

# **All Power to All the People: Redefining Power, Social Movements, and Intersectional Activism**

***Brittany Packnett***

***Tuesdays, 4:30-5:45 pm  
Littauer 166-Institute of Politics Conference Room***

Increasingly, traditional American politics is being upended by the power of the people, their moments, and their movements. This happens in cycles: each era of civil unrest and direct social action shifts the status quo—hopefully for the better—and lays a foundation for the next. The most effective social change shifts culture, people, policy, and creates *new power*.

Still, social change work suffers from the weight of societal challenges, too. Privilege can take over social movements, creating welcoming environments for some and silencing others. Prioritization and tactical efficacy can push organizations to erase dissenting voices among their own ranks. Varying access to resources, platforms and power can elevate some movements over others, even when all are vital. How can our movements move mountains if they are no different than the status quo?

In this study group, we will explore the art of social change at both its most organic and most aspirational. We will wrestle with the hard and necessary questions: are equitable and intersectional movements, that embrace the needs of all people instead of merely prioritize the needs of the majority, necessary? Are they possible? Are a diversity of people and tactics necessary for victory in justice—or are some people unwelcome, and some tactics a step too far? Should we transform existing democratic institutions—or create new ones? Most importantly, how do we act for social change in ways that are truly equitable and intersectional?

This study group will be as non-traditional in both format and content: our sessions will not merely be for observation of how change has been done, but provocative explorations of how we want to perform change ourselves. The goal of this study group is not merely to learn, but to act, and act differently. Together, we will interrogate dominant archetypes of power and co-construct a theory of social change for the way the world ought to be, not the way it is.

Study groups will employ provocative content across mediums, of prominent and grassroots voices in order to redefine "success" in social change. Guests will include those who can complicate our notions of power through the sharing of their first-hand experiences in activism, politics, art, organizing and leadership. Ultimately, we will let go of what we think we know about how to change the game, and build a new way, together.

If we want to change the world, we must redefine power.

**September 18***Interrogating Power: Where Have Movements Moved?*

It's called Power Hoarding: when one group dominates the who, what, where, when, and why. And it even happens in social movements. Together, we will ask ourselves what and who has hoarded power in social movements of the past- and explore what elements it could benefit us to include in the future. We will take the time to thoughtfully define where we are, what we mean, and what the architects and users of our language mean. "Intersectionality" is often incorrectly used in place of "diversity," "equity" and "equality" are often confused, and juxtapositions of the traditional and the modern divide instead of instruct. In this introduction, we will cut through the noise and get to what's real: what do these critical concepts actually mean, what lens do they require we use for our work, and does the inclusion of so much weaken or delay progress?

**September 24***Redefining Power: Exploring Recent Power Shifts and Democratic Upsets*

The recent primary victories of Ayanna Pressley, Andrew Gillum, Wesley Bell, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and others have stunned political operatives, defied polls, and challenged established beliefs about who can win- and how. But should these victories have been stunning at all? What happens when activists are elected? In this session we will interrogate traditional lenses and investments of democratic politics by constructing a campaign for a progressive political outsider ourselves, and receiving insight from leaders who have done it-and won.

**Guest:** *Kayla Reed, Ferguson Organizer and Architect of #ByeBob Campaign that defeated a 27 year District Attorney Incumbent*

**October 2***The Power of Imagination: From the Predictable to the Alternative Future*

The limits of social movements are often impaired by the tyranny of the status quo. Even when we go to change the world, we settle for incremental visions instead of revolutionary ones. Is there more power in a particular approach? Why do we believe in "impossible?" What could we gain by removing the limits of tradition and trying on something new? In this session, we will explore these questions through experimentation on a social issue of our choosing, and hear from change agents who have taken on the impossible with intention and clarity.

**Invited Guest:** *Starsky Wilson, Co-Chair, Ferguson Commission.*

**October 9**

*Protest Power: Does Acceptable Protest Exist?*

Kneeling during the anthem. Breaking a store window. Blocking traffic with a human chain. Shutting down a store. Interrupting a presidential candidate. Disrupting a SCOTUS hearing. Occupying the lawn of a mayor. All of these have been tactics of protest we've seen in 2018. Yet, the debate rages on- what protest is acceptable, and what is not? Is violence ever welcome or necessary in the revolution? And is the question of the "acceptability" of protest beside the point- and irrelevant for progress? Together with our guest, we will debate these topics not just in theory, but applied to the social issues of greatest importance to us.

**Guest:** *DeRay McKesson, Activist, Educator and Host, Pod Save The People*

**October 16:**

*Positional Power: The Inside-Outside Game*

A debate as old as social movements themselves, there is hardly a clear answer as to which tactic is most effective, or even if the strategies of working from the inside of systems or pressing them from the outside need to be presented as mutually exclusive. "Moral Purity" is often derided as an impediment to progress, limiting the scope of influence, acceptance and progress. Others insist upon it- and limit participation with intention as a matter of principal. All of these systems intersect in the lives of the marginalized: should the marginalized and their allies work within them to change them, or continue to push from the outside? Guests and students will explore the efficacy of both approaches, the limitations of both, and explore the benefits and challenges of leveraging them both.

**Invited Guest:** *Symone Sanders, CNN Political Commentator & Former National Press Secretary, Bernie Sanders for President*

**October 23:**

*Powerful Classrooms: Making Schools the First Line of Revolution*

Once upon a time, schools at all levels were hotbeds of activism and organizing. Once again, schools have become front lines for compelling institutions to change on everything from issues of LGBTQ equity, legacies of racism, and labor rights. Some schools encourage these behaviors; others silence them. What is the responsibility of institutions of all kinds to respond to their constituents- and what is the responsibility of constituents to hold their institutions accountable? What responsibility do educators have to nurture critical consciousness in students- even if they will be the ones being protested? Through the lens of education, we will explore the art of changing the institutions that serve us, from the inside and out.

**Invited Guest:** *John King, CEO, The Education Trust & Former U.S. Secretary of Education*

**October 30:***Storytelling Power: Art and Media in Activism*

Much has been made of the importance social media in modern movements-but it is *not* the exclusive source of news on social issues for the general American public. Mainstream media and entertainment outlets continue to be primarily responsible for crafting the public's perception of marginalized communities. Those perceptions are poorly informed and have great impact on the traction social change can-or can't-take. Who gets to own the narrative? Who should deliver it? Are there messages and messengers that are off limits? Does politics create lasting change- or does culture? Which comes first? Guests in this session will bring their perspectives as artists, advocates and journalists to answer these critical questions and more.

*Invited Guest: Wesley Lowery, Pulitzer Prize Winning Journalist, The Washington Post*

**November 6****Election Night***Electoral Power: The Predictable Future or an Aspirational One?*

As we await the critically important election night returns of the 2018 Midterm elections, we'll embrace the hope in the air and name the possibilities. If movements are truly intersectional, equitable and diverse, they do they have the power to change power and place new voices at decision-making tables? We will hear from unlikely candidates, elected officials and campaign leads who charted new territory in 2018, to open up our imaginations about what lawmaking can look like.

*Invited Guest: Kim Foxx, the First Black Woman elected Cook County State's Attorney*

**November 13:***Our Power: Time to Do The Work*

Now that the Midterm results are in, how do we make sense of the outcome? What do these outcomes indicate about the success of modern social movements and the merging voices within them? And most importantly, after a semester together and a new political landscape, what does this inspire us to go and *do*? We will prototype movements of our own, and commit to action moving beyond the semester to impact the Harvard community, greater Boston, and the communities with which we most closely identify. We don't just get to be learners. Our privileges require us to be leaders.