

# Regional Equity Goes National

*A half-dozen leaders in the regional equity movement join an intergenerational conversation with movement elder Carl Anthony on the prospects for national change.*

## Participants

- **Carl Anthony**, Co-Founder, Earth House Leadership Center, Urban Habitat, Oakland
- **Juliet Ellis**, Executive Director, Urban Habitat, Oakland
- **Nathaniel Smith**, Director, Partnerships & Research for Equitable Development, Emory University, Atlanta
- **Cecil Corbin-Mark**, Director of Programs, We Act for Environmental Justice, New York
- **Leslie Moody**, Executive Director, Partnership for Working Families, Denver
- **Dwayne Marsh**, Director for Policy Engagement, Policy Link

Roundtable Interview by Jesse Clarke

## Movement Origins of Regionalism

**Jesse Clarke:** Can you situate the movement for regional equity in a historical context? What came before, and how do these different movements relate to one another?

**Carl Anthony:** We all have a rather short memory, but most of the social movements that we think of today as being defining movements of our time actually have roots that go way back to the 17th and 18th centuries, or even the 16th century, with the European expansion. The ones that are most familiar, the Civil Rights Movement and the abolitionists' movement had their beginnings with the struggle against slavery. The Labor Movement had its beginnings in England in the Industrial Revolution which followed from the colonization of the New World.

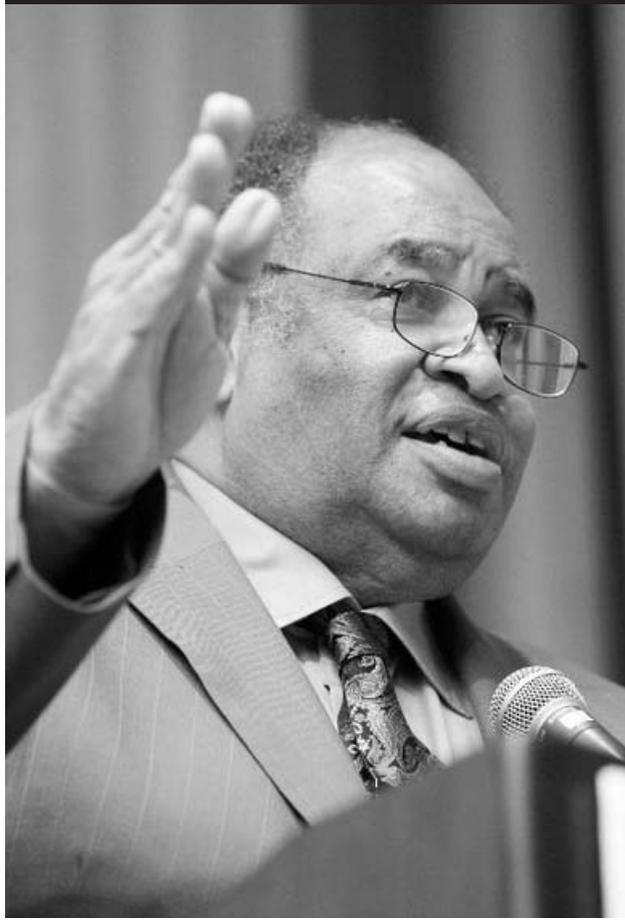
The Women's Movement also had groundings in those days when the families were broken up in order to provide for manpower for the Industrial Revolution. The indigenous people's movements and most of the anti-colonization movements around the world go back to that time. Even the environmental movement goes back to the colonization of islands in the New World where people could see the devastation based upon the exploitation of natural resources.

We are actually in an inter-generational struggle that goes back quite a long time. When the Civil Rights Movement came to its heyday in the 1950s and 1960s, it was a movement about human rights, but it was also a movement about spatial geography. That's a concept with which most people may not be very familiar; but we had a whole region of the country in the South where African Americans were being terrorized. It was a place where it was embodied in law that black people could be lynched, that they had no

voting rights. They couldn't even go and buy a cheeseburger at a five-and-dime. Participation of blacks in the commercial and civic culture was off limits. So, even as African Americans struggled in that space for inclusion into daily life, similar struggles in a different space but from the same origin were taking place in the North.

As the migration of African Americans came into the cities, the spatial context of the struggle changed, and a lot of the struggles then became grounded in urban neighborhoods. This context of struggles for neighborhoods took on a very powerful meaning in the 1960s. It was built upon not only the history of African American displacement, but also on the struggles of other immigrant groups to participate in the United States on an equal footing.

The struggle for black power and the culmination of that movement for equality in both the South and the North resulted in the new electoral politics of the 1970s. Almost



every major city in the United States went through a process of trying to accommodate the struggle, the insurgency, of African Americans. African American mayors and members of City Councils were elected in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, New Orleans, Raleigh, and most other big cities.

Simultaneously, with the emergence of African American leadership within the cities, the white population left—they actually left and they took the resources with them. So we had a huge fiscal crisis in every city across the country and African American mayors and leadership were left coping with diminished fiscal capacity and rising social needs.

So, as we talk about regionalism, we need to really understand that, in some ways, this is not really new, it's actually an old struggle. There are a number of conditions that have made it possible for this to become a battleground at the end of the first decade in the 21st century. And I'll just mention several key influences.

**Rise of Environmentalism:** First is the rise of the environmental movement, which produced a public questioning of life in the suburbs as being the optimal quality of life for everyone. During the 1950s and 1960s, the suburbs were thought of as being the best possible way of life.

**Suburban Decline:** The second really important influence was the recognition that all suburbs are not the same, and Myron Orfield's groundbreaking work with *Metropolitica* actually demonstrated that some of the suburban places are getting the shaft in the current pattern of metropolitan development so that they're receiving a lot of the same problems that the old inner cities used to realize.

**Globalization:** The third influence has been globalization. The structure of our metropolitan regions have been changed radically in the last 20 years because of globalization.

#### **Demographics:**

In addition, there are two more points that I want to mention and maybe open it up for conversation. There has been a big demographic change. The quality and character of individual families changed in the last 30 years. The "single person" and "single head of household" are the dominant

household types in the United States—the "Ozzie and Harriet" lifestyle is certainly not predominant.

Migrants from all over the world, particularly from Latin America and the Asian Pacific islands, have become a very important political force. And finally, the African American community is finding itself in the middle of a dilemma because it is actually being undermined by the success of a relatively small fraction of people who have achieved middle class status as a result of the 1960s.

A class divide is opening up within the African American communities. While some people are managing to get over to the middle class, the bottom third of the population is actually worse off than they were in the 1960s.

So, as the African American middle class moves up, they also are moving out. We now have 60 percent of the Asian American population, 50 percent of the Latino population, and 40 percent of the African American middle class population living in the suburbs. This is quite a different picture than it was in the 1960s and 1970s.

Lastly, the mortgage crisis that has really come to a head in the last couple of years, has demonstrated that the old idea of metropolitan development is dead. The struggle for regional equity will be a struggle whereby the middle class people who have now moved into the suburbs join together with those in the inner city to create a new reality for our metropolitan regions.

Photo:

Carl Anthony speaking about the relationship between green economics and racial equity.

Courtesy of [www.coop-power.coop/](http://www.coop-power.coop/)  
LynnBenander



**Jesse Clarke:** Carl Anthony has laid out the trajectory of the social movements which came together under the regional equity banner. (See preceding Carl Anthony interview excerpt.) That naturally leads into the question, how do you differentiate between the regional equity movement and other civil rights and social justice movements that have similar objectives or similar demographic bases?

**Dwayne Marsh:** Policy Link came to this frame both because its leadership was committed to the idea but also because it came from the ground up. There was an early gathering of about 30 or so people doing work in what we then called “community-based regionalism.” In that conversation, there was a clarity of understanding that you can’t make lasting neighborhood change without at least a regional analysis, if not a regional strategy for moving power. The reason our own tri-annual gathering of regional equity advocates has tripled in size is people are finding practical usefulness in this kind of real-world theoretical framework.

The principles that drive a regional equity analysis cannot be easily stretched into something that doesn’t consider the interests of working class, low-income people of color. One can contrast that with “Smart Growth” as a frame. People looked at Smart Growth and agreed with some of the principles, but felt like too often, at the end of the day, no benefits accrue to their constituencies.

**Nathaniel Smith:** To go back to what Carl’s piece addresses, we need to understand that this movement is not an independent movement unto itself but a continuation of a broader, longer, movement for social justice in our country and in our world. The regional equity framework allows individuals to get together who may not have thought of being under the same tent. It gives them the opportunity to find that common thread that binds us together as human beings.



If you go back to one of King’s last speeches at the National Cathedral, “Remaining Awake in a Great Revolution,” one of his great quotes is: “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.”

What he’s talking about is how we’re all connected as individuals. What he’s talking about is regional equity. And what we need to do is to build upon that great quote and move forward in really promoting social justice in our broader community.

**Juliet Ellis:** I really appreciate Nathaniel’s comments highlighting interconnectedness because in doing the work in the Bay Area we hear again and again that one of the reasons people want to be part of the effort is the understanding that we’re stronger when we work together. Our fights are similar and there is synergy in us working together for the real solutions.

The beauty around the joint equity work in comparison to other movements that are out there is the fact that the regional equity agenda is explicitly about equity. Not just smarter growth, not just greener jobs, but equitable participation for low-income people and communities of color. The tent is big enough but it’s explicit enough. So unlike the kind of coalition work where Urban Habitat is alone in advocating for the equity part of the equation, our regional equity work is an easy natural fit.

**Carl Anthony:** I think one of the other wonderful things we’re experiencing in the United States (and you see this in the Presidential contest), we’re welcoming a new generation that is saying not only can we represent the communities that we come from, but we can provide leadership for everybody.

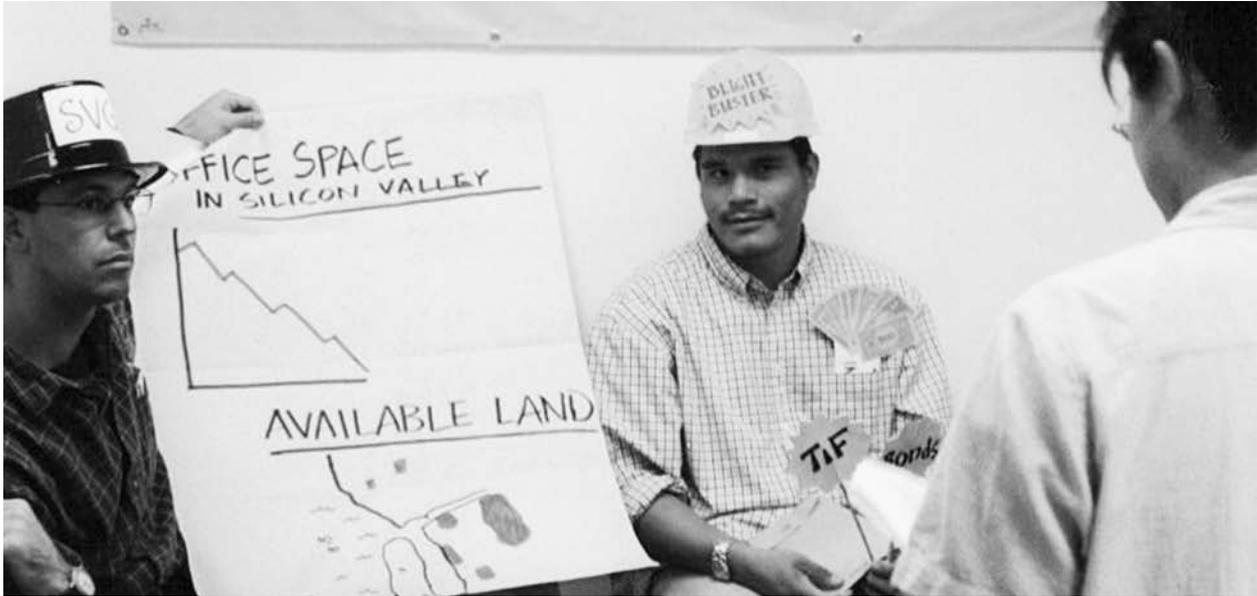
**Dwayne Marsh:** I think that’s so right, and this concept that we are all interconnected and intertwined leads to the realization that we are mutually vulnerable: the

Photos:

(Left) Boston youth register for apprenticeships as part of Our Schools, Our Futures.

(Right) Community residents rally for good jobs and local hiring at Denver’s Cherokee-Gates redevelopment.

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vulnerability of one is the vulnerability of all. And this is an idea that resonates as a true American ideal. Ultimately, it's the same premise as the New Deal, which became a signature piece of American political thought: the security of one is tied to the security of all.

Unfortunately, for the last decade, and even longer, urban centers have been subject to an assault. Our urban centers weren't seen as interconnected to the place where "white flight" took flight to. There was a refusal to recognize that there is a direct connection between what's going on in the urban environments, and the suburban ones.

I think that once again it's becoming very clear to people that we have to work together in larger, more diverse coalitions to build our power together. It's also becoming clear that to build power together in a regional equity movement is to deal with transportation issues, with employment, with housing, and with the environment in a broader way than in the way just one person or one organization might be approaching it locally.

**Jesse Clarke:** So, what sort of power are you talking about building?

**Leslie Moody:** In Denver, we're working in a number of major metropolitan areas on both, site-specific development campaigns to win community benefits agreements and on larger community benefits policies and principles in cities. We're seeing the incredibly transformative nature of the regional equity movement: people moving from isolation (sometimes connected to a community organization or a union or a church, but feeling like they have no access to power) and then, through this work, realizing that they not only can access power, but that they have the power to govern.

The meaning of this political movement in the country right now, as well as the movement we're seeing in cities, is

really inspiring and exciting. Over the last eight years we have been subject to a concerted attack on the role of government in society and the power of government to hold corporations accountable and to hold communities to a high standard. There had been a sense that progressive governance was removed as a possibility. Now we're seeing the revitalization of a progressive vision of what our cities can be, the power of government to raise the floor, level the playing field and create opportunity, whether it's through the education system or through housing opportunities or job opportunities, and people ready to actually jump up and govern.

And so, I think there's a moment when you pull enough groups together who have been isolated and competing for resources and frustrated long enough that we can all start saying, "Wait a minute. We have a vision. We share this vision. And if we combine our resources, our membership bases are able to actually think about how power is structured in our region. We will be the folks, we will be the people who can decide the future of our cities and our regions."

**Jesse Clarke:** In terms of the political power of governance, how do you think the current situation compares to the situation in the 1970s when African American mayors and city councils took power and then found that the treasury was bare and the political power that they were exercising was the power to administer scarcity, the power to withdraw investment, the power to ration social services and healthcare? When you look at the social institutions like unions and other movements like the Civil Rights Movement that held economic power outside the electoral system, how do you see regional equity building that kind of autonomous power that's not dependent on elected officials' transitory power?

Photo:

Chinese Progressive Association and Urban Habitat participate in regional analysis of Silicon Valley real estate.

Circa 1999 Urban Habitat file photo

**Leslie Moody:** When you get right down to it, unions have an economic power that is really unmatched in a lot of the other organizing that we see. (And these 100-year-old labor institutions are going through their own challenging restructuring.) Unions have the power to bargain a contract, to improve your job, your wages, and your working conditions. It gives people a real sense of security despite the overwhelming economic power of developers and large corporations. In addition to conventional union organizing, we need to figure out what real economic power resides in our families, neighborhoods, and communities.

**Carl Anthony:** Our social and economic institutions go through phases of being powerful and dormant, but take a 50-year perspective. When Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks started organizing in Montgomery, everyone thought that the South was dead. But the churches, historically black colleges, and even the elected folks lined up behind this new agenda. Our unions are going through really huge problems, but they're also bringing in new assets, such as the new immigrant labor force. We're beginning to see the value of having these institutions that have had some challenging history but also have some sound operating principles that we will need to get us through the next stage.

When we talk about social movements capable of autonomous political action, we're talking not only about labor, the environmental movement, the environmental justice movement, or the Civil Rights Movement; we're also talking about all of the other people of color movements, all of the social movements for progressive social change. They have an opportunity to come together and govern. We're moving into a position where we can posit what we do want and what we can make happen.

In 1961, no one thought that when those four students went in to ask for a hamburger that it would have the transformation value that it had. They thought it was about a hamburger. It was not about a hamburger. It was about transforming American society and we see the fruits of that in the electoral process for the presidency of the United States. But we haven't seen anything yet. We realize that Barack Obama or Hillary Clinton are only two of thousands and thousands of people who have this capacity to stand up and really demand the changes that we need. We're at the beginning of something that could be quite powerful and transformative.

**Nathaniel Smith:** When you look back at Dr. King, Rosa Parks, Dr. Abernathy, Dr. Larry and other people that



began the civil rights movement in Alabama, there are some lessons that can be learned about how to sustain that spark. We've learned that you need to get beyond the technical explanation of regional equity and focus on developing a common language. We've learned that you need to get everyday people to understand their stake. We learned that we need to tell neighborhood-based and grassroots stories around regional equity, and keep those close to our hearts.

Just as in the civil rights movements, its not just specific issues, tactics, or even strategies that will hold us together over the long term. It's the common language, the values, the stories, the passion, that we have for social justice, that will keep us together during the work that we have ahead of us.

**Jesse Clarke:** Are these regional equity organizations ready to start collaborating on a national agenda? What are some of the key elements that agenda would have regardless of who's in office in the federal government? What are the political and social objectives of the movement that need to be knit together to create a common national platform?

**Carl Anthony:** The bad news right now is that there's no regional government in this country. The good news is that there's no regional government in this country. We will need to develop and sustain the capacity of our folks coming from the bottom up, from the grassroots up, to mobilize their own neighborhoods and their own communities and their own labor unions and their own educational campaigns. But then to move beyond their originating base to enlist the folks from the inner-ring older suburbs and with the white working class.

We can now see the possibility of connecting the progressive elements of the environmental movement to the working class, with issues like green collar jobs and the green economy. We can do it in a way, as Nathaniel pointed out,

Photo:

WE ACT's Jamillah Jordan protests at Columbia University in October.

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WE ACT! Newsletter



that the average person in the community can understand—what’s in it for their children and their grandchildren and their neighbors.

To some extent, we also need to consolidate. There are several hundred regions around the country. But if we’re able to build strong organizations in just a dozen of those regions, that would have a huge catalytic impact on national politics.

**Cecil Corbin-Marks:** I don’t think that the agenda coming out of the regional equity movement is going to be focused on a unitary platform. It’s not an agenda around a set of core issues because the issues play out in fundamentally different ways regionally. Furthermore, when it comes to coalition building, it’s easy for the status quo forces to pick people off around issues.

There have to be different agendas on a variety of different levels to achieve particular types of outcomes. Policy and planning processes; participation in political campaigns and the elections; pressure on appointments and making sure that key decision-makers are put in key positions—each will need to be approached based on the particulars.

The question is not “What agenda can we unite around?” but “What are the values around which we shape an agenda that can lead us to a common place?”

**Leslie Moody:** I agree. I don’t think that a focus on narrow issues is the way to go. We need to focus on shared principles across a broad spectrum of issues: on standards of employment; on requirements for public participation in decision-making; and on equity in financing. As we look at potentially huge federal investments in infrastructure, transportation, housing, the green economy, we need to agree on standards that will control how these dollars devolve to the state and city level. When that money comes in, we want a voice about how it’s going to be spent. We want to be able to screen the employers and consultants that are bidding on that to make sure they’re doing local hiring, creating high-wage jobs and real career opportunities. What are the things that we demand, no matter what the issue or the funding stream?

**Dwayne Marsh:** If we’re going to do real mass mobilization, we have to move beyond the tens of thousands

who have been touched by the work of community based organizations, to the millions of people who need to be. It’s a battle for the uncommitted part of this country and we have to look for issue opportunities to do that.

**Juliet Ellis:** What’s great about the regional equity frame is that it allows us to be able to talk about issues in a really comprehensive way. So I worry less around issues being

picked off in that “divide and conquer” process that we’ve experienced in the past.

Organizations like Urban Habitat are talking about education, transportation, and housing as a comprehensive story. So I say, yes, there is the opportunity for us to get on the same page and articulate our shared values and shared principles around participation, winning electoral power, and so on. But there’s also a real hunger to figure out how to actually move these issues on the ground locally. How do we share strategies, so that we’re not reinventing the wheel every single time. What is working in Denver that we could actually apply to what we’re trying to do here in the Bay Area?

**Carl Anthony:** I just want to add one other part. On the capacity question: for many, many years, most of us have been operating with one or two percent of our capacity because we’ve been spending a huge amount of energy just trying to cut through all of these different overlays and frames. What this particular movement allows us to do is look more holistically. And that has a potential of liberating capacity.

We haven’t talked much in this conversation today about the prison system, and how many people are actually being wasted by sitting there, and how do we liberate that potential, not only to disrupt the systems that are wrong but also to begin to create the kinds of systems that we really need?

The country is longing for vision and the grassroots mobilizations coming up from communities of color are extremely inspiring. It’s an inclusive approach that includes everybody and anybody who is progressive, who has something to contribute. The capacity question is very much linked to having a faith in ourselves to mobilize the people of the emerging generation toward a new vision of the whole society. ■

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