

Geoffrey Kurtz

Review

How To Get Stupid White Men Out Of Office: The Anti-Politics, Un-Boring Guide to Power. Edited by Adrienne Maree Brown and William Upski Wimsatt.

MoveOn's 50 Ways to Love Your Country. By MoveOn.

reviewed by
Geoffrey Kurtz

If two books constitute a trend, then these two announce a shift toward a new political style on the American left: a style that is simultaneously lively and lonely, furious and vacuous. This style has precedents, but it is unique in the way it synthesizes existing themes, and it marks a break with the approaches to political action that have previously characterized the best parts of the democratic left in the United States. This new style matters because of all this year's campaign-season books, these two might very well have the deepest long-term significance. Unlike the piles of political eye-candy at the front tables of every Barnes & Noble in the country, *How To Get Stupid White Men Out of Office* and *MoveOn's 50 Ways To Love Your Country* (hereafter *How To* and *50 Ways*) are being distributed primarily through networks of liberal and radical activists. Their impact will be concentrated where it matters: among the fraction of the country that is already struggling to make sense out of what forms of political action make sense today, and what those forms of action mean.

The new style rests on three ideas.

1. Political action is to be seen as an individual pursuit, akin to a hobby: something you, on your own, at a time convenient to you, drop in and out of. A "movement," if we can even use that term anymore, is the sum of the actions of a wide scattering of individuals who may or may not ever interact with each other.
2. Politics must cease to be boring and routine, and must become a venue for creativity and self-expression.

3. Political activists need technical advice, but norms and theories of society need little or no explanation.

The authors and editors of *How To* and *50 Ways* are optimistic. Wasting no time appealing to undecided voters, they aim to galvanize the vast millions of Bush-leery but politically disconnected potential voters and activists. To that end, the editors of these books have compiled advice (generally smart) and anecdotes (almost monotonously inspiring) about political participation by regular folks.

How To's case studies include election campaigns, voter registration drives, issue initiatives, and new political uses of the internet pioneered by or starring young people, especially people of color. Its authors display occasional interest in the details of doorknocking plans, phonebank statistics, and fundraising levels, but the focus of the twenty-odd stories they relate is just how *cool* politics can be. *How To* claims to be the register of an explosive new youth movement: a multi-racial, radical-flavored young left with a list of successes ranging from Jason West's mayorship in New Paltz, NY to a Senate race in South Dakota swung by young Native American activists to the politicization of the hip-hop and rave scenes. The book is scattered with relentlessly this-minute slang, instant-message lingo, and hip-hop culture references; the authors never let us forget that they are down with everything one is supposed to be down with these days.

50 Ways is less hip and more earnest, offering encouragement to "average citizens" who want to "make a difference." The editors group the testimonials they have collected into sections on the internet, voter registration and elections, mass media, the personal motivations behind political involvement, and "creative" action. Most of the tactics suggested here are conventional and fairly reliable: GOTV phone calls, letters to the editor or to elected officials, petitions, fundraising houseparties. The authors recommend rather than describe these methods of political influence; we read one-page stories by MoveOn members who have successfully used these tactics, but get only bits of advice little about how to put them into practice ourselves. The heart of the book is its upbeat insistence that you—yes, you—can "do big things."

Both books define themselves by defining their audiences. Although *How To* aims itself at hip left-leaning youth and *50 Ways* at their suburban parents' next-door neighbors, there is an important set of similarities underneath these niche-marketing differences. Besides the common traits of political inactivity and antipathy toward the Bush administration, the most striking commonality among the books' intended readers is that they see electoral politics as alien, unethical, and boring. These readers are people who, along with one *How To* contributor, would be surprised to walk into a campaign office and feel "a general vibe of really actually caring about who was going to be put into office." *50 Ways* bemoans the scorn leveled by "insiders" at candidates with "integrity;" another *How To* contributor relates his group's struggle with the need to "to 'dirty' ourselves with politics if we were going to have any chance of winning." The key conceptual distinction for these readers seems to be that between "inside" and "outside". For them, this distinction maps perfectly onto those between manipulative and honest or professional and amateur.

The strongest point of both books—especially *How To*—is that they challenge this dichotomy, urging their readers to understand the interplay of electoral and pressure-group tactics. Despite calls to bridge the inside-outside divide, however, both *How To* and *50 Ways* retain one of that its tropes: the obsession with the presumed gulf between the fun, entrepreneurial activism of the novice and the numb conventionalism of the expert. *How To*, for instance, expresses distaste for those "within the system": "They may wear suits, they may hold lots of boring meetings, they may have rules and justifications that don't make any sense, but they're in charge." The alternative? *How To* recommends voter reg at the local dance club, promises to assign you only "fun homework," and calls for artwork and talent shows to promote voting. *50 Ways* gets excited about "expressing political views through art or fashion" or through "new media" such as public access TV, and calls on you to "advertise your political vision" through billboards, banner-toting airplanes, or homemade T-shirts.

There is nothing wrong with smart new campaign tactics, or with the proposal that we have as much fun as we can on the way to political victories. But *How To* and *50 Ways* stretch toward another standard: a politics that fulfills our restless dreams of community and that is the arena for social re-imagining. For *50 Ways*, this wish is expressed through the

frequent use of words like “connecting,” “sharing,” and “inspiration;” as the book’s editors put it: “Engagement in the political dialogue—large or small—breathes life into us all.” Even online petitions yield “a sense of community and connection,” and less-virtual political involvements are plugged in terms of their potential to help you “reach out to others,” make friends, and perhaps even find a husband. For *How To*, the desire is still more urgent. Organizing should be “sexy;” politics based on “vision.” One contributor captures the mood concisely: “It’s the sense of celebration and joy, and the opportunity for people to be connected and be together—that’s the missing piece in the U.S.” It is the mood of these suggestions, rather than their content, that is so striking: both books strain with desire for a public sphere that is rich and accessible, full of opportunities to develop and realize new ideas and to expand social relationships beyond the sphere of private affections.

If the authors of *How To* and *50 Ways* really mean their call for a politics of imagination and community, they are being more radical than they acknowledge. This is a utopian demand, one that cannot be fulfilled in a society remotely like our own. Television-dominated, corporate-financed elections in a constitutional system that prevents the development of programmatic parties and allows little room for direct citizen participation; a class-divided, hyper-marketized society riven by hierarchies of race, gender and sexuality and criss-crossed with irrationalist and fundamentalist currents: it is silly to think that politics under these conditions can have room for self-expression and human connection except at its margins. We have too few interests in common and too few opportunities to discover more, and as citizens we hold far too small a share of power to allow us to re-design society as we might wish to. Absent an analysis of those conditions, to ask that political action be a vehicle for the exercise of creative capacities and an antidote to isolation is either to ignore the nature of contemporary politics, or to admit to only the mildest of creative urges and the faintest of solidaristic impulses. Whether modest hopes might be more appropriate is beside the point: the authors of *How To* and *50 Ways* gesture toward an ideal they cannot help us reach, and they leave themselves no way to recognize either the utopian glow or the strategic shallowness of their agendas.

A less wide-eyed approach to political action would accept Max Weber’s dictum that politics is a “slow boring of hard boards.” At their wiser

moments, *How To* and *50 Ways* admit this, and I suspect that many of the people who contributed to the books have better understandings of this point than they reveal here. Each book's authors occasionally rattle off a set of daunting figures: the number of voters it takes to swing an election, the hours of doorknocking required to canvass a precinct, the length a petition signature list had to reach before officials took notice. The lesson of these instances might seem to be that effective power-seeking is a matter of patient organization at least as much, if not more, than it is about cleverness or innovation. This is not an insight that the authors of *How To* and *50 Ways* seem to have taken to heart, however, or at least not one that they choose to impress upon their readers. Here, the gulf between the new political style and its predecessors yawns wide.

Take, for example, the central concerns of older political action manuals, such as *Organizing* by Si Kahn and *Organizing for Social Change* by Kim Bobo, Jackie Kendall, and Steve Max. Kahn, Bobo, Kendall, and Max write about the tasks of groups that seek to pursue power together. Both books emphasize the mechanics of meetings, coalition-building, goal-setting, member recruitment, and leadership development. This is a view of left politics as *organizing*, as a craft that must be learned through experience and mentorship and that must be practiced in and by collectivities that meet regularly, strategize for the long term, and act in concert. It is a view of politics that has developed out of the experiences of generations of labor, community, and civil rights organizers, and that has played a central role in winning that scattering of precious and precarious victories that the US left has been able to leverage. Organizing works. It is not a form of entertainment, it takes time and commitment, and it cannot, by itself, explain *why* social change is needed, but there is no better method available for the construction of insurgent democratic movements.

Where Kahn, Bobo, Kendall, and Max wrote their books as supplements to in-the-field organizer training, *How To* and *50 Ways* present themselves as replacements for apprenticeship in political action. For *How To* and *50 Ways*, meetings and mentorship fade from view. "You," for these authors, is always singular: their audience is a universe of individuals who take action alone. While neither book offers an explicit critique of organizations, the implications are clear: organizations are inconvenient intrusions into your busy life, and they leave you less room for doing things your own way. *50 Ways* lauds actions that you can take "at home, in

[your] spare time,” preferably on the internet. Classic community organizing techniques, for at least one *How To* contributor, are “time-consuming bullshit.” Once they get around to recommending specific “slick moves to swing the election,” the closest *How To*’s authors come to telling their readers to organize is to gently recommend starting “an informal group” or “an unofficial or official...local voting block.” The words “informal” and “unofficial,” here, seem to add no meaning, but they do add reassurance: We’re not too serious about this, y’all, so just chill. We won’t place serious demands on you.

With its rejection of the organizing model of political action, the new political style announced by *How To* and *50 Ways* is missing a realistic appraisal of what books can do. Since organizing must be learned through practice and with guidance, books can only do so much to teach us political skills. However, books can help us understand *why* we engage in political action. This is a question that *How To* and *50 Ways* disdain. Ideals toward which we might aspire do not require discussion, they insist, nor do accounts of how our society fits together. The unstated thesis of both *How To* and *50 Ways* is that the real problems of the US left are a lack of enthusiasm and a dearth of technical know-how. The first is to be remedied by cheery success stories and an insistence that political action need not be boring, and the second by collections of what *50 Ways* calls “tips and resources.”

What if this is not what we need? I am not sure how to prove what the US left today does or does not lack, so I will simply propose an alternative to the view presented in *How To* and *50 Ways*: We have plenty of technical skill around, and finding sources from which to learn it is not difficult. Numerous unions, community organizations, and political groups have internships and organizer training programs. As for cheer: in a world of contradictions and disappointments, it is not the most reliable source of motivation. On the other hand, the work of figuring out what we want is not as easily dispensed with as the *How To* and *50 Ways* authors presume. Once, left activists understood this. The Port Huron Statement charged: “All around us there is an astute grasp of method, technique—the committee, the ad hoc group, the lobbyist, the hard and soft sell, the make, the projected image—but, if pressed critically, such expertise is incompetent to explain its implicit ideals.” This is our problem, too.

Geoffrey Kurtz

How To and *50 Ways* burst with unexplained implicit ideals. *How To* drops jokes about what we'll all do after the revolution, but the "Vision" it expounds is fluffy despite the capital V, veering between conservative-tinged communitarianism and ho-hum liberalism:

We believe in creating social support to strengthen families.
We believe in fostering a spirit of shared responsibility and community.
We believe in bringing all voices into the public dialogue.
We believe in protecting our right to privacy and our freedom of choice.
We believe in making real opportunities available to all.
We believe in using government to invest in the public good.

...and so forth. *50 Ways* is even more averse to discussing goals and principles, aside from whatever agenda might be implied by the notoriously unhelpful label "progressive", or by friendly offhand mentions of organizations such as the AFL-CIO, Sierra Club, NOW, Working Assets, and other usual suspects. *How To's* authors make clear that their immediate goal is to defeat George W. Bush this November, and the anti-Bush stance of *50 Ways* is only a nudge and a wink away from being explicit. (Perhaps MoveOn has some tax-status reason for remaining noncommittal in print?) But neither book shows interest in a serious discussion of what we might hope to gain from a Democratic victory this year, or what we might want to achieve afterwards. It is not that *How To* and *50 Ways* never get around to addressing these questions: rather, they reject normative and theoretical questions as unnecessary.

In his dialog *Gorgias*, Plato argued that politics is not simply an *empeiria*—a skill or knack that can be discussed apart from its goals. Rather, it should be understood as a *techne*—a craft that entails both capabilities learned through practice and an account of the ends toward which those capabilities will be applied. *How To* and *50 Ways* treat politics as *empeiria*, as a mere bag of tricks whose goals are so obvious—or perhaps unimportant—that they require little or no discussion. I want to suggest that Plato's notion of politics as *techne* is as relevant to our situation as Weber's realism. What we need most is not books that try to tell us how to do politics, but organizations that can show us how to

Geoffrey Kurtz

organize, and engagement with political theory to help us determine why we want to organize and what we should expect from our organizing.

By conceiving of politics as *empeiria* rather than *techne*, insisting on immediate pleasure, and taking the individual as their cosmos, *How To* and *50 Ways* surrender to the ideology of consumerism. This is evident in the simpering userfriendliness of *50 Ways*, but it reaches a sickening level of self-consciousness in *How To*, with its calls for a “marketing model of organizing,” its recommendation that activists take “lessons from hip hop, mass media, and corporate marketing,” and its identification with the generational consciousness that “brought jazz, rock ‘n’ roll, hip hop, jeans, sneakers, and the Internet to power.” In the end, this reduction of left politics to consumerism is what distinguishes the political style shared by *How To* and *50 Ways*. That their acceptance of this ideology might be at odds with their own deeper hopes is a possibility that the authors have not equipped themselves to discern. *How To* and *50 Ways* may be fueled by a sound rage against social injustice, but it is a rage that, since it is merely expressed and never explained, remains just as private as any other consumer preference. The creativity they exhibit never rises above the level of the clever advertiser, the solidarities they offer go no deeper than our identifications with our favorite brands, and they leave us with a conception of politics that has little room for either the mundane and disciplined action required for effectiveness or the critical intellectual edge that is a prerequisite for radicalism.

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