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What is radicalism?

What is radicalism? The question immediately begs its obverse: what is *not* radicalism? Or rather, what might falsely appear as, or make unsubstantiable claim to, ‘radicalism’?

The term ‘radicalism’ implies a number of things, as many contributions to this volume will no doubt remark. On the one hand, it implies a commitment to fundamental change, change which changes whatever it changes ‘at the roots’. On the other, in the ordinary parlance of Western democratic politics, it implies a commitment to the historic goals of the Left. Of course, there has been and remains a powerful tradition of right-wing ‘radicalism’, but that is not our concern here. We will confine ourselves to thinking about the ‘radicalism’ in terms of a commitment to the historic goals of the Left - i.e. the elimination, as far as possible, of fundamental imbalances of power between different communities, classes and individuals - and in terms of a willingness to pursue that objective beyond the limits set by conventional political or cultural practice. This brings us back to the initial idea of ‘radicalism’ as a measure of how fundamental the change might be that one is willing to pursue.

A problem emerges here already, however. Consider the implications of the word ‘fundamental’. It has its origins in the Latin ‘fundamen’, meaning ‘foundation’. In fact, one of the marked tendencies of ‘radical’ thought in recent decades has been the ‘anti-foundationalist’ and ‘anti-essentialist’ turn away from any conception of the social which would identify one element, institution or group as necessarily ‘fundamental’, foundational, determinant or constitutive of all others. What does it mean, then, to retain a conception of ‘radicalism’ in such a context?

To answer this question, it is necessary to be clear about what is implied by such anti-essentialist conceptions of the social. Such an approach rejects the assumption that a single set of power relationships - such as relationships between classes, between genders, or between governors and governed - determines all others. But such an approach does *not* necessarily deny that such different sets of relationships impinge upon each other. Rather, it stresses the dynamic and unpredictable nature of their mutual influence. Various terminologies have been mobilised in order to capture this quality of interrelation between different sets of dynamic power relations, understanding the social in terms of its ‘formations’ or ‘assemblages’, for example.

One thing these reflections might draw our attention to is the fact that of course, ‘radical’ does not share the etymology of ‘fundamental’. ‘Roots’, understood literally, are not the same thing as ‘foundations’. Roots are organic elements without which a plant cannot survive, but which also cannot survive without the other elements of the plant and of the broader ecosystem in which it is located. Might ‘radicalism’ then be thought of in terms of a particular attentiveness to the interrelatedness of different elements of the social - even to the ‘ecological’ interaction between those elements and the wider geophysical and technological environment? (see Guattari 1989; Fuller 2005). Our suggestion here is that this might be a useful way of supplementing and complexifying the usual understanding of ‘radicalism’ as a measure of the dramatic and far-reaching ambitions for change registered by a particular political position or project. At the same time, this suggestion itself draws attention to the issue of how to differentiate ‘dramatic’ and ‘far-reaching’ ambitions from more limited ones: how is it possible to make such a distinction meaningfully today?

Revolution Vs. Reform?

Within an older paradigm, it might have been possible to differentiate the ‘radical’ from the non-radical in terms of a relative degree of commitment to ‘revolution’: the classic distinction between

‘revolutionary’ and ‘reformist’ politics continues to inform much far-left political discourse to this day. The problems with this distinction are well-known, but worth re-iterating. Firstly, many uses of it rely upon a fixed historical narrative according to which revolution is the inevitable destiny of social change if it is not hampered or slowed down by distracting ‘reform’ (a hypothesis which has absolutely no historical evidence to support it). Even if such a strict conception of history is not in place, the distinction still assumes that it is possible to plot a straight line from a given present to an imagined future which can be determined as being, or not being, ‘revolutionary’ in nature. Such a perspective makes no sense in the context of an understanding of the social and its processes which accepts the radical unpredictability of complex ecologies, of which any human society is clearly an example. It is simply not possible to predict in advance whether a given course of action will or will not tend towards something like a revolution, unless that action is being taken in an obviously pre-revolutionary situation.

This is not to say that nothing could remain of the ‘revolutionary’ spirit within such a perspective. A certain willingness to push change as far as it can go, and to intensify lines of transformation past those ‘tipping points’ which might alter the dynamics of the entire system, would still be a necessary element of any conceivable ‘radicalism’. For example, in a situation such as the UK in 2008, where neoliberal hegemony has resulted in an almost unquestioned acceptance of the value of privatisation by most of the political class, such radicalism might be registered just as well by local campaigns to democratise public services without handing them to the commercial sector as by explicit commitments to socialism and class struggle. However, such campaigns would perhaps only deserve the epithet ‘radical’ if they were unwilling to limit their objectives to the mere defence of existing arrangements in a local context, and instead oriented themselves towards a longer-term and permanent intervention in the wider arrangement of power relationships in which they find themselves. The successful campaign against the privatisation of local government IT services in Newcastle a few years ago would be a good example.

Strategic Orientation

Such an orientation towards long-term and permanent intervention might best be understood as ‘strategic’ in nature. In our view, the distinction between strategic and tactical interventions is a crucial one. A particular tendency in ‘radical’ thought - informed by de Certeau, Hakim Bey, certain immature strands of anarchism and some deeply confused misreadings of Deleuze & Guattari - tends to assume that true radicalism can operate on a purely ‘tactical’ level, and that ‘strategy’ must always be the property of authoritarian organisations and projects (de Certeau 1984; Bey 1991). Such a position inevitably ends up endorsing a range of ‘tactical’ manoeuvres which give expression to a ‘radical’ identity but have no apparent impact on power relationships at any level: examples of such ineffectual gestures include ‘subvertisements’, short-term squatting, conceptual art shows, or spectacular political ‘actions’ involving large numbers of arrests and no change whatsoever to the policies being protested. In fact, we are highly sympathetic to the creativity and dynamism of much such activity, and we would also share this tradition’s hostility towards rigid doctrine, party discipline and organisational authoritarianism. As should be clear from our rejection of the revolution / reform distinction, we do not believe that it is possible to formulate all-encompassing ‘strategies’ with determinate final goals for radical political projects. But at the same time, there can be no conception of radicalism as tending in the direction of ‘tipping points’ if there is no attention at all to the wider configurations in which particular actions are taken and no desire to intensify change in the direction of their possible transformation. Such an attention and desire can best be characterised as a ‘strategic orientation’.

A strategic orientation, we are therefore suggesting, is what characterises genuine radicalism. This is, of course, a perspective very much in the Gramscian tradition (Gramsci 2000). From this point of view, it is possible to be thoroughly militant in one’s declared opposition to, say, capitalism, or

patriarchy, or imperialism, or whatever; but if that opposition is expressed in terms which have no hope or intention of *persuading others* to engage in similar opposition, no chance whatsoever of *broadening and intensifying* such opposition in the direction of some transformatory tipping-point, then it can be at best merely ‘tactical’ in nature, a mere statement of opposition which makes no impact upon the wider configuration of forces, and so is devoid of any real political efficacy. However, this is not to make a case for mild-mannered pragmatism, either. The distinction we are making is one which may at times be a very fine one: between, for example, the short-term occupation of a building which there is no hope of holding indefinitely (symbolic tactical gesture) and the establishment of a social centre as a permanent community resource (a clear strategic gain in the struggle for democratic spaces).

Against ‘pragmatism’

Our distinction would also be just as critical of an insufficiency of militancy as of an excess thereof. For example, one of the chronic problems facing the mainstream Left in Western Europe is the apparent inability of social democrats and their supporters to appreciate the sheer levels of sustained effort which would today be required to defend the remnants of the welfare state from creeping privatisation. Under conditions of global neoliberal hegemony, for example, free universal health care is not the ‘reasonable’ expectation that it was, but a radical demand only likely to be met by sustained militant action against that hegemony. Few politicians or voters of the ‘moderate’ European Left have yet grasped this fact.

In fact, the dominant tendency amongst parties and governments of the social democratic Left in Europe, the US, and Australia in recent times has been the embrace of the technocratic programme of the ‘Third Way’, which claims to move beyond the political polarities of the modern era, occupying a pragmatic position from which to solve social problems efficiently, taking each in turn as a discrete technical problem to be addressed on its own terms. In the UK, at least, this is a position only really adopted by think tanks such as *Demos* and the IPPR. Government may mouth the pragmatist mantra ‘what matters is what works’, but in practice the commitment of UK governments to neoliberal programmes has often flown in the face of any objective measures of those programmes success in generating social benefits. But for the think tanks and the intellectual cadres in their wider orbit, including most professional political commentators, this pragmatist ideology has an absolutely paralysing effect, in effect reducing their policy programmes to a set of tactical proposals which make as little impact on the wider configuration of social forces as do the sermonising and self-publicity of self-identified ‘activists’. In fact, the consequence has been that the think tanks have been quite unable to make any critique of New Labour’s ideological conversion to neoliberalism, and have only seen their policies adopted when they happen to converge with its existing agenda. Without any aspiration to such critique, the think-tanks and NGOs have been unable to pull New Labour away from the influence of the corporate lobby and the ‘Washington consensus’.

Politics as technocratic tinkering, then, we are arguing, is no more effective than politics as pseudo-radical posturing. For a politics to be radical involves attacking imbalances and concentrations of power wherever they are found; functioning with a well-developed understanding of the ‘ecologies’ - the relational contexts - in which such imbalances and concentrations exist; and operating strategically, for far-reaching change. We can think about what this means in practice by comparing different policy agendas in the area of recycling and green energy.

Green Gestures

There has been a great deal of policy innovation in the areas of recycling and green energy over the past decade. This is because they are seen as a way of addressing in a number of environmental problems, particularly climate change, and the potential problems generated by 'peak oil'.

Let us take one example: the act of buying a product such as the 'Worn Again' brand of trainer, made with a number of recycled components. In the UK this product became fairly high profile when it was worn by the leader of the Conservative party David Cameron as one of a number of attempts to 'green' his image. As a political move this is clearly not very 'radical' for a number of reasons. The production of the shoe does not go very far in its attempt to reduce imbalances of power: whilst it uses recycled components, including London firemen's uniforms, these are shipped to Tangxia in Southern China for production where, as even the Conservative-friendly UK tabloid the *Daily Mail* pointed out, workers are paid little and the local river is black with industrial pollution from shoe factories.ⁱ Terra Plana who produces the expensive high-end shoes is not a co-operative, a means by which wealth could be shared, nor does it use unionised labour. In fact Terra Plana specifies in its ethical policy that whilst it uses recycled materials it 'does not have a code of conduct for its overseas production'ⁱⁱ. These are also expensive shoes and therefore are only available to an elite.

Buying the *Worn Again* shoe as a political gesture is therefore not particularly radical. Whilst wearing the trainer works as a tactical move to promote recycling and the idea of green politics, it exemplifies a politics that offers environmentalism as a shopping option for the relatively privileged. Here Cameron's wearing of the shoe is significant, as it echoes how the Conservative Party's particular shade of green revolves round an 'eco-aristocracy' of millionaire environmentalists like Zac Goldsmith. Moreover, wearing *Worn Again* does not produce many significant moves towards equality because of its environmental effects and relatively elite approach. In ethical shopping terms, a more 'radical' clothing choice would be the US-based company *No Sweat*, which uses unionised labour to produce all its products, uses organic material in the local production of its shoes, and which have a very low profit mark-up, so being more widely available as an option to a wider segment of the population.

Green Strategies

But the purchase of a shoe is still on its own a relatively isolated gesture. We might therefore look elsewhere to find examples of a radical politics of recycling. Consider, for example, the remarkable expansion of household recycling, the growth of which 'has been of a kind that few would have predicted ten years ago' (Murray, 2002: 32). In the UK, for example, recycling has become such a popular practice that it regularly tops the list of green facilities people want to see provided by local government. Household recycling has been described by waste guru Robin Murray as an example of 'productive democracy', because it involves a degree of collective work which members of the public are increasingly willing to engage in for a perceived 'wider good' (Murray 1999: 70). This has involved an innovative mobilisation of new constituencies. As Gay Hawkins puts it, some of the more inventive language around recycling has worked not by addressing a pre-existing public but by creating a new public that was 'called into being through a vision of a contaminated world' (Hawkins 2007: 64).

The potential seeds of a radical politics exist in these practices of 'productive democracy', which try to move towards creating environmental equalities, and do so on a very participative social basis. They are extended further and become more pronounced in their radicalism when the sentiments they have mobilised become used as a *resource* to extend further activity. And this, in effect, is what many 'Zero Waste' campaigns are doing. Zero Waste campaigns build on popular enthusiasm for recycling to extend green sensibilities outwards towards what is sometimes called

‘closed loop’ or ‘cradle-to-cradle’ environmental thinking (see Braungart and McDonough in IPPR and Green Alliance 2006: 12). Put simply, this emphasizes the idea of recycling as a continuous practice taking places across a wide range of interconnected social contexts, rather than imagining recycling as a series of isolated actions or events. It emphasizes the value of a ‘reduce, re-use, recycling’ attitude, of clean production, of atmospheric protection and of resource conservation. Such ‘zero waste’ strategies have begun to be deployed by a number of areas including San Francisco, Bath and New Zealand (IPPR 2006 and Green Alliance: 6). Zero waste campaigns are radical activities in that they are strategic in their nature whilst mobilizing an understanding of the context they work within. Importantly, they also work to publicly *politicize* previously taken-for-granted areas of social life such as household consumption, retail, and small-scale manufacturing.

Energy-Independence for All?

We might take a different example of radical politics from the area of green energy generation. Getting a solar panel or wind turbine fitted on the roof of your house appears to perhaps be something of a radical gesture in the current social and environmental climate. But it remains the case that on its own it is not a particularly radical practice, as it is limited to the few people who can afford the cost of fitting solar panels or wind turbines, which at the time of writing in the UK remains prohibitively high.

Of course it would not be helpful to dismiss such activities of middle-class people ‘doing what they can’ as useless, because as an environmentally useful practice it is more helpful than harmful. But a more radical politics around green energy in the UK involves campaigning for the UK government to adopt strong feed-in tariffs. ‘Feed-in tariffs’ are set prices which national and regional energy suppliers are legally *obliged* to pay for the power generated from renewable sources by domestic producers using household windmills, solar panels, or geothermal systems. Where progressive ‘feed-in tariff’ policies are adopted, then generating companies are obliged to pay more for such locally-produced renewable energies than for ‘dirty’ fuels. This system has been massively successful in increasing the proportion of renewable energy generated and used in countries like Germany, where the appeal of the extra income generated from feed-in tariffs is a powerful motivation to householders to generate their own renewable energy.

To date, many western governments have pursued an environmental strategy which mainly seeks to shift the costs of environmentalism onto consumers: an approach that is sometimes termed ‘green governmentality’. By contrast, Germany’s use of feed-in tariffs stands out as a approach which tries to solve environmental problems on a collective basis (Forsyth and Young 2007; Luke 1999) while importantly addressing issues around energy generation at the level of *production*. Germany’s strong environmental record has come about through the radical green political movements that gave rise to the red-green coalition governments of the 1990s, which have left a deep impression on its political landscape (Schreurs 2002). Not simply *using* renewable energy, but campaigning so that *everyone* will be able to generate and use it, has been one key characteristic of radical politics in this area.

However, as some journalists have pointed out, such campaigns are finding it hard to get popular traction in the UK. In part, this is because the the phrase ‘feed-in tariff’ is just not particularly catchy (Guardian 2008)! This is not a trivial issue, in fact. Rather it should focus our attention on the importance of understanding the contexts within which such campaigns exist and through which they attempt to build popularity; or, to put it in Felix Guattari’s terms, to the ‘mental, social and environmental ecologies’ within which any politics exists (Guattari 1989/2000).

Another word for ‘mental, social and environmental ecology’ might just be ‘culture’, of course. From this point of view, it is important to attend to the cultural resonances and potentials of

particular programmes, policies, slogans and strategies. In the UK, popular green politics has been hamstrung by its lack of resonance with the deeply individualist political tradition of the country (especially Southern England) and its appeals to an uninspiring rhetoric of moral responsibility. In this context, a far better strategy would be to mobilise a rhetoric of independence and economy around the ideal of giving all householders the *right* to become energy-independent, and hence free from the vagaries of the energy market, which have produced massive, and massively unpopular, rises in household bills in recent years.

Could such a rhetoric be linked successfully to a wider critique of the power relations which underpin our environmentally unsustainable economy? In fact, the issue of feed-in tariffs could be strategically linked to such an agenda if they were publicly connected with support for the ‘Green New Deal’. The Green New Deal is a package of far-reaching proposals proposed by brought together by a group of politicians, journalists, academics and the radical NGO, the New Economics Foundation. The Green New Deal, which suggests ways of tackling the credit, oil and climate crunch simultaneously (by for example, using feed-in tariffs and other incentives on renewable energy to create more jobs) is in these terms a good example of a radical green energy politics, because it has the potential to mobilize a range of constituencies - from militant eco-activists to bill-conscious suburban householders - around a programme that would actually shift power dramatically away from major corporations (the energy producers), distributing it amongst a much wider population.

We are arguing, then, that for a politics to be radical means that it is a politics which is pushing for redistributions and reconfigurations of power on a number of levels; that it is a politics which is sensitive to its environment, and that it works with a sound contextual understanding of the ‘ecology’ it is part of; and that it is a politics works on a strategic level, pushing for real, and long-term, change rather than for short-term spectacular effect. The Green New Deal is a potential site of such a strategic politics, especially if it can be linked to a real popularisation of domestic renewable energy-generation, because it threatens to tackle a major social issue by mobilising a broad constituency of support and permanently weakening the massive, entirely undemocratic power of the electricity-generating companies. This is one strong example of what radicalism could mean in the 21st century.

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ⁱ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-449890/The-dirty-truth-Camerons-green-trainers.html>

ⁱⁱ http://www.terraplana.com/ethical_policy.php