important one:

2. No despair. Despair is a waste of time and energy.

Anger is useful. It gets the blood moving. It gets people out of their chairs and into the streets. Harnessed quickly to constructive action, it's the fuel that drives change. But anger, once generated, also cools and congeals quickly into frustration, cynicism and despair. Indulging in our daily two-minute hate may be cathartic, but ultimately, it doesn't change a damn thing about our situation. Even worse: it curdles, producing paralysis. Worst of all: once it starts festering, there's nothing left to do with it but turn it on each other.

So: let's drop that cool, cynical, I've-seen-it-all, let's-not-get-too-excited-here stance. Stepping back from the pain by telling ourselves sagely that it's all too much, our enemies are too strong, and there's nothing we can do — that's the lazy way out. Yes, you are no doubt right: and yes, it sucks mightily. But the answer to that isn't to sit around indulging in a group bitch session about how awful it all is. The answer is to get off our butts and get back to work, because life is short and there's a whole planet out there that needs to be fixed on our watch.

3. Try everything.

Because I have no idea what will work now, what we can ask for or expect, or where the boundaries of this new landscape lie. And neither do you. (Thrilling, isn't it?) It's all up for grabs. So, try everything. Try it, even if you've tried it before and it didn't work. Try it, even if it doesn't seem to make a lot of sense. Try it, just because it's there. It's going to take many thousands of experiments before we really understand the contours of this new political and economic reality we're living in.

Of course, there are boundaries: don't try anything that violates our principles, or replicates the things we hate the most about the other side. There will be no cheating, no lying, and no crazies with guns taking out people we disagree with. We have to be better than that: if we betray our values, we lose everything.

But apart from that: Go. The sooner we get going, the sooner we'll figure this thing out.

4. Trust the vision.

Those of a progressive bent — and by "progressive," I mean anybody who believes that business-as-usual is no longer acceptable and that real progress is not only possible, but necessary for our very survival — have a strong, vivid vision of what this nation can and should become. In our minds' eyes, we

can see that future as clearly as we can conjure the familiar rooms of our old childhood homes. And for most of the past few decades, it seems like it's been just about as far away.

Still, we can close our eyes and linger over every shimmering detail. The optimistic comfort of a middle-class life in which most Americans have dignified work, happy families, and enough wealth plus some to share. The relief of knowing that our basic needs for adequate shelter, healthy food and water, safe work, inspired education, useable transportation, essential healthcare, world-class recreation, and a good retirement are met through strong, trustworthy community commitments we can count on. The peace of mind that comes from knowing that we're providing all of this in ways that won't deprive our grandchildren of options crucial to their own survival. We want justice, equity, opportunity, and a government and an economy that are finely tuned to the spritely and practical rhythms of the common good. We want to be rich in the things that genuinely matter, rather than slaves to predatory institutions that produce things that don't.

That's our vision, and we're sticking to it. The problem is: until very recently, a lot of us have felt isolated, like this alternate reality existed nowhere else except inside our own skulls. Few corporations paid it anything more than lip service. Their pet media declared our ideas dangerously crazy and unworthy of "serious" coverage. Our federal government, even in Democratic hands, has been almost totally non-responsive (unless somebody screws up). The cultural authorities who used to defend and uphold our values without restraint or apology — the academy, the scientific community and non-fundamentalist religious congregations — were systematically discredited and silenced. Progressivism is literally being written out of history, its heroes co-opted, its astonishing victories erased. The very words we once used to describe these very American ideals have been redefined to the point where it's sometimes impossible to even talk about it.

It's hard to trust a vision that nobody else recognizes, let alone validates. After a while, even you might even start to agree that this is all just a weird personal delusion that's best kept under wraps.

The new rule is: Trust the dream. Trust it enough to not only talk about it, but defend it proudly to any and all bullies. Trust the deep wisdom and sanity of it. Trust your own craziness in believing in it. Trust the other people who share it. Trust the change that you create while you pursue it. Trust that much of that imagined world has existed before; and trust also that it will — in a new and better form — rise again.

5. Focus on our goals, not on our enemies.

This one builds on #1, the "No despair" rule.

I've made a career writing about the conservative movement's uncanny skill at thwarting our dreams. This is red meat to progressives (and a perennially effective traffic booster at lefty Web sites). No blogger ever goes wrong by describing, explaining, or expressing spittle-flecked outrage over the

overwhelming will, reach and resources arrayed against us. It's easy, and not entirely wrong, to tell ourselves that we're being stalled by the unfathomable cunning and treachery of our enemies.

But we've got a lot to do, and are strapped for time, energy and resources to do it with. Every moment we spend focusing on How Evil They Are is a moment we are not focusing on creating the next America where we (and they) will all be spending the future. Yes, absolutely: we need to name our villains, clearly call out the threat they pose, and put names to the tools they're using to stop us. But vanquishing them is not the ultimate goal. We've got bigger, better, more rewarding work to do. All they are to us is in the way. And all the energy they deserve is however much it will take to get them out of the way.

6. Expect resistance.

It's the political corollary to Newton's Third Law of Motion: Every action creates an equal and opposite reaction. Whatever you do, you are going to piss somebody off. (In fact, I've always thought that this is an important life metric: if you're not pissing somebody off, you're not doing enough to change the world. Call it Robinson's First Law of Politics.) It is a waste of energy to be surprised by this. It's also political malpractice not to think ahead to figure out where it's likely to come from, what form it will probably take, and what you're going to do about it.

Also: there are people (and not all of them are on the other side, sadly) who have made a lifelong commitment to resisting change. For them, obstructionism is a spiritual path. And they're masterful at it. It's a waste of energy to be surprised by them, too. Obstructionists are a force of nature all their own; you cannot be angry at them, any more than you can be angry at a rattlesnake for wanting to bite you. It's who they are. It's what they do. It's part of the Zen of change-making.

Anticipate resistance as much as you can, and do whatever it takes to steer clear of known sources. If surprised, find the flow and go with it. As an Aikidoka friend once put it: If someone attacks you, lean into them. Become part of their attack. And then: become the part that goes horribly, catastrophically wrong.

7. Find and nurture innovators.

We're building a lot of new stuff very fast right now. New politics, new media, new cities, a new economic paradigms, a new relationship with the planet — it's daunting. We need new answers much faster than we're able to generate them.

There are people in our midst who are really good at this stuff, and times like this tend to be good ones for them. In more stable times, these folks are often pushed to the side: they often look and talk goofy, they have weird ideas, they don't fit in, and nobody really gets what they're talking about a lot of the time. Also: trailing in their wake you'll find quite a few successes, along with a few stunning failures — the sure sign of somebody who's comfortable taking a lot of risks, and not afraid of bombing out.

Genius comes in all ages, genders and colors. It's the old Boomer codger who's got a thousand tricks up his sleeve, and forgotten more than you'll ever know. It's the young kid who's never been told it can't be done, so she just went ahead and figured out how to do it. I've seen world-changing political innovation come from farmworker organizers in Phoenix, women's activists in Atlanta and rural organizers from Montana and Oregon. There are often no markings on the package it comes in that give you a clue as to what's going on inside, so you have to drop your biases, and look closely.

We need to seek out these folks and put their amazing brains to work. To do their best work, they need time and space to think. The basic necessities of life. Really good and worthy problems to solve. Permission to let their minds wander, unfettered and free. Permission to fail spectacularly. And then fail again. And again, over and over, because really complicated problems usually require outrageous quantities of failure before success is achieved. The process takes time, patience, and faith; this is what innovation runs on.

And then we need to listen to them, which is often the hardest part of all.

8. Expect iterations, not perfection.

Even when we find some solution that's shiny, new, and actually working, it's smart to expect that the early successes will be so compromised that they'll create a whole new round of problems of their own. It will take a while, sometimes a long while, to knock the rough edges off to the point where it's an unqualified Good Thing. That's part of the process, too.

In technology, this fact is well understood. The first version of the product is never as good as later versions; this is new stuff, and we expect that we're going to keep getting smarter about it. In politics, though, this is often the point at which the innovator is kicked to the curb. "She's really smart, but that thing she does; well, there are problems. Move on to something else." We lose a lot of brilliant people this way. In this new era, it's a loss we can't afford any more. If there's promise, stick with it, and give the innovator the chance to keep making it better.

9. Celebrate every win, no matter how small. Every one matters.

We may be the world's worst winners. We can get 75 percent of what we want, and spend the next three days whining about the 25 percent we didn't get. (Also: we'll probably forget to reward the politicians who actually managed to deliver the goods for once. And then we'll wonder why they don't help us out again next time.) We'll eagerly do the two-minute hate, but ask us to spend two minutes feeling good about something, and we'd much rather drop back into that lazy cynicism thing instead.

This has got to stop. Whatever we focus our attention on, we do tend to get more of. And as long as we're spending more time focusing on failure than success, we shouldn't be surprised that that's exactly what we get. Would it really hurt us to break out the champagne, turn on the music, and just enjoy the

win once in a while? (I sometimes wonder how much of the conservative success was simply built on the fact that those people know how to throw a party, and will do it even when they lose.)

No, that city ordinance didn't change the world, or even all that much in this town. But for once, we made sure the bastards also didn't get exactly what they wanted. That, right there, is something to celebrate. So let's party.

10. Replicate success.

College teaches us to value original ideas. (Borrowing thoughts from others is called "plagiarism," and it's frowned on.) But guess what: this ain't college any more. Out here in the real world, it's OK not to spend valuable time and energy reinventing perfectly good wheels that have already been dreamed up by other people. If it works, use it. Good ideas belong to everybody, and nobody is going to flunk you for stealing them.

There's a corollary to this. This is a big movement, encompassing tens of millions of people and more moving parts than you can possibly imagine. And we've spent a decade building up some really good infrastructure. So every time you find yourself grouching: "Why isn't someone doing X, dammit?" your next thought should be to assume that someone already IS doing X. Because the odds are good that they probably are. And your next move is to find out who that person is, and offer to extend, help with, or replicate what they're doing.

Ten new rules for the new era. We'll probably figure out a lot more as time goes on and this weird new era we're in becomes more familiar to us. I'd love to hear what other rules you're discovering that help you navigate the post-Occupy world; if I get enough of them, I'll turn them into a future column.