

DISPATCHES FROM POSSIBLE FUTURES:



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You have to act as if it were possible to radically transform the world. And you have to do it all the time."

— Angela Davis





What do we need to do and build **now**to **create** a country in 20 years
in which the dominant, broadly shared

common sense

drives our public policy, shared action, and private practice toward

care for our communities-

for each other-in moments of crisis and opportunity?





IN 2022...

The Social & Economic Justice Leaders Project (SEJ) convened over 100 leaders from the social justice ecosystem to grapple with that challenge through seven half-day future scenario sessions. Our demographically diverse participants came from a range of roles within the U.S. progressive ecosystem — campaigners, organizers, narrative strategists, artists, researchers, elected officials, policy analysts, and more.

Through SEJ's Horizons Project, we dropped participants into a dire 2032 and a more promising 2052, asking what capacities, roles, relationships, and infrastructure are needed to stem a more repressive future and seed a more joyful, just, and beautiful future beyond. Participants inhabited these future scenarios to draw insights for *today* — for both what we do (or don't do) and how we should be.



This dispatch offers a heat map of what emerged:

Signals demanding new attention, including the coming attacks, increases in violence, and disruptions to our current systems and institutions.



ABOUT SEJ

SEJ is a shared resource, capacity builder, and collaboration space for leaders across issues in the progressive movement to:

- Prepare for opportunities and risks through scenario planning and experiential learning;
- · Nurture relationships and align strategies;
- · Catalyze new projects that translate plans into actions; and
- Expand the social imaginary on social values and systems for a just and joyful future.

SEJ convenes progressive movement leaders and their organizations to build shared actionable strategies to win over the long term, because we believe that when progressive organizations and their leaders build shared analysis and strategies over the long term, prepare for conditions outside their control or campaigns, and practice responding to crisis and opportunity across organizational lines, they will — individually and collectively — strengthen the overall progressive movement and win a robust and reparative democracy, economy, and future.

ABOUT SCENARIO PLANNING

SEJ frequently uses scenario planning as a methodology in service of those goals. Scenario planning seeks to inform present-day strategy by placing people into futures that are plausible (grounded in an analysis of where we are and of signals about future trends) but not meant to be predictive. As an immersive approach, scenario planning pushes participants to inhabit those futures, whether they like the facts they find or not — and thus helps participants face and grapple with conditions beyond their control.

SEJ historically engaged participants in much closer-term (e.g., six to 24 months) and limited scope (e.g., economic recession, election sabotage) exercises. The Horizons Project grew out of the field's desire to use scenario planning to support much longer-term strategy work, shifting the time horizons out 10, 20, and 30 years. We developed the Horizons scenarios in collaboration with leaders from the field, following current trends as well as signals of emerging shifts into those futures.





(the long-term trends certain to shape our future) as well as signals

(present-day harbingers of possible future disruptions).

In collaboration with social justice leaders from the field,

we populated those futures to

focus attention

on what otherwise is secondary or outside our view — interpolating plausible (but not predictive) futures that

upset familiar habits of strategy and analysis.



We foregrounded trends including:

- The right wing's success moving an integrated regressive issue agenda
 as the tip of an ambitious spear aimed at retrenching whiteness and
 patriarchy, even as social justice organizations continue to move
 siloed progressive issues and score atomized wins.
- **Authoritarian moves** to hollow out or dismantle government at every level, from the inside out.
- Spiraling and widespread crises of basic survival infrastructure from the collapse and privatization of public needs provision including energy, clean water, food, health care, etc.
- Increasing violence, state-sanctioned and not, with the harshest impacts visited on those whom centuries of exclusion and injustice already harm most, namely Black, LGBTQ, immigrant, disabled, and Indigenous people and communities.
- Shifts in, pressures on, and increased attacks against familiar organizational forms and existing institutions generated from outside

 e.g., coordinated attacks on 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) funding streams
 and infiltration and from pressure within. Working Families Party
 National Director Maurice Mitchell details this in his piece "Building Resilient Organizations," for example.



We also elevated shifts where the trajectory is less easy to predict:

- The evolution of technological innovation. How will it impact the domestic and global economy, politics, culture, and modes of people relating to each other (online and off)? Who will be harmed and helped by it?
- The **climate crisis**' broad reach. Who will move where? How will climate change impact what regions are livable and where food can be grown? What innovations will arise to stem the tide? How will that unfold inequitably across geographies and communities within the U.S. and beyond? What are the implications for notions of identity (e.g., the likely upsurge of xenophobia and the reconstitution of whiteness)?
- The reshaping and realignment of social, political, cultural, and economic opposition to social justice advances and movement in the coming decades. What will be schisms within that emergent opposition? Who could be cleaved from a dominant/oppressive regime, and who will newly align? How will domestic shifts reflect or drive global dislocations? How will our current views on race, gender, and identity shift or retrench in the face of those changes?

Across the sessions, participants concurred that, collectively, we are inadequately contending with the range of conditions we are likely to face. Implications for capacity, infrastructure, and collaboration that we should build now include:

- Preparation for more challenging conditions, including strategies for confronting violence and its impacts on communities and affirmative paradigm-shifting campaigns that move past issue fights and challenge the terrain of the culture war and the war on government, supported by rigorous future forecasting, scenario planning, and crisis preparation.
- Collaboration with new sectors and forms of expertise with which we
 have relatively few relationships (including a wide range of expertise, for
 example, engineering, construction, planning and design, demographers,
 technologists, physicists, ecologists, linguists, artists and creatives,
 healing practitioners, and mediators).
- Experimentation with new models/methodologies for impact (beyond new agendas or campaigns) to fuel shared learning and iteration, including capacity for learning from tests, resources for scaling successes, and incentives for continuing to take risks.

Complexity theory has been a valuable framework for navigating possible futures.

The complexity theory framework and the challenge of tolerating, much less navigating, complexity will resonate with the experience and themes emerging from Horizons. Complexity theory helpfully distinguishes "complicated" situations (which are met most effectively with front-end research and development, expertise, and commandand-control execution) from "complexity," where the predictability of cause and effect is broken (because the scale, interdependence, and interactivity of myriad factors render front-end assessment impossible rather than just hard). In complexity, the call is to sense, test, and learn — culling insights and ideas from a range of perspectives, drawing on nontraditional expertise, facilitating experimentation, tolerating failure, and encouraging collective learning. Complexity requires nimble organization, dynamic and real-time sensemaking, and tolerance for decentralized authority and decision-making. Complexity theory and the practice of emergent strategy will be key to wayfinding through an uncertain, unpredictable future.



Participants experienced the Horizons scenarios as

both sobering and generative

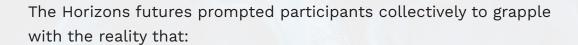
with the complexity and urgency

of the present

and likely near-term futures challenging us existentially, even as those scenarios shook loose

familiar modes of strategy and opened

portals to new methods, capacities, and pathways.



- We're ill-prepared and ill-preparing. Both futures (a hard next decade and a brighter 30-year future) consistently provoked participants to share frequently with deep emotion their sense that little of what we're doing is preparing us adequately, much less well, to inhabit or steer either future (individually, institutionally, or across the ecosystem).
- We're exhausted. Facing the reality of our poor preparation, participants also shared a range of intense emotional and bodily responses anxiety, exhaustion, erasure, blankness, grief, hopelessness. Those emotions were all the more heightened because they echo what participants experience in daily life (both in and outside work), even as we collectively tend to suppress or ignore the emotions to further the work.
- The path forward is not (just) doing more (better, faster, at scale) of what
 we already do. Participants shared a sense that we need new modes,
 some of which are yet to be imagined and others of which lie within
 existing expertise that is often peripheral to the justice ecosystem.
 They were clear that we should not jettison all our current strategies or
 approaches but also that we need to frankly assess what is working, what
 is not, and what is missing.
- Even in the face of all that, we hold a deep collective curiosity and a strong appetite for experimentation. Participants oriented to much longer time horizons (cross-generational, geologic) in ways that heightened the present urgency as well as the need to prepare now for long-arc needs, threats, and opportunities. And we evidenced a willingness to look anew (and more critically) at our existing approaches as we imagine new experiments to seed.

Those consistent responses to the

Horizons experience, in turn,

shifted the focus of discussions

toward less familiar questions

of how we need to respond

or navigate our conditions
by attending to both

care and conflict.

CARE



CONFLICT

to make provision for to be concerned with

CARE. CONFLICT.

to collide, disagree, or oppose to fight or contend with

CARE

Those strong emotions arose in all sessions, as they do in participants' daily lives, their communities, their institutions, and the world, even as we have been trained to suppress or ignore our emotions to keep doing the work.

We know the right is adept at activating and channeling emotion (anger, fear, defensiveness weaponized for the authoritarian agenda). But participants consistently voiced that the progressive ecosystem has an underdeveloped understanding of what emotions actually are; how to wisely foster, channel, and metabolize them; and what role they play in collective life (beyond instrumentally activating anger to further organizing).

Even as participants confronted hard emotions, over and over, they found a path from the present through a dire future to a more just and joyful one through modes of *care*. With pro-authoritarians attacking the public provision of basic shared needs, participants recognized that pro-democracy formations must provide survival services (including mutual aid) for those facing the harshest impacts. The scenarios also prompted attention to the likely need for more technical and ambitious forms of self-reliance, including our own energy, food, and health and water systems (something few social justice organizations are seriously oriented toward).

That line of inquiry led to two fundamental questions for how organizations approach our work:

- A future-facing question: How can we design such nongovernmental interventions in ways that make the case for the shared decision-making and common stewardship that are part of a robust and reparative democracy?
- 2. And a question for today: How does the centrality of service provision upset current theories of change, which often segregate service from organizing?

It also raised important questions about the role of care in the U.S.'s future. What should care's role be in a reimagined and better version of governmental and public institutions for the future, and how can care be available among and across communities? What practices would move aspirations of care from assertions on paper into our culture and common sense, our governance structures, and public and private institutions? How can we center care while remaining clear-eyed about the challenges and open to the opportunities of difference, even when salient differences are no longer along the axes with which we are most familiar (e.g., race, gender, ethnicity, ability)?

The opportunity that centering care creates is greatest when we attend to the need for circles of care and concern to broaden to those with whom we do not agree. Political Scientist Hahrie Han offered a helpfully sharp definition of solidarity relevant here: Namely, solidarity exists when two parties mutually agree to share their own resources to advance each other's interests, even if their interests differ. That surfaces a dimension of caring that is critical to the project of democracy: to care enough to remain in the collective project even when our side or our priorities don't prevail.

HOLDING AND NAVIGATING CONFLICT

Horizons also pushed participants to grapple with the reality that *conflict* will persist permanently, even as we build a world that is more just and equitable. The enduring nature of conflict can be viewed as falling across several axes: minor and intense conflict, healthy and unhealthy conflict, interpersonal and institutional conflicts, conflicts of interests, and conflicts of inequalities (and others). Some conflicts give rise to *harm* that requires restoration and repair, while others — wisely navigated — become generative fuel for innovation and collective advance.

The omnipresence of conflicts points to the need for better skills, vehicles, and strategies for navigating conflict and for holding together collectively as we grapple with conflict — not only within social justice institutions or movement spaces but broadly within a complex, pluralistic society.

That attention to conflict elevates a recurrent theme flagged in the Horizons sessions: progressives' troubling tendency to speak to an ever-smaller constituency when there is an urgent need to engage meaningfully across a broader set of people with whom we do not agree; with whom we must engage; and with whom we must move toward a new vision of collective engagement, democracy, and shared abundance—even as we may still disagree about so much. (To be explicit, this report is not suggesting that the justice ecosystem should bridge to white supremacist, violent, or authoritarian forces.)

We must prepare for a future replete with conflict, even in a world where we collectively are taking care of each other and even if the particular conflicts of today are no longer hardwired.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE WORK

The centrality of care *and* conflict for our present and future points to a range of capacities, models, and approaches — within and beyond the social justice ecosystem — that we must strengthen or build. For instance:

- Skills for fostering generative conflict as a fuel for change
 (interpersonally, within institutions and the social justice ecosystem, and
 more broadly as foundations of democratic engagement), coupled with
 strong practices, institutions, and resources for meaningful repair when
 conflict generates harm.
- 2. Explorations of how emotions are ways to activate people and fuel winning change and how fostering prosocial emotions and emotional interconnectivity could be constitutive practices to anchor collective modes of being together (in community, in place, online, through democratic engagement, by the government, etc.).

There are real questions to explore here related to what containers are the right ones for people to navigate and work through strong emotions and how and whether one's nonprofit or mission-driven nonprofit employer focused on change in the world is a place for some of that work. As the social justice ecosystem continues to engage with Maurice Mitchell's article and the internal organizational challenges that staff raise, a clear-eyed exploration of this is hugely important because institutional forms will and must evolve.

- 3. Models and vehicles for creating big tent spaces with a low bar to entry, grounded by meaningful baseline commitments and values but able to hold divergent interests, as compared to high-bar, self-selected movement or organizing spaces.
- 4. Experiments that demonstrate that justice or advancement for historically excluded communities can advance our collective abundance and liberation (even as those most privileged may experience a nearterm cost).
- 5. Pilots of new identities and narratives into which a wide range of people are drawn to adhere to rather than just a demand to divest old identities oriented around white supremacy (or in opposition to it).



1. THE BRIDGE PROJECT

In 2022, Horizon's sister project <u>Bridge</u> (a collaboration of SEJ and The South), developed seeds of a new American identity untethered from white supremacy (i.e., neither white supremacist nor centered around resisting white supremacy) and oriented to a fundamental reconstitution of the story of America around a shared vision and values. The goal is to move past a demand of divestment from present identities and past polarizing people into action tomorrow and instead entice people to a new shared identity that is so expansive and rooted in belonging that it is irresistible. That destination narrative reflects outcomes of a yet-undone healing process for the nation:

- To have arrived at a prevalent American identity that has ample room for plenty of diverse constituent identities.
- To have built an identity that acknowledges harms of the U.S.'s white supremacist past but has also repaired enough for people to broadly share values and trust.
- To have created a nation where the sacred humanity of all drives our understanding of who belongs.

In 2023, SEJ will test elements of that narrative — what resonates, across what divides, and how might that be a path we build now that helps us survive the near term while building the long arc.

2. THE MERIDIAN PROJECT

The Meridian Project seeks to explore and test new strategies to counter the authoritarian threat, including, for example, whether and how community-provided mutual aid and survival services can strengthen resistance, build a pro-democracy base, and increase community cohesion. It aims to complement existing strategies by providing a space for deliberate research and development of underexplored strategies, with an eye toward identifying measurable experiments where possible. In 2022, SEJ commissioned scholars Erica Chenoweth and Zoe Marks to look at the nature and intensity of the authoritarian threat in the U.S. and to engage the social justice field to explore the nature and level of preparation to stem (or survive) the authoritarian threat. Concluding that there exists a significant possibility of electoral autocracy domestically (where the formal apparatus of democracy is the pathway for the authoritarian takeover), the authors outlined a set of recommendations for prodemocracy organizing and building a united front. Meridian will continue that R&D work, with Horizons exploring how a united front could, in fact, provide a foundation for an affirmative intervention to seed a new future, not only a bulwark of defense against a worse near-term future.

3. THE STRENGTHENING ORGANIZING PROJECT

The Strengthening Organizing Project is a two-year intervention to support organizers from labor and community organizing to grapple with questions of the lineage of organizing models, strengths to foster, and gaps to address for what is needed today and in likely futures. The process will include over 200 interviews with experienced organizers as well as a series of in-person gatherings to build trust, delve into the broadly felt crisis of base building, what organizing methodologies and practices the field has inherited, what those practices were designed to solve for in history, and what future conditions we must build for now.

These SEJ projects will provide avenues through which to explore themes that Horizons elevated. In addition, Horizons will follow some of the trailheads emerging from the themes outlined in this report, including:

- What capacities could complement existing frameworks for building and leveraging *power*, including questions of care and conflict?
- What metrics could better help us determine whether we are creating a new shared common sense?
- What experiments could help us design new infrastructure/ models for organizations, public leadership, accountability, and infrastructure beyond philanthropic-funded nonprofits for an uncertain, permanently conflictual future?
- How can we build truly cross-disciplinary modes of shared learning, innovation, and strategy to bring expertise and wisdom from outside the familiar modes that drive social justice strategy now?

A CLOSING INVITATION

The Horizons Project was designed as an experience and offering to those working to remake our country for a more just and joyful future. SEJ aimed in 2022 to surface insights from near- and further-term futures to highlight the moves we must make today — not simply in what we aim to do but in how we do it (the capacities, roles, relationships, and infrastructure that give life to our vision).'

As SEJ looks to move this work forward, we are eager to hear from you in response to this dispatch and on the themes Horizons will explore in this next phase:

- What resonated in this personally or institutionally?
- What provoked you, or what are you unconvinced by?
- How does or might your work explore or test these themes?
- What questions should we be asking that we are not?
- How would you want to engage in a collective exploration moving ahead?

We invite you to share your thoughts and feedback or ask to join a future Horizons scenario session by emailing info@SEJleaders.org.

APPRECIATIONS

We deeply appreciate the time, insights, energy, and willingness to come along for an uncertain ride of everyone who has touched Horizons since its inception in 2021. We are grateful to the members of the Horizons Lab who engaged in an arc of sessions that helped craft the 2032/2052 scenarios we ran in 2022, and we are thankful for the session participants who spent four-plus hours in those futures generously sharing their authentic and thoughtful insights, reactions, and questions.

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ABOUT SOCIAL & ECONOMIC JUSTICE LEADERS PROJECT

SEJ is a shared resource, capacity builder, and collaboration supporter that provides movement leaders and organizers with space to look further in the future than they usually can; to prepare for conditions beyond our control and campaigns; and to practice responding to crises and opportunities across organizational lines. We convene progressive movement leaders and their organizations to build shared strategies for the long-term that are actionable today.