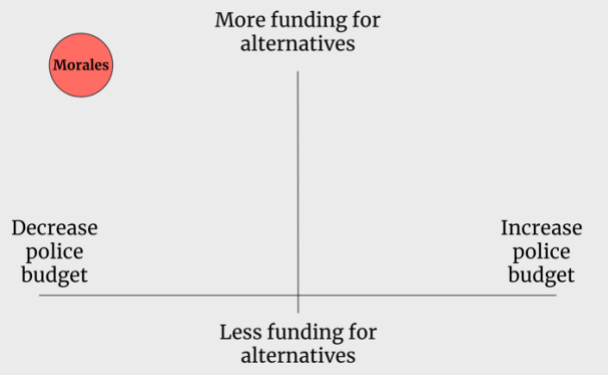
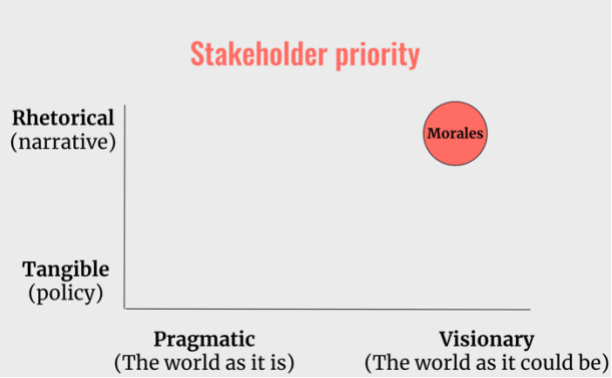
A narrative interview with Ricardo Levins Morales

Activist with MPD150

Situating Morales' perspective





Themes to lift up

- **Clear roles within social movements create space for multiple actors**. It's noteworthy that in Morales' telling, MPD150 has remained clear about what its role is and isn't in the movement to reimagine policing. By focusing on narrative, MPD150 provides an intellectual foundation for the movement while creating space for organizations like Reclaim the Block and Black Visions Collective to play complementary roles.
- **Investments can be categorized into horizontal and vertical strategies**. Morales borrows a framework from public health to differentiate strategies that target specific problems from ones that are broadly beneficial across a population.
- **Demand and need aren't equivalent**. Morales differentiates "demand" from "need", arguing that public investments should respond to what communities need. Starting from the question of need is a powerful way to center potential solutions to structural challenges.

Edited interview

Nathan: To start, I'd love to hear what brought you to this issue.

Ricardo: I first came to the States in the late sixties, when I was eleven years old. I was inclined to go to protests, but it was really a series of police murders of some leaders of the Young Lords and the Black Panther Party in Chicago that got me involved in organizing.

Any movement I've been involved in has been viewed by the police as an enemy. In terms of their function as an instrument of political control, they've always been there observing, harassing, sometimes intervening in nastier ways. It's not that any one thing brought me into dealing with the police. They've always been part of the equation.

MPD150 grew out of some conversations, after we noticed that by chance, the Minneapolis Police Department had been founded in 1867. At that time it was early 2016 and a quick calculation revealed that next year was going to be their 150th anniversary.

We noticed that some municipal police would use their anniversary as a way to shore up their credibility in the community. We just said: we should do a performance review and really shine a light on what the police really are, because people take them for granted as an institution that just exists. It's totally ahistorical. Some of us already knew some of the connections to slave patrols and things like that, which were not widely known at the time. So that's really how we started coming together, just having one-on-one discussions with organizers.

MPD150 isn't based on organizations. It was not meant to be a coalition. We didn't want to be dealing with the baggage that organizations have with each other or their sense of turf. We wanted to put wind in everyone's sails by providing a narrative that was different than the dominant one.

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We had no idea that the shift in narrative would happen anywhere with the speed at which it did. But we did notice from the beginning that people were far more receptive than we imagined.

Nathan: Could you describe what has happened in the intervening couple of years between the report coming out and George Floyd's murder? How has that dynamic changed this year?

Ricardo: From the beginning, we started having influence on the conversation. Several of our members were part of another project that sent a questionnaire to city council candidates in 2016. One of the questions was, 'can you imagine a future without the police in Minneapolis?' and a bunch of the candidates said yes. The next day, the president of the Minneapolis City Council and the head of the Downtown Council held a joint press conference to announce to the world what a terrible idea that was. Who could ask for better publicity than having the power structure say, 'hey, pay no attention to this idea'?

In the first few days after George Floyd was murdered, people were demanding a civilian review board with teeth, residency requirements, all the same things. But it only took a few days before people started to say that this institution is entirely criminal. It needs to be replaced.

And I think partly because of the groundwork we laid, this spark was amplified nationally. It helped propel it like ripe dandelion spores when a tornado hits.

In the meantime, you have the emergence of Black Visions Collective, which grew out of Black Lives Matter, whose origins were in dealing with police brutality. And Reclaim the Block, which began as a coalition and included a number of people from the core group of MPD150 who wanted to be more involved in policy work.

MPD150 became very clear that we were about narrative. We're not about endorsing this or that policy, or meeting with the chief. We're oriented toward the community. That's where the power is. On the other hand, Reclaim the Block was perfectly interested in sitting down with city councilors. They started out with the radical demand of reducing the police budget by 5%; they were hoping they could push the narrative that far. So it's a big leap from that to the City Council saying, 'we're going to abolish the police.' That's evidence of a shift in power.

But [the City Council] is also under the liberal illusion that they actually are in charge. The way in which their bold declaration has been chipped away, their second thoughts and backtracking comes from the urban power system stepping in and saying 'You're not the bosses here.' It's really the real estate industry, the hospitality industry, the sports franchises, the police department, that are, to borrow a phrase from the Trumpists, the 'permanent state.'

We're going way ahead of the understanding of abolition. There are a lot of people whose embrace of abolition is emotional but not necessarily practical. We at MPD150 understood very clearly that it's not enough to have people imagine this future where everyone takes care of each other. You have to actually demonstrate that there's a pathway to get from here to there. There are practical steps, there are existing traditions, there are other ways of dealing with crisis intervention. There are other ways of dealing with scarcity. That part hasn't caught up yet although the concept has caught people's imagination.

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We find that the people who argue against abolition, whether they're right wingers, liberals, or radicals have one thing in common. And that seems to be that they've never read our material or actually sat down and engaged with our positions. They're responding to this sort of knee-jerk idea that we're advocating for waving a magic wand and making the police disappear, then criminals take over the streets and a nightmare dystopian future quickly comes into play. We have a chance to reach people when they realize that we've actually thought this stuff through. We take very seriously the reasons that people reach for 911 when they're in crisis, as well as the reasons that they're scared.

Nathan: I'd like to ask about the path forward. The charter amendment was one setback, and it doesn't look like this year will result in budgetary cuts for the police. Given this political context, what do you see as the ideal next step?

Ricardo: What we really need is an ideal mix of strategies more than a next step. It's in part a strategy of erosion: keep doing the work we're doing. That includes the policy work, the street work, the educational work. To some degree the police are doing our job for us with every incident. They're making it clearer and clearer that they are not part of the solution.

In the meantime, the system is going to try to co-opt the movement with halfway measures, of course. And we just need to keep hammering at it. That includes going after the tentacles that connect them to the rest of society.

I believe Reclaim the Block is going to go after the charter commission again. Hopefully there'll be some questioning of the legitimacy of the charter commission because it turns out to be a secretive, elite, corporate safety valve for the system. Shining a light on it might help.

I think that the charter amendment that the city council came up with, frankly, went too far. Public education wasn't at a point where people would say, 'oh, we're going to create this new entity.' I think they should have just removed the requirement that police be funded at a certain rate to open the door to possibilities, rather than being so specific about the solution. You need to bring people along in organizing, help them start thinking that stuff through, before they'll be comfortable with it. That's my opinion.

Nathan: I would love to hear what types of long-term investments you think that cities like Minneapolis need to be making? What agencies, organizations, or efforts do you see as being promising?

Ricardo: When we talk about defunding - which is the rubber meets the road aspect of abolition - we're talking about shifting resources, not making them evaporate right from the beginning. It's a shift into filling the gaps that create both emotional and financial crisis.

It really comes down to, to borrow some language from public health policy, horizontal solutions and vertical solutions. A vertical solution is you look at what diseases or conditions that are affecting people and you come up with a pharmaceutical intervention to be able to address that illness. A horizontal solution is that you raise the immune resilience capacity of an entire population through clean water, healthy food, satisfactory work, stable housing, which increases the resistance to whatever comes people's way.

Now, when you have horizontal strategies, you still need vertical interventions for specific things. But it lowers the need for those. And it's the same thing we're talking about here, when we're talking about investments. We need to think about the police as a vertical intervention. What are the horizontal strategies that would lower the need for those interventions?

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We're talking about challenging the way our economy is set up. If you're a doctor in Colombia and you are dealing with an outbreak of dysentery, If you identify the microbe that is causing the dysentery, you might get a prize. If you identify a polluted water system as being the underlying cause, you can be thrown in jail. In order to deal with real solutions, you actually have to get, quote unquote, political. You have to deal with the issues that could get you in trouble.

So what would a successful community-driven investment strategy look like? You need to be able to establish centers of activity in communities that are based on need and not demand. The market talks about demand. Communities talk about need. There's a need for accessible housing; there's not a demand for it. That's why we don't have it.

Any victories that are won in political struggle are transitional. You need to be able to protect and defend community needs for a period of time, so that people start feeling entitled to them. We want people to feel that actually healthcare is a right, that well-funded schools are a right. My personal political program starts with the clause: “Nobody gets seconds until everyone has had firsts.” That's a moral value that almost everybody will agree makes sense. And it’s completely incompatible with our current system. It’s important to popularize these different ways of thinking, and you do that through organizing.

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This is a narrative interview from the 2021 MIT research project *A Moral Document? Expanding conversations about public safety budgets in Minnesota in the wake of George Floyd’s murder*. The full project can be seen here.