



Everybody Wants A New Old Left

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With the election of Obama and a widening economic crisis, it seems immense changes are sweeping national and global politics every week or so. Radicals, along with everybody else, are struggling to comprehend the nature of the changes around us, and the directions we can head in the future. The good news: pretty much everybody thinks the next few years are going to offer the greatest opportunity to remake our world in decades. The bad news: there are as many opinions about how to do it as there are letters in this paragraph.

Amid the flurry of forums, panel discussions, listserv back-and-forths and spirited bar talk animating lefty circles right now, socialist groups are putting forth proposals for new directions in the capital-L Left. Two notable proposals appeared recently in pamphlets distributed online and in bookstores. The first, *Which Way Is Left*, was produced by the Freedom Road Socialist Organization, a nationwide post-Maoist group formed in 1985. The second, *Manifesto for a Left Turn*, was put together by a collection of professors from the east coast including Stanley Aronowitz and Rick Wolff. Both pamphlets call for cohesion and organization-building in the U.S. left, and both fill me with mixed emotions.

On the one hand, the manner in which these pamphlets talk about the purpose of organizations, and methods of building them, tell me the party-building left is headed in interesting new directions. On the other hand, I'm critical of each pamphlet along pretty predictable lines. *Which Way* and *Manifesto* both fall within Marxist traditions that generally aim at taking state power through hierarchical organizations, while I identify with horizontalist, anti-authoritarian or anarchist

struggles that have eschewed both. I'm inspired by Zapatista communities, Italian autonomia, and the counter-globalization movements, to name a few.

What Do The Pamphlets Say?

Each proposal claims the main stumbling block for movements here in the settler state is the fractured nature of our resistance, and both provide a laundry list of contemporary problems. For the *Which Way* authors, there's a dearth of analyses that provide frameworks for effective action, a lack of trust between radical groups, and a failure to appreciate the immense scale of movement necessary to challenge U.S. power. *Manifesto* laments how progressives focus myopically on single issues, or limit themselves to acting as reformist hangers-on to the Democratic Party. Both pamphlets claim a national political formation and/or socialist party should be formed to address these problems.

But crucially, neither pamphlet proposes to form a political party right off the bat. Instead they both urge radicals to begin a lengthy process of learning, debate and development in the form of study group networks, publishing projects and public events. The idea is to spur discussion and organization, and ultimately contribute to the creation of a national formation of some kind. The *Which Way* folks call this process "Left Refoundation," while the *Manifesto* authors call it the "Radical Project."

I don't think the pamphlets' reluctance to call immediately for a socialist party is some disingenuous attempt to disguise the authors' intentions while ensnaring converts. On the contrary, I think the authors of *Which Way* and *Manifesto* have a sense of how huge the task of social transformation in the U.S. really is, and at the same time, how premature it would be to call for a national organization based on fixed, predetermined principles. Both pamphlets advocate instead for an open-ended process of exploration and cohesion building. In doing so, they're helping the party-building tradition respond to many of the criticisms leveled at state socialist projects over the last 3/4 century.

Anyone familiar with radical politics could list the criticisms I'm talking about. From 1917 on, communist parties across the world were regularly accused of authoritarian purges, enforcing rigid dogmas, acting as proxies for capitalist control, and undermining movement outside the tried-and-true industrial working class. Battles along lines of gender or sexuality, in the university, within communities

of color, or on the basis of new forms of labor went unappreciated or opposed by most institutionalized socialism in the 20th century. Years of scathing critique (and Cold War defeats) have made the authors of *Which Way* and *Manifesto* much more exploratory in their approach.

Taking A Step Back

An example of the authors' soft touch: the word "party" appears only sparingly in each pamphlet, and with lots of caveats. *Which Way* cautions "no one organization will simply grow in size and become *the* party. Building a party will require a conscious coming together of forces on the revolutionary Left." It insists the development of revolutionary organization could involve multiple party formations or united fronts, and urges people to rethink the relationship between parties and organizations of workers, neighbors, and spontaneous actions.

Manifesto, for its part, starts out calling for a "political formation" and only drops the p-bomb later on. It encourages socialists to investigate links "between the anarchist critique of the state forms that arose in the wake of socialist victories at the turn of the 20th century" and democratic Marxist currents. It also pushes socialists to investigate Marxism's relevance to new forms of capitalist production and reproduction, and to tangle with "the question of organization: what is a party, what is a federation and other political forms, what is the relation of nation and state" and so on. These questions arise in both documents, in part, because their authors want to use the party differently than it has been in the past.

Earlier generations of socialists considered political parties an instrument to seize state power--whether through elections or warfare--in order to implement a program generated by a few key leaders. Confidence in the objective truth of scientific socialism meant groups didn't have to ask many questions during their march to the state. In *Which Way* and *Manifesto*, the emphasis is different: the party is described first and foremost as a place where many disparate currents engage in debate, programs are developed and strategies tested. The possibility of seizing state power is pushed to the background, as one of many topics for discussion, while party debates broaden to include interrogations of staid Marxist categories.

These are big changes in the world of socialism, and they indicate how much innovative social movement in recent decades has influenced socialist groups.

From the Maoist adage to “constantly revolutionize” organizations to a “21st Century Socialism” fueled by grassroots participation, socialist groups are growing more flexible and adaptive. That’s encouraging—but I’ve got big differences with the proposals too.

Some Things Change, Some Things Stay The Same

My main beef is: if you want to build something to develop new ideas and strategies, and the state is of secondary importance to you, that’s great! Why does it have to be a political party? For decades, radical movements have developed modes of organizing outside the party model, and tried to build power without relying on the state. These experiments have affirmed the idea that the forms of organization employed in our struggles are literally vehicles for change. Depending on how groups tend to grow and develop, they can carry us in vastly different directions.

Historically, parties have operated as proto-states. They usually function by building hierarchical power and prefiguring the governing structures they hope one day to manage. Sure, party formations have employed degrees of internal democracy; the German Green Party initially rotated leadership roles and maintained gender-balanced quotas, for instance. But most parties mold themselves to fit the state form, and the basic features of most states—from repressive police to alienating bureaucracy—undermine egalitarian, self-organized social relationships. In trying to *become* governments, revolutionary parties often remain regulative in scope, and duplicate functions of the state outside the halls of power.

Many contemporary groups steer clear of these models, because they find it hard to build egalitarian, self-determined communities while modeling state structures. Thus most horizontal groups look markedly different than the parties and unions that predominated for much of the 20th century. Proposals and decisions tend to emerge from a broad array of base groups, instead of a central committee of decision-makers. Formations grow by incorporating many tactics and projects appropriate to different contexts, instead of fashioning a homogenous organization with a uniform political line. The Poor People’s Alliance in South Africa; the Other Campaign in Mexico; the movements of ’77 in Italy; the World Social Forum gatherings; all these point to a world of organizational possibilities beyond the state and hierarchy.

Why do the authors of *Which Way* and *Manifesto* insist on building a “party,” if they want to do something largely tangential to its historical purpose? I think it’s because both sets of authors still consider the state an effective tool for liberation. A common refrain among socialist folks in the U.S. is that the nation-state is the only structure capable of implementing changes on a mass scale while combating the influence of class elites, and party organizing is the only way to seize it. The proposals in *Which Way* and *Manifesto* are more flexible: they de-emphasize state power in a search for a new kind of party. But they fail to consider how one concept presupposes the other, and recognize struggles that have flourished while questioning both.

Another Politics Has Been Made Possible

Starting in the early 1990s, many counter-globalization groups mobilized outside political parties because they felt the nation-state had lost its influence in the face of multinational corporations, and institutions like the G8, the World Trade Organization and the International Monetary Fund. Some felt states were merely undemocratic facades, used by global capitalism to manage local conflicts and keep goods and services flowing freely. To challenge global capitalism, these groups believed they would have to organize autonomously and confront new centers of global governance directly in the streets. The massive convergences that followed were surprisingly effective at remaking public opinion and derailing neoliberal agendas across the globe.

None of these victories would’ve been possible without feminist movement, which decades earlier had exploded the very notion of *where* politics took place. From the late 1960s on, feminist struggles brought domestic life, the treatment of peoples’ bodies, and the written and unwritten laws governing gendered relations into question. These were arenas over which the nation-state had only partial influence and control, but which helped reproduce the oppressive social order on a daily basis. To fight battles that spanned government policies and interpersonal relations, feminists deployed forms of organization that were distinct from parties or unions, and which cast aside the state as a central reference point.

Both movements were hugely important in the late 20th century, yet they appear in the pamphlets only in passing. *Which Way* pigeonholes globalization as merely U.S. imperialism in disguise, and understates feminism’s contribution as having “challenged the economic determinism of traditional Marxism.” *Manifesto* makes

a nod to counter-globalization theorists Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, and even asks “will nation-states reassert autonomy, or are new political arrangements needed to insure a world of growing equality and democracy?” But neither pamphlet seriously engages with the answers movements have been flinging at these questions for over 30 years.

If We Don't Do It, It Won't Get Done

Of course, it's impossible to critique something without also challenging oneself. While I have major differences with the proposals put forward in *Which Way* and *Manifesto*, I know anti-authoritarian movement in the U.S. has a long way to go before it can demonstrate that building struggle from below is more effective than strategies that rely on parties and the state. To critique the latter approach carries with it an implicit challenge: to build new kinds of horizontal power, capable of meeting people's needs while outmaneuvering or outfighting the state form. We have our work cut out for us.

As we build new organs of struggle and popular power, radicals will need a rich pool of ideas to draw from, and even to contrast themselves against. Dialogue across different political traditions is incredibly useful here, in part because it helps us clarify our own ideas about organizing and strategy. These discussions can generate new anti-authoritarian modes of struggle, even if they don't smooth over the many differences between groups or result in the creation of a unified organization.

Until socialist groups shift their sense of the aims of social struggle--and the forms of organization appropriate to them--I don't think there'll be much opportunity for anti-authoritarian folks to collaborate with them beyond particular issues or coalitions. But I'm still encouraged by the changes displayed in *Which Way Is Left* and *Manifesto for a Left Turn*. If socialist groups in the U.S. continue these explorations, they could end up looking like Lotta Continua in 1970s Italy, or MST, the Brazilian landless worker movement. Developments like that would be a good thing, and create opportunities for daring radical collaboration in the years ahead.

Further Reading

We Are Everywhere

Notes from Nowhere

“The Fourth World War Has Begun”

Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos

The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community

Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James

“Zapatismo: A Brief Manual on How To Change the World Today”

El Kilombo Intergalactico

“The Proliferation of Margins”

Felix Guattari

“The Twilight of Vanguardism”

David Graeber

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