READING GUIDE

FOR THE LONG HAUL

How to Stay in the Fight for a Better World

CHRIS DIXON

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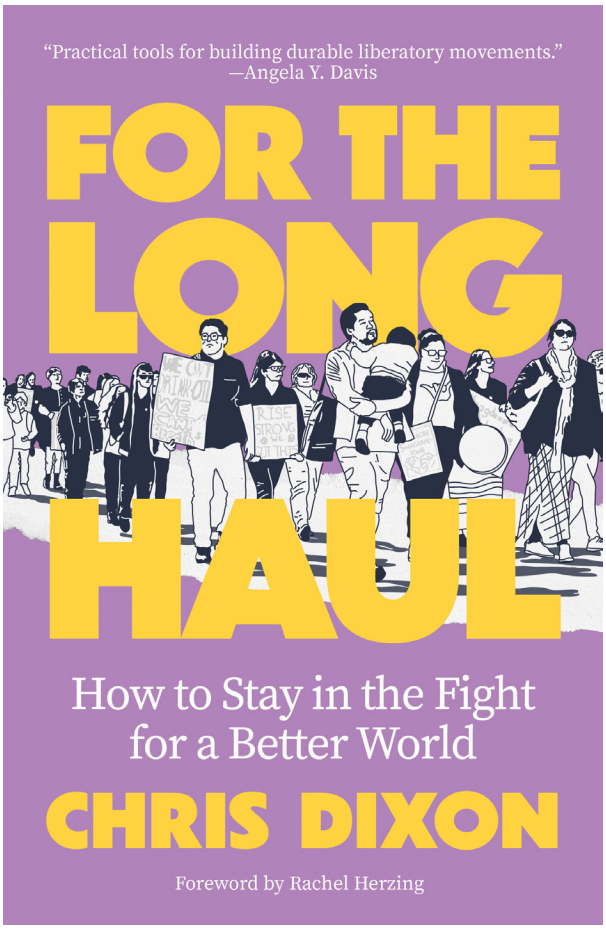

How can people on the left stick around in movement work over the long term? And what can we do collectively to generate durable radical movements? In *For the Long Haul*, Chris Dixon offers a practical and inspiring guide that seeks to answer these questions. He draws on several decades of his own movement involvement and research and an intentionally wide range of left movements. Dixon offers answers in five chapters and an epilogue, each organized around one practical approach and each offering a plethora of specific habits, structures, and strategies which he urges readers to consider and put into practice. Dixon writes with a broad set of readers in mind, explaining that "whether you have just attended your first protest, been active for years, or are burned out and unsure how to continue" (p. 11), this book is for you.

This reading, reflection, and discussion guide is also for you no matter what your experience with movements has been so far. It is offered to support individuals and groups in using the book as a tool for learning and growth. As you read, you will notice that Dixon poses many questions. We encourage you to generate your own. The questions below don't touch on every theme in the book and they aren't primarily aimed to support critical analysis of the text. Rather, they aim to help individuals and groups start to surface ideas, practices, and sources of inspiration you can experiment with right away and in the future.

Here are a few ideas for engaging with this book:

- Read and discuss with a friend, with members of a group you work with, or in a cross-group space. Consider the different benefits that might come from each approach.
- Read at a pace that allows for reflection and insights to emerge and be explored.
- Engage actively by recording your questions, thoughts, and ideas.
  Pay special attention to the practices you want to try.
- Follow your curiosity and engage with the "Suggestions for Further Reading" section and the many resources in the "Notes" section at the book's end.
- Activate your learning and growth: Find a good idea! Experiment! Learn! Reflect!
  Then try it again or try something new.

Reading and reflecting on books like *For the Long Haul* is one valuable kind of movement study. This book offers many ideas about other ways to further individual and collective learning and growth. Stay open and curious, keep experimenting, and remember the invaluable power and pleasure that can come from taking many kinds of action with others.

INTRODUCTION

In the book's introduction, Dixon describes his teenage years as a formative period during which he met older activists who had lived their lives on the left informed by many liberation-focused movements and traditions. He argues that we can—and should—work together to create conditions that enable people to stick around movements for the long term and he insists that the greatest insights about how to stick around long-term come from the experiences and perspectives of people who have done so.

1. Are there seasoned activists or organizers who shaped your orientation and approach to change work? Who? How? Who else might you learn from today?
2. How do you think about your journey into political awareness and/or struggle? How do you describe it to others?
3. If you have succeeded in staying involved in movements over time, are there younger people you share your journey with? In what kinds of spaces? How else could you do that?
4. How and when have you encountered the term "long haul" in social movement contexts? How did it resonate then? How does it sit with you today? Why?
5. Dixon argues that challenges for long haul efforts among organizers and social movements are due to both structural forces (how power is organized systemically and societally) and cultural forces within movements (habitual ways of working together that sabotage our efforts) forces. Which kinds of forces do you experience, see, and feel most acutely? Which do you feel most inspired to challenge and shift?

CHAPTER 1: Cultivate a Long View

Dixon asks, "how can we hold a sense of urgency while pacing ourselves for the long haul?" (p. 13). This chapter describes a set of habits that Dixon argues can help activists and organizers struggle more effectively today, including "maintaining links to the past, learning from those who came before us, seeing our efforts in intergenerational and global terms, and remaining open to new approaches and unpredictable developments" (p. 34). Together, these habits can "enable us to locate ourselves in history as we attempt to act on history" (p. 35).

1. Which habits described in the chapter intrigue you most? Which do you feel interested in cultivating in yourself and groups you work with?
2. Are there other habits involved in cultivating a long view that you think could complement those described in this chapter?
3. Do you see efforts to build intergenerational and internationalist movements in your own work? What tangible steps to "recognize our obligations to both the past and the future" and deepen a "global orientation" can you imagine taking in groups you work with?
4. What dominant hierarchies feel most challenging to the movements or groups with which you have engaged? How have you witnessed or experienced folks involved in those movements or groups contesting them? What actions have you taken to advance "the struggle within the struggle"?
5. Consider Dixon's claim that "dogmatism is like quicksand: holding too rigidly to political traditions or conceptions frequently gets us more and more stuck while the world around us continues moving" (p. 29). Can you think of a time when you newly recognized the value of a tradition, lineage, or approach that you had once dismissed or viewed more skeptically? How did that shift happen? What made it possible?

CHAPTER 2:
Work with Others

In this chapter, Dixon describes the past few decades as a period of major social and cultural shifts. Whether we call it neoliberalism, class war from above, or "the long grind down," this period has changed how we interact with others. It has made organizing feel both less natural and more difficult by eroding the kinds of institutions and spaces that have supported broad community building and radical political spaces. To contend with our current circumstances, this chapter advocates for grappling with our present circumstances and organizing, creating organizations, treating one another well, and pursuing training and study together.

1. Why do you think Dixon chooses the phrase "class war from above" instead of "neoliberalism"? What practical implications does this choice have? Can you think of other words or phrases that describe power dynamics or historical processes that would similarly benefit from more direct or plain language?
2. When have you felt the power of working with others? What allowed that?
3. Do you think the distinction between "activism" and "organizing" is useful? Why or why not? In what ways? How are these terms used in your community or circles?
4. What's been your experience with movement organizations? In working with others in groups or movement organizations, have you experienced or felt the "whole is greater than the sum of the parts" (p. 48) as Suzy Subways describes? What allowed that?
5. In what spaces have you experienced relating in affirmative, non-instrumental ways? Have you felt those "magic moments" and what facilitated them?
6. What kinds of learning-focused movement spaces have felt most meaningful to you? What do you think our movements need today?

CHAPTER 3:
Care

In this chapter, Dixon poses two core questions: "How can communities in struggle cultivate conditions for their own health and longevity?" and "How can we create movements in which people can stay involved and flourish?" (p. 65). While outwardly-organized movement work is often most visible and valued, there are many kinds of activities taking place behind the scenes that allow that work to happen, including all kinds of caring labor. Dixon makes visible many kinds of care work that are happening constantly in movements – as in society – and urges readers to value this work as critical to political organizing and find ways to more deeply "be practicing feminists" by finding ways to share this work in community.

1. What ideas do you have for making caring labor more visible and valued?
2. What examples of intentionally organized care described in the chapter speak to or intrigue you most? What examples have you participated in or what do you see in your local context that you'd like to engage with?
3. What forms of care does Dixon not explore in this chapter that you think are significant and worthy of more attention?
4. Do you face—or have you faced—barriers to movement involvement that might be addressed by treating care work as a central concern? Have you experienced moments when a group or community recognized a barrier and centered care work in a way that invited more people in?
5. What practices might help people in movements get or stay in touch with the feelings of joy, fulfillment, delight, and satisfaction that Dixon argues can be part of sharing the work of care?

CHAPTER 4:
Make Plans

In this chapter, Dixon argues that "urgently reacting to crisis is the main kind of movement activity people have experienced in the last couple of decades." "The danger," he writes, "is when crisis mode organizing crowds out our collective capacity for looking ahead and setting our own aims and agendas" (p. 92). He suggests intentionality, strategy, having a theory of change and a theory of victory, engaging in evaluation, and a recognition that movements most often accomplish something between wholesale success and failure as tangible practices that can allow movements to get out of reaction-only cycles and instead develop and pursue our own shared goals.

1. Among the three practices to increase intentionality that Dixon elaborates, which feel especially salient to you: making thoughtful choices about commitments; setting priorities more carefully, including saying no to some possibilities; or developing practices and spaciousness to accommodate unexpected challenges? Which do the groups you participate in do well? Which are absent or could be built upon?
2. How do movement groups you are involved in develop strategies for change? What specific tools or resources have you drawn on with success?
3. Do you have experience exploring, developing, or articulating a theory or theories of change? How about a theory of victory for a particular struggle or fight? What parts seem easiest and hardest to develop or articulate?
4. Instead of feelings of busyness, increased social recognition, or state pushback as key metrics to assess our efforts, what benchmark goals have you seen serve organizers and organizing efforts particularly well? What practices for measuring what a group or movement has done against its aims do you think are especially useful?
5. What practices of celebration have you seen buoy movement work? Where have you seen spaces created for frustration, sadness, or grief when goals are not met? What learning or other good has unfolded from these kinds of spaces?

CHAPTER 5:
Stick Around

In this chapter, Dixon addresses the structural and cultural challenges of staying involved in movements long-term and recommends tangible cultural shifts, infrastructure, and practices to help people stay engaged and find meaning along the way.

1. What kinds of initiatives, infrastructure, or gatherings have you witnessed or participated in that encourage the kind of sticking around this chapter aims to support? What examples from the chapter do you want to see more of? What might you help create?
2. How can organizers practice the steadiness Dixon advocates in both moments of high movement activity and when there are lulls in the struggle? In the Center for Political Education's terms, what does it look like to be "regular, rigorous, and reliable" during both kinds of political moments?
3. What movement or movements were formative in your own political development? Are you aware of how it or they continue to shape your perspective about political activities?
4. What practices help you stay curious about other people's activities? And which help you stay "courageously and compassionately self-critical" (p. 127)? Have you witnessed other radicals candidly owning their uncertainties, miscalculations, or mistakes? How did that experience, or those experiences, impact you?
5. Do you have experiences of engaging politically in the kind of "critique mode" Dixon describes? Do you have experiences with the constructive approach he advocates? How do these two modes feel different to you? In your view, what role do each play in sustaining or straining relationships and political work?

EPILOGUE: Ordinary Hope

To close the book, Dixon argues that it was the commitment and action of ordinary people who "propelled emancipatory struggles of the past" (p. 136). Even as we make space to feel and express warranted despair about interconnected crises we face today, the dynamism of history means there is much we cannot foresee. He contends, "the only way to increase the likelihood of change for the better is by taking purposeful collective action" (p. 140).

1. Have you felt the energizing and humanizing power of acting with others to transform the world together? When? What circumstances supported those connections and efforts? What steps could you take today to create and sustain those for yourself and with others?
2. Can you think of times when circumstances have changed rapidly and produced openings for positive change work that would have been unimaginable before they occurred? Which ones? What can help you stay alert for these moments and ready to take new action when they come?
3. What sources of ordinary hope might or do help motivate and sustain you?

SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

Echoing a theme from throughout the book, Dixon argues that all of us can strengthen our process of movement-based learning through study. He offers a highlight reel of books exploring movement histories and practices that may be especially useful for those seeking long-term involvement. Books include those focused on elaborating key theories, ideas, and concepts; organizing manuals and handbooks; books offering concrete guidance on movement building; books about state repression; and movement histories.

1. Reflecting on your experience of reading *For the Long Haul*, which kinds of books or specific movements, organizations, or histories most intrigue you now? Is there something you want to read on your own or with a study group?
2. What other books that explore movements and examples beyond a US and Canadian context (the focus of this book) would you add to this list? What other kinds of books do you think might support people who want to stay involved in long-haul activism or organizing?
3. Beyond books and social movement involvement itself, what other sources of learning could energize and fuel you to stay in the fight for a better world?

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For Dixon, acknowledging the many individuals, groups, experiences, and musicians that shaped the writing of this book is very important. The acknowledgements reflect a form of care and appreciation that he advocates in various ways throughout the book.

1. Recognizing that we are all shaped by myriad people and experiences, what practices do you engage in to acknowledge those who have shaped your perspective and movement work? What might you like to try?
2. What kinds of experiences have been especially supportive to your political work and—even if you're not writing an "acknowledgements" section for a book—is there a way to demonstrate your appreciation or gratitude for them?