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You're More Powerful Than You Think

A CITIZEN'S GUIDE *to* MAKING CHANGE HAPPEN

Eric Liu

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PROLOGUE
IMMOKALEE AND POTTERSVILLE

Picture a ripe, red tomato. Perhaps there's one in your kitchen. If it's nearby, hold it. Feel its heft. Consider its origins.

There's a fair chance it was picked in Florida, home to a $600-million tomato industry; and if so, a fair chance it was picked in Immokalee, in the sweltering southwest of the state, where much of the industry is concentrated; and if so, a fair chance it was picked by someone who not that many years ago was, in essence, a slave.

Immokalee isn't a place most Americans have seen. But most Americans have eaten the fruits of its vast harvest. And because the picking of tomatoes can't be mechanized, that harvest has always been by hand. By the hands of migrant workers, mainly from Mexico and South America, who were abused physically and verbally and sexually, who were entrapped in debt peonage, paid by the bucket and not the punishing hours in the field, yet whose meager wages were routinely stolen by their overseers, and

who were pistol-whipped and chained in locked containers if they complained.

These workers were the very definition of powerlessness. They had no recourse. No advocates. No fluency in the language of their own domination. They were socially dead to the rest of the United States.

And yet, starting in 1993, they came alive. A few of them began to meet secretly in a local church. They resolved, together, to act. First they organized communitywide work stoppages, then hunger strikes, then mass marches hundreds of miles long. They became the Coalition of Immokalee Workers. The press took notice. The workers fought for better pay, and after five years, they finally got a raise from the growers. They fought for such small dignities as shaded rest areas. They earned the currencies that people crave once they achieve subsistence: respect and recognition. They were *seen*.

And they didn't stop there. Once they escaped invisibility, they were determined to undo the bigger system of involuntary servitude. They worked with prosecutors to build cases against their traffickers and captors. Those investigations and convictions freed over 1,200 farmworkers from captivity and forced labor.

They didn't stop there, either. They realized that the machinery of their exploitation was powered by supermarket and fast-food chains that buy produce in mass quantities and create pressure to drive costs down. So in 2001, they organized the first-ever farmworker boycott of a fast-food company, against Taco Bell; four years later Taco Bell's parent company agreed to raise wages and reform its supply chain. With this victory came more allies, more assistance from more experts of all kinds.

And they didn't stop there. They pressured McDonald's and Burger King to agree to the same terms. They organized the Fair Food Program, through which these restaurant and retail chains would buy only from growers who paid a fair wage and abided by a code of conduct stricter than federal law. The buyers agreed to contribute some of the same pittance they once squeezed from the workers—a penny per bucket—to a common fund for worker health, safety, and education. Wal-Mart, with its market-moving scale, joined in 2014. Over $10 million has been paid into the fund in its first seasons. The pickers of Immokalee fought for a fair chance, and they're still fighting.

So if you sometimes wonder whether you have enough clout to make change happen—how *you* could ever be seen or heard, or have your demands answered—then just think of them. If people who started where *they* started could learn power and transform their lives together, can't anyone? If *they* did it, shouldn't *everyone*?

Now think about where *you* work and live and ask yourself: Who runs this place?

It's not that simple a question. There are certain public offices you can identify: mayor or city manager, council members or commissioners. Widen the lens. What businesses dominate the local economy? Who in those businesses has a real say in the town's affairs? Now wider still. Where are the arenas where deals are made, and to whom are they open? Who are the fixers and the enforcers? Are there groups or blocs or interests that always seem to get their way? Who *really* runs this place?

Once you have a sense of an answer, ask another question: How could it be different?

This brings us to what I call the Pottersville flip. In Frank Capra's classic film *It's a Wonderful Life*, George Bailey gets to see what life would be like if he'd never been born. In this counterfactual world, his hometown of Bedford Falls—an idyll of trust and mutual aid and democratic pride—becomes Pottersville, a race-to-the-bottom grid of slums, trashy bars, and pawnshops all owned by the richest man in town, Mr. Potter.

Many American towns in the three generations since *It's a Wonderful Life* have become a lot more like Pottersville than Bedford Falls, in the sense that wealth and clout have consolidated into the hands of one or a few. But wherever your town might fall on the Bedford Falls–to-Pottersville spectrum, imagine flipping places.

Imagine, if you live in a place where you and your neighbors have been crushed by the unseen force of someone else's wealth and wants, what it would be like to be Bedford Falls. Or imagine, if you live in a place where civic health is high and opportunity abounds, what it would be like to descend into Pottersville.

Now run the same thought experiment for the other places in your life: Who runs this company? This campus? This state? Who, if you want to change custom or culture or policy, do you have to see, win over, pressure, shame, praise, or *be* to get the change you want? Who runs this neighborhood, this party, this club or association? Who decides who gets what? What counts as a fair chance?

To ask the question is to begin to change the answer.

The immigrant pickers of Immokalee may never have seen or even heard of *It's a Wonderful Life*. George Bailey is probably not part of their cultural vocabulary. But they've definitely done the

Pottersville flip. They imagined the opposite of helplessness and the inverse of invisibility. They seeded the change they needed. They are harvesting it now.

Go back to that ripe, red tomato, whether in your mind's eye or on your kitchen counter. Appreciate the world of possibility within it. And let it be a humble reminder to you:

You're more powerful than you think.

PART I

THE AGE OF CITIZEN POWER

OUR MOMENT, OUR POWER, OUR PLAN

OUR MOMENT

Here is what people have been doing the last few years:

The Arab Spring, the Orange Revolution, the Maidan protests, the Green Revolution, the Cedar Revolution, the *indignados*, the Umbrella Revolution, the Brexit, anti-government protests in Iceland, Poland, South Korea, Ethiopia, Hungary, Thailand, Brazil. In the United States, we've had Occupy Wall Street, the Tea Party, the Dreamers, Black Lives Matter, $15 Now, Standing Rock, Feel the Bern, and then, of course, the Trump Train.

Not every one of these movements has, in a conventional sense, "succeeded." In fact, most have not (yet). But they're all connected. And they're still coming. Occupy begat We Are the 99%

begat Fast Food Forward begat $15 Now begat the Bernie Sanders campaign. The Tea Party harnessed a radical anti-establishment spirit that seized and then consumed the Republican Party, fueled Donald Trump's election, unleashed a new populism, and created a "none-of-the-above" opening for libertarians.

This is a moment of citizen power. And that is nowhere more visible than in the turbulence of American political and civic life.

The coming-out of undocumented immigrants; the gradual then sudden triumph of marriage equality activists; the counter-offensive for religious liberty; demonstrations against racial inequity; demonstrations for free speech; the rising voices of sexual assault survivors; the emergence of moms for gun responsibility; the unadorned anger of nativists and white nationalists; the rise of Native American environmental activism; the obliteration of elite gatekeepers in party politics, consumer markets, mass media, pop culture—all are evidence of the same bewildering reality.

The old deal is dead. There is no new deal yet.

Citizens today no longer have to accept the bundles—the one-size-fits-all packages—that the monopolies of politics and business have long forced upon us. Unbundling is everywhere, from how we get the news to how we listen to music or watch television to how we catch a ride across town to how we label ourselves by party, gender, or race.

There is an upbeat, utopian version of this story that's all about an explosion of individual choice. But of course the unbundling is happening *to* us as well, in ways that have eaten away at our cohesion, security, and dignity. Social contracts—of trust and common cause—have been unbundled by technologies that sift and sort us ever more narrowly. Collective economic

arrangements—pensions, benefits, livable wages, worker safety—have been unbundled by the Uberization and globalization of work.

As a result, in greater and growing numbers, we Americans no longer feel in control of our own everyday lives. We have little say in a workplace that makes us expendable. Our lives as consumers are dominated by distant, impersonal brands. In our lives as citizens too many of us are passive spectators or the clients of distant bureaucracies. We have a surplus of stuff and a deficit of attention and purpose. As we retreat to smaller circles of kith and kin, the commons goes to seed.

All this is propelled by a relentlessly upward concentration of wealth. Since 1980, the share of national income flowing to the wealthiest 1 percent has tripled. Since the end of the Great Recession in 2010, over 90 percent of the recovery's gains have gone to the 1 percent. Median wages have barely moved in forty years, while CEO pay has increased tenfold. More than half the benefits of federal tax breaks flow to the wealthiest 5 percent, while low-income families get nearly nothing. Today the greatest determinant of whether an American child will end up poor or rich is whether parents are poor or rich. By the standards of our national self-story, that is profoundly un-American.

Meanwhile, economic concentration of power begets *political* concentration of power. Congress today is now driven by the policy preferences of wealthy individuals and corporations. A comprehensive study of congressional action by the political scientists Benjamin Page and Martin Gilens showed that when the average American's policy views clash with those of the rich, the rich almost always prevail. The average American is heard only

if wealthy donors happen to be saying the same thing. Congress, redistricted to make itself challenger-proof, is walled off against reform. Meanwhile, Republicans use trumped-up charges of election fraud to keep low-income voters of color from voting. And government insiders from both parties cycle through a perpetual revolving door to Wall Street.

But we knew all this already: the system truly has been rigged.

What's new is that this unprecedented concentration of power is now giving rise to a Great Push Back: a sprawling, disorderly effort by citizens of the right, the left, and the scrambled everywhere-else—people of every color and faith—to challenge monopolized power in all its forms and to demand a greater say in how things are run. The revolutions promised by both Sanders and Trump are still coalescing, even if only one of them has the power of the federal government behind him.

And this Great Push Back—this chaotic, contagious cross-ideological revolt of the smalls—is not the end of the story. It's just the raucous beginning. (Also, there is no end.)

It's made all the more turbulent by another great shift underway: the delinking of whiteness and Americanness. The imminent arrival of an America that is majority-of-color—even as the power structure has remained predominantly white, and even as uneducated whites face declining opportunities and life expectancies—has amplified the anxiety and expectation and volatility already in the air. It has made populists out of racists, and vice versa. It has emboldened social justice advocates and white supremacists alike to press their claims more impatiently.

At some point we may reach a stable new equilibrium in political life. Before then, we can expect many more kinds of

confrontation between the people in charge and The People. Between monopoly and its discontents. "Power," as Frederick Douglass said, "concedes nothing without a demand."

But here's the thing: there is a gap between making demands and making them happen. It is the gap between the rhetoric of revolution and the actual changes in values, systems, habits, and skills that adds up to a revolution.

This book is designed to help close this "revolution gap": to help you make better demands—and then to make them a reality. It will give you new ways of understanding power in civic life and new tools for claiming and exercising it.

OUR POWER

Let's start with a simple definition: power is the capacity to ensure that others do as you would want them to do.

If that sounds menacing or distasteful, or makes you feel squeamish, I understand. And I invite you to get over it.

Power is something we are often uncomfortable naming and talking about explicitly. In the culture and mythology of democracy, power is supposed to reside with the people. End of story. Further inquiry unnecessary and unwelcome. In our everyday talk, power has a negative moral vibe. *Power-mad. Power-hungry. Power grab. Power trip.* It's a dirty word. Which is why we so often soften it with such euphemisms as "voice" or "strength."

But power is no more inherently good or evil than fire or physics. It just is. The only question is whether we will try to understand and harness it.

If power is the capacity to ensure that others do as you would want them to do, *civic power* is that capacity exercised by citizens in public, whether in elections or government or in social and economic arenas.

I say "ensure" rather than "compel" or "make," because power is as often about persuasion or contagion as coercion. And when I say "citizens" here, I do not mean only people with the right papers; I mean all members of the body politic, who can and do contribute to our common life, whatever their documentation status.

Power in civic life takes many forms: force, wealth, state action, ideas, social norms, numbers. And it flows through many conduits: institutions, organizations, networks, laws and rules, narratives and ideologies. Map these forms and conduits against each other and you get what we think of as "the power structure."

But the problem today is that too many people aren't able to draw, read, or follow such a map. Too many people are profoundly—and willfully—illiterate in power: what it is, what forms it takes, who has it, who doesn't, why that is, how it is exercised.

As a result, it's become ever easier for those who *do* understand how power operates in civic life—those who understand how a bill becomes a law, yes, but also how a friendship becomes a subsidy or how a bias becomes a policy or how a slogan becomes a movement—those folks are more capable than ever of wielding disproportionate influence and filling the void created by the ignorance of the majority.

How does a friendship become a subsidy? Seamlessly, when senior government staffers become corporate lobbyists and work their relationships to benefit their new masters. How does a bias become a policy? Insidiously, as with stop-and-frisk. How does a slogan become a movement? Virally, as when Tea Party activists co-opt "Don't Tread on Me," or Black Lives Matter turns a hashtag into a movement.

But most people don't see or care to look for these realities. Much of this ignorance, this power illiteracy, is intentional. And that compounds the problem.

There are some young people who think the whole business is sordid and would rather do community service or direct action and exempt themselves from politics altogether.

There are some techies who think that the cure-all for power imbalances or abuses is simply more data and transparency, and that tech networks are *inherently* beneficial.

There are some on the left who think only business has power and some on the right who think only government has power; both blinded by their selective outrage.

There are the naïve who believe that good things just happen, and the cynical who believe that bad things just happen: the fortunate and unfortunate alike who believe their lot is simply what happens to them, rather than the alterable result of a prior arrangement, an inherited allocation, of *power*.

But as the sociologist C. Wright Mills wrote in *The Power Elite*: "To accept either view—of all history as conspiracy or all of history as drift—is to relax the effort to understand the facts of power and the ways of the powerful."

As a result of this creeping public fatalism, we now have depressingly low levels of civic participation, knowledge, engagement, and awareness. Political life has been subcontracted out to a band of professionals—money people, message people, outreach

people. The rest of us are made to feel like amateurs, as in *suckers*. We become demotivated to learn more about how things work. And this pervasive power illiteracy becomes, in a vicious cycle, both a cause and a consequence of the concentration of opportunity, wealth, and clout in society.

This is why reimagining civics as the teaching and learning of *power* is so necessary—now perhaps more than at any time in the last century. If you don't learn how to practice power, someone else will do it for you—in your name, on your turf, with your voice, and often against your interests.

Power plays out in every arena of life, from the home to the workplace to the public square. In this book our focus is on power in political and civic life—how we live in public. And the core question of such power is this: Who decides?

Every aspect of collective existence in a complex society is the result of countless layers of countless decisions, including decisions not to challenge long-ago decisions.

Think: How did the railroad tracks get put down in my town and who decided what would be the wrong side and the right side of those tracks? Why does one employer get tax breaks and subsidies but not another? Why is this community center getting funded instead of that one? Why a new jail instead of preschool? Who decided that?

When a city passes an anti-discrimination ordinance to protect gay, lesbian, and transgender people, but then the state preempts the ordinance, what unfolds is an argument not only about local government law but also about culture and identity. When a national political party has a system for allocating delegates, and one candidate's campaign comes to resent that system, the conflict

may unfold in the language of parliamentary rules but it is, more deeply, a matter of muscle and "street heat."

Who decides? All politics turns on that question. The answer is in furious flux today. If you are illiterate in power, if you cannot speak the language of who has clout and how it is exercised, you will not even realize you've been excluded from the question.

OUR PLAN

Before we go through the plan for the pages to come, I want to make one thing clear. This book is not about personal empowerment in the self-help sense. There is no chicken soup for anyone's soul here. Nor is it about empowerment in the Machiavellian sense. You'll find nothing in these pages about how to manipulate the boss or edge out workplace rivals. I offer not the courtier's view of power but the *citizen's* view.

The citizen's view is by definition greater than the self because the citizen—a member of the body, a contributor to community—is by definition acting in a social context. To be sure, the citizen's view of power is not selfless. It is often quite selfish. But whereas self-help and self-advancement focus on the individual, often in isolation, citizen power is about identity and action in the collective: how *we* make change happen *together*.

Something else to be up front about: This book is for underdogs and challengers, not top dogs and incumbents. It's for people who want to be change agents, not defenders of the status quo. That change can emanate from the left or from the right. In many cases, it will scramble the lines *between* left and right. But in all

cases, this book is about democratizing power rather than hoarding it.

As the coming pages will demonstrate, hoarding is not just morally repugnant; it is systemically suicidal. If we want our society to work for everyone, it is imperative that we learn to circulate power and literacy in power far more widely.

And literacy isn't just a metaphor. Imagine finding yourself in a foreign land. If you can't read or write the language, life is very challenging. Street signs, storefronts, newspapers, public notices: all are undecipherable to you. Because you don't know what you don't know, you become an easy mark for fraud, you waste energy and time on everyday tasks, you are cut out of chances to improve your situation, you are in every sense voiceless. You might survive, but you will never thrive.

Not knowing how to read or write *power* has exactly the same effects. Power is a language. It has a grammar and a syntax. It expresses our wants and needs, and is the medium by which those wants and needs are negotiated and addressed. Ignorance of that language is harmful to your aspirations and to your well-being.

So literacy in power means understanding the what, the how, and the why of power. That's the plan for the rest of this book. In Part II, we will focus on *what* power truly is and how to imagine it anew. We will explore three core laws of power that shape the patterns of public life—and that challenge us not to give away our power carelessly but to circulate it wisely.

Then in Part III, we will examine *how* to practice power—and specifically, how those laws demand three kinds of strategies for the citizen who wants to create change. Finally, Part IV examines *why* you'd want civic power. To what ends are you learning about

the elements and the strategies of political action? What are the moral purposes and ethical foundations of your desire for clout?

In every part, we will look at cases from the past and present. Full disclosure: most are from the contemporary United States. That's not jingoism or parochialism. It's knowing what I know best. And it's trusting that you'll be able and willing to connect dots across place and time to your own situation.

We will also look at cases from across the ideological spectrum. You may not like the positions or beliefs of some of the people you will meet. But a skillful citizen finds lessons everywhere. This is important. In case you couldn't tell, I am not the mythical creature called the Impartial Observer. I write as a citizen who has progressive and communitarian views and who has put those views into practice—in government and policy making, in concerted citizen action, and in the publication of ideas.

But I also write as the founder of a cross-ideological organization, Citizen University, that brings together people from the Occupy left, the Tea Party right, and many points between. We challenge each other to find common interests. We generate unlikely collaborations and friendships. We engage where we can in mutual aid because although we will often disagree on policy and intellectual paradigms, we can all agree that this is a time to take on entrenched monopolists—and to boost citizen power.

The analogy I often use in my work, because I am a baseball fanatic, is this: I grew up in upstate New York and I'm a Yankees fan. I hate the Boston Red Sox. But I share with Red Sox fans an abiding interest *in the underlying health of the game*. The more people who know how to play, and the more resources there are for people to learn how to play, and the less corrupt and rigged the

game is, and the less rigid a wall there is between amateurs and professionals, the better it is for everyone. Let's first make sure, together, that the game is not sick—that it prospers in every way. *Then* my Yanks can go beat the Sox.

The underlying health of civic life today is poor. The Trump presidency was born of decades of democratic decline. The clubs and associations where people used to practice citizenship are moribund. Everyday journalism that holds local power to account is evaporating. Muckraking investigative journalism is even rarer. Civic education in the schools is disappearing, and where it survives, it is often reduced to a bland "lowest-controversy denominator" that makes civics unsexy—or worse, it's hijacked by history-blind fanatics who call Moses one of the Founding Fathers or describe enslaved people as "workers." The game is sick. And it's not a game.

Let's begin the work of healing it.

PART II

HOW TO UNDERSTAND POWER