Participatory Democracy and the Renewal of Radical Politics

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Introduction

In the past two decades, the project of radically transforming capitalist societies in order to create communities that are in some sense ‘socialist’ has undergone a profound crisis. This crisis has sometimes looked like a complete collapse of the radical Left, especially in Canada and the United States, where the socialist Left has always been comparatively weak. But the two most striking features of this crisis – the discrediting of the statist central planning model of socialism and the systematic adaptation by social democratic parties to neo-liberalism – have produced not only dangers for the Left, but also opportunities. In this paper, I want to make the case for a cautiously optimistic assessment of the prospects for a self-reinvention by the North American radical Left, on the basis of grassroots organizing for a non-statist, egalitarian and participatory-democratic alternative to capitalism.¹

The paper has three parts. In Part One, I offer a way of thinking about the crisis of radical politics which acknowledges the widespread rejection of the de facto political initiatives that were long seen as central to the project of the radical Left, such as a planned economy and an expansive public sector. Contrary to conventional wisdom, however, I interpret this rejection as a function of the concessions of the Left to core elements of modern capitalism, notably, bureaucratic governance, alienated labour, and the separation of workers from the levers of economic decision-making. In Part Two, I draw attention to some of the most promising and dynamic political initiatives of the contemporary radical Left in North America, and highlight what differentiates these initiatives from those of earlier generations of radicals, notably the centrality of participatory-democratic processes to both the way they define their aims and the methods by which they organize themselves in the here and now. And finally, in Part Three,

¹ Two terminological notes: First, this paper concerns the radical Left in Canada and the United States. Whenever, for the sake of brevity, I use the expression ‘North American Left,’ I mean to refer to the Canadian and American Left, in contrast to the Central or the South American Left. Second, when I discuss ‘social democracy,’ I have in mind what we might call ‘radical’ social democracy, i.e., those who pursue a ‘parliamentary road to socialism,’ as distinct from pro-capitalist varieties of social democracy.
based on these considerations, I offer an anticipatory sketch of a possible future for the radical Left, grounded in contemporary trends, but also counting on the as-yet unrealized prospect of a fusion of today's marginal radical initiatives with a hoped-for resurgence of anti-systemic social movements, on a scale large enough to put fundamental social change back on the agenda of contemporary history.

Part One: The Crisis of the Radical Left

It is no secret that the radical Left is in crisis. Nancy Fraser (1997), one of today's most important radical intellectuals, has defined our time as a 'post-socialist' age, by which she means a time in which the project of radically transforming society by replacing capitalism with socialism has been, for the time being at least, taken off the table as a viable scenario. No doubt, this assessment is correct, as far as it goes. But there remains an open question: how plausible is it to anticipate a resurgence of the socialist project, a renewal of the realistic hope for the construction of a radically egalitarian and radically democratic economic and political alternative to capitalism?

Let us set aside at once the debate over the word, 'socialism.' Nothing important hinges on this word. What radicals insist upon is the desirability of a post-capitalist society, founded upon political and economic democracy, and social and environmental justice. The standard name is ‘socialism.’ But there are others. In this paper, for instance, I will note the popularity of the proposal for a post-capitalist egalitarian and democratic economy that goes by the name, 'participatory economics.' We can call it what we like.

Indeed, we can go further. It is arguable, I would suggest, that a narrow fixation on the external markings of the radical project – words like 'socialist' or 'marxist,' symbols like red flags or raised fists – has been a source of great confusion and political disorientation. Too often, radicals have thought that their role was to defend institutions that referred to themselves as 'socialist' or governments that brandished red flags. Many of the most tragic wrong turns in the history of 20th century radicalism could have been mitigated, if not avoided outright, by a more disciplined focus on the extent to which institutions, claiming to be part of the Left, were organized to remain consistent with the values, goals and principles which the Left defined and whether these institutions stood opposed to capitalism. This would mean evaluating institutions by their insistence on grassroots democracy, rigorous egalitarianism, demand for self-management in the workplace, opposition to hierarchy and domination, and so on. The renewal of the Left should begin, however paradoxical it may sound, by returning to an early insight of Karl Marx (1942, 43): “every shopkeeper,” he wrote, “is well able to distinguish between what somebody professes to be and what he really is.” We on the Left, I would add, should demand no less a capacity from ourselves.

Whatever one thinks about the retention of this baggage-laden word, 'socialism,' it is clear that the problems facing radicals run far deeper than terminological confusion. Call it what we like, the project for a radical, post-capitalist, revolutionary transformation of society, along egalitarian lines, has few defenders in today's 'post-socialist' political context.
What interests me, in this inquiry, is the question as to why socialism, once so powerful in its mass appeal, in every corner of the globe, has now fallen into a state of near-total disrepute and popular repudiation.

There are those, above all those on the political right, who regard this turn of events as symptomatic of socialism’s sheer impossibility. According to this view, the inability of socialist, or more broadly, non-capitalist economic institutions to solve the problems confronting any modern society has been exposed, for all to see. But how plausible is that? After all, viewed in world-historical terms, the 20th century Left was by no means without its successes. The Soviet Union, for instance, was able to achieve growth rates which, in comparison to other so-called ‘underdeveloped’ countries, were actually relatively impressive, setting the stage for its emergence, for better or for worse, as a global superpower. And the social-democratic parties of Europe could claim important accomplishments, too, notably in spearheading the construction of the great Welfare States of mid-century Europe, which spread prosperity and economic security more widely than laissez-faire capitalism had ever managed to do. Though these projects have had their problems it is not plausible to suggest that their failures, in strictly economic terms, were as stark as those of capitalism during the Great Depression. And capitalism, too, has racked up its share of problems. In our own time, for instance, capitalism has come to be widely acknowledged as the leading cause of potentially catastrophic climate change and, according to a recent World Health Organization report, “social injustice is killing people on a grand scale” in the world capitalist system (CSDH 2008, 26).

But if the failures of these real-world projects cannot be explained strictly in terms of economic failures, how can we explain them? I suggest that, far from the socialist project straying too far from capitalism, to the point of unworkability, the problem has been nearly the opposite of that: socialism, I suggest, embraced too many of capitalism’s core elements, including many of its most pernicious, destructive, and unattractive aspects. Socialism, in most of its real-world variants, embraced capitalism’s bureaucratic model of governance, its technocratic approach to designing and implementing public policy, its hierarchical and autocratic forms of workplace organization, its Realpolitik norms of international relations, its glorification of production and accumulation as ends in themselves, and its elitist understanding of who is best able to exercise political power and spearhead social change. And it is precisely here – not in the distance that separates socialism from capitalism but in the proximity that makes them too difficult to distinguish from one another – that the roots of the Left’s crisis are to be found.

‘Actually existing’ or real-world variants of socialism, above all statist social planning and parliamentary-reformist social democracy, have been rejected as alternatives to capitalism because they tend systematically to replicate the least attractive elements of the social order they purport to reject. The result is a kind of paradox of anti-capitalism: the very considerations that generate a distaste for capitalism – hostility to its elitism, authoritarianism, hierarchy, and alienation – generate at the same time a suspicion of many real-world socialist initiatives. And this suspicion reflects an insight into the Left’s very real concessions to capitalism, not a failure on the part of the masses to grasp their true interests, or to see capitalism for what it really is.
Part Two: Signs of a Possible Resurgence

And yet, there are stirrings of something new, early glimpses, perhaps, of a re-emergence of the radical Left, even here in North America where the Left is weaker than almost any other place on earth.

But the signs of a possible resurgence do nothing to encourage a faith in the prospects for a reassertion of the declining variants of the former Left – the small Leninist organizations, the anarchist Black Blocs, or the reform-minded social-democratic electoral machines. Rather, they suggest new sources of vitality, arising in unfamiliar forms from unexpected locations.

A number of recent (and admittedly still-marginal) grassroots initiatives have been launched by North American radicals hoping to re-invent the radical Left under the banner of ‘participatory democracy’. To be sure, it is an old term, embraced by some North American radicals at least since the early 1960s (Isserman 1987, 210; Pateman 1970). But it has acquired today a new, apparently unprecedented practical significance. The key difference between the conception of ‘participatory democracy’ that circulated in the 1960s and that of today lies in the fact that, whereas in the past, ‘participatory democracy’ figured mainly as a proposed alternative to the alienation and cynicism of the elite-dominated system of representative democracy typical of advanced capitalist societies (SDS 1962), in today’s emerging radical Left, the ideal of ‘participatory democracy’ has much more of a double function: to specify a critical standard of socially just outcomes to be fought for, on the one hand, and to articulate a moral and political standard for assessing the conduct and processes of the Left in the here and now, on the other hand. In short, participatory democracy has gone from being simply a label used to articulate the outlines of a ‘project’, to being at the same time a formula used to delineate the constraints on admissible ‘processes’ deployed in pursuit of such a project. It is about ‘means’ as much as it is about ‘ends’, methods as much as goals.

The Left that is beginning to emerge from under this banner is one that eschews both the bureaucratic conception of socialism typified by the East European model, and the uncritical stance of many social democrats toward the political and economic institutions of capitalism, notably ‘representative’ democracy and the market economy. The emerging participatory Left wants to embody, ‘in practice’ and ‘right now’, the characteristics that the Left has always claimed to regard as worth wanting in a post-capitalist future. It wants, in short, to be egalitarian, anti-elitist, non-statist, and participatory.

In this paper I want to highlight three manifestations of this emerging participatory Left. Each of these initiatives takes the notion of ‘participatory democracy’ as the touchstone of its political vision, and its political practice.

Consider, first, the re-founding (in January of 2006) of the campus-based Students for a Democratic Society. The ‘New SDS’ bears a familiar name, at least to those well-versed in 1960s radicalism in the U.S.A, but in many ways it has departed sharply from its namesake. Today’s SDS has over 120 chapters on campuses across the United States (Kelly 2008). Its name has perhaps attracted a degree of news media attention that a radical direct action student group
would normally not be accorded (Phelps 2007). But what makes it important, in the present context, is not its size or its relatively high profile. Rather, what is so striking about SDS is its ‘aspiration’ to make a qualitative break with earlier models of organizing. Although SDS has struggled to develop a coherent organizational structure, and has arguably been held back by its indecisiveness about questions of organization and structure (Kelly 2008), these weaknesses are in part symptomatic of a crucial secret to its success. SDS has not seen such matters as strictly issues of efficacy or efficiency, but has treated them as inextricably bound up with the question of what it means to organize in the present for a radically democratic society in the future. SDS members have refused to disengage questions of ‘process’ from questions of ‘project.’ From its inception, “many SDS organizers took the challenge of integrating liberatory practices into every level of the organization very seriously,” as two prominent SDS activists put it in a recent article (Kelly 2008). That has meant, in part, that the New SDS’ embrace of the ideal of ‘participatory democracy’ has served as a way of “defining our vision for society as well as our internal structure” (Kelly 2008). To be sure, the SDS experience has been uneven, and the organization has only very recently begun to develop a coherent national structure (Hegemonik 2008). It would be absurd to suggest that SDS has stumbled on all the answers about how to develop new-model Left organizations. But, in its insistence on merging the question of how to organize with the question of what to organize for, it typifies what is best in the emerging participatory Left. Whatever its mis-steps or internal squabbles, SDS has taken a firm stance in favor of, as SDS activists Brian Kelly and Joshua Kahn Russell put it, establishing “an internal culture that prefigures the participatory democracy we want to achieve” (Kelly 2008).

A similar insistence on process/project consistency has animated a distinct, but parallel radical initiative: the project for a participatory society, which emerged out of the popular ZNet website, associated with Z magazine. First, some background. In recent years, the vision for an egalitarian post-capitalist economy proposed by Michael Albert and Robin Hahnel (2005), known as ‘participatory economics,’ has become increasingly influential on the North American far Left. Hahnel and Albert (2005) took the longstanding socialist claim that a radically democratic economy was possible, and backed it up with detailed institutional proposals for replacing market economics with a process they call ‘participatory planning.’ This process would be based on deliberative councils of workers in the workplace and consumers in neighbourhoods and regions, coordinated by a process of iterative negotiation, using ‘indicative prices,’ but substituting participatory and deliberative procedures for the blind rule of market forces.

As these economic proposals grew in influence, a group of like-minded writers and activists began to join in with Hahnel and Albert (2005) in elaborating a broader, more expansive vision of a post-capitalist participatory society. Political scientist Stephen Shalom began to articulate a conception of a post-capitalist ‘participatory polity’ (Shalom 2005). Radical journalist and academic Justin Podur proposed a vision of a ‘participatory culture’ (Podur 2006). Feminist activist and writer Cynthia Peters explored the possibility of a transformation of gender roles and kinship structures within a participatory democratic society (Peters 2006). Most recently, Matt Halling (2008) has tried to develop a conception of a participatory-democratic legal system. As this notion of a participatory society began to take shape, advocates of the
new project began to get organized, first with a conference on strategies and visions for a participatory-democratic movement (in June of 2006), and then with the formation of the International Network for a Participatory Society (IPPS), later that year.

The IPPS was intended to serve as a centre for advocacy and collaboration among activists and intellectuals committed to the ideal of a participatory society. But, just as important, the appearance of the IPPS quickly led to the formation of a series of locally rooted ‘anti-capitalist NGOs’, such as the Austin Project for a Participatory Society, in Texas, the London PPS in Ontario, the Hellenic PPS in Greece, the PPS Down Under in Australia, the African Project for a Participatory Society, and several other local PPS groups, in at least five countries. Arguably, this may prove to be one of the most enduring achievements of the larger ‘participatory society’ project: the formation of locally rooted, grassroots anti-capitalist NGOs, engaged in a wide array of broadly political, but wholly non-statist activities, including public advocacy, popular mobilization, and prefigurative institution-building. What is striking in all of this is the emergence of a new idea of what a radical organization can be: not a political party, but an NGO; not seeking to conquer power through the state, but seeking to subvert capitalism from a position within civil society; not a coalition focusing on a single issue or theme, but a broad-based project to work for the displacement of capitalist civilization by a new, post-capitalist participatory society.

This brings me to my third example of the emerging participatory Left. Obviously, the whole thrust of what I’ve been saying so far is that the participatory Left does not believe in putting off until tomorrow what it can do today. And so it is that the participatory economics movement has found practical expression in a series of real-world experiments in post-capitalist economic institution-building. As Robin Hahnel (2005, 368) points out in his book, Economic Justice and Democracy: From Competition to Cooperation:

[T]here are a handful of collectives in the United States and Canada that are not only owned and managed entirely by their members, but organized self-consciously according to the principles of participatory economics. These collectives...promote participatory economic goals, seek to relate to other progressive organizations on a cooperative rather than commercial basis, and explicitly agitate for replacing capitalism with a participatory economy.”

Hahnel (2005) offers some detailsI cannot go into detail in this context, due to time limitations. However, I will mention that examples of such participatory workplaces include two publishing firms, South End Press and Arbeiter Ring publishers, a bookstore and café called the Mondragon Bookstore, a bicycle repair shop called Natural Cycle, a now-defunct online newspaper called the New Standard, and a number of others as well. As part of the larger solidarity economy, but also as a living expression of the aims and principles of the participatory society project, these institutions are a key part of the emerging participatory Left.

Part Three: What the Next Left Might Look Like

We can see, then, that what is new about today’s emerging new forms of radical politics is the way in which today’s radicals have begun to relate their processes to their project. They
treat processes, not simply as 'means to an end', to be assessed in terms of their efficacy and efficiency, but as objects of ongoing political assessment, susceptible to the same kind of critical scrutiny to which the processes and practices of capitalism are subjected. If such 'project/process consistency' is at the heart of the most hopeful initiatives of the emerging participatory-democratic radicalism, what might we expect the next Left to look like, in the years to come?

Here, of course, one has no choice but to speculate. But my speculations are at least grounded in the observation of real tendencies, like those noted in Part Two, above.

If, as I claim, the participatory Left can be expected to displace the declining social-democratic strategy for radical change, and the largely exhausted vanguardist revolutionary strategy, the next Left can be expected to exhibit the following distinctive characteristics.

First, it will be a Left whose most visible manifestation will be the pervasive role of 'prefigurative pilot projects': that is, anticipatory institutions and practices that embody participatory-democratic principles, and that stand opposed to the core principles and leading characteristics of capitalism. The obvious example is participatory workplaces and enterprises, like those mentioned above. But other examples include local participatory budgeting initiatives and all manner of experiments with participatory-democratic decision-making.

Second, the emerging Left will be a form of radicalism in which the classical organizational model of the political party, aspiring to exercise state power, will have been displaced by the new model of the 'anti-capitalist NGO', aspiring to subvert capitalism, and to promote alternatives to it, from outside the state, within a combatively oppositional civil society. Such NGOs will view the market and the state, not as vehicles for advancing progressive aims, but as an adversary that needs to be discredited and displaced, as far as possible.

Third, it will be a Left in which political action and economic institution-building will co-evolve with a reciprocally supporting series of what I want to call 'counter-capitalist' cultural practices. That is to say, the political activism of the next Left will be rooted in lifestyles and value systems founded upon a repudiation of the cultural bases of pro-capitalist behaviors and aspirations. This follows from the principle that how we live today should be consistent with the kind of society we aspire to create.

All three of these characteristics – post-capitalist pilot projects, anti-capitalist NGOs, and counter-capitalist cultural practices – are rooted in the primacy of the principle of project/process consistency. There is, however, a gaping absence in this vision of a renewed radical participatory Left. I have painted a picture of a 'participatory' Left with only a handful of actual 'participants.' But a participatory Left without mass participation is obviously bound to remain on the sidelines of social change and contemporary history.

In the face of this sobering thought, we must acknowledge that the prospects for reinventing the radical Left, on the basis of a thoroughgoing commitment to participatory democracy, depend largely on the capacity of today's grassroots participatory democratic
organizations to merge with larger processes of political mobilization in revitalized social movements organizing for social and environmental justice, and for political and economic democracy. True, these mass mobilizations have yet to occur, on anything like the scale that is needed. But nothing less than such a broad-based resurgence of community-based 'movement' activism can lay the groundwork for a re-emergence of the radical Left as a vital political force.

**Conclusion**

My aim in this paper has been two-fold. I have attempted, first, to distinguish between the widespread popular repudiation of the genuinely flawed real-world variants of the socialist project, and the enduring attractiveness of the core values and principles of the Left’s critique of capitalism and vision of a post-capitalist future. And I have also attempted, secondly, to discern in some of today’s radical organizing efforts, signs of new approach, which – far from discarding the values and principles of the classical Left – clings to those values and principles with an unprecedented attentiveness to the importance of consistency between the project one aspires to realize, and the processes by means of which one pursues that project. Participatory democracy serves as a crucial bridge, for the emerging new radicalism, between how we struggle and what we struggle for.

**Works Cited**


