

## Who's Afraid of Democracy?

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A few years ago, in my hometown of Vancouver (British Columbia), I attended some meetings focused on provincial and national climate change policy in Canada. It was a fairly large gathering (perhaps 75 people), convened by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, a social democracy-oriented think tank well known for its foresight and sophisticated research. The attendees included representatives of environmental and social justice NGOs, unions, and a few academics. The point of the meeting was to discuss what a “climate justice” agenda would look like for B.C. In other words, the goal was to initiate a discussion of how to ensure, as far as possible, that adaptation and mitigation efforts in the face of climate change be shaped within some set of social justice constraints. Or, even better, that a so-called “just transition” to a “green economy” could be organized not merely to prevent working people’s lives from getting worse, but to function as part of a more structural program of redistribution. It was definitely not an “anti-capitalist” forum, but it was certainly important and interesting.

Throughout the day, and during subsequent meetings, there was much talk of the absolute necessity of a “democratic” approach to climate justice, and to whatever institutions of governance its implementation might require. Words like “grassroots,” “participatory”—and, over and over, “ordinary British Columbians”—were staples of the conversation. These terms, if not the institutional means through which they would be realized, were unproblematic. It was obvious to all of us that it was unnecessary to say what they meant, and even more obvious that they were “good” words, naming unquestionably essential dimensions of all political work. Indeed, it seemed clear that for many, these words were like rosary beads they constantly worry, a sort of reflexive mantra informing everything they do or say.

The meeting was also, of course, opened by some heavy-hitting climate scientists, who detailed a range of likely climate change impacts on the province, organized according to the predicted severity and rapidity of planetary warming. Even the mildest of these projections was daunting, to put it mildly. I think it is fair to say that most of us in the room, even those who considered themselves well informed, found these forecasts unnerving. By the time of the day’s closing plenary discussion, I could not shake the suspicion that confronting even the lower-intensity transitions was unlikely to involve “democracy.” All the talk of public participation and democratic decision-making by “ordinary British Columbians,” at least in the political conjuncture as I understood it, seemed pretty hard to reconcile with the problem at hand. I spoke up, admittedly not very articulately (I tend to get a bit nervous in these kinds of situations), and tried to say that if these futures were indeed to come to pass with the severity and on the timeline suggested in the scenarios, then the scale and form of response necessary made it difficult to understand what role “democracy” (at least in its standard liberal variants) could possibly play. Indeed, it was unclear to me how any well-planned participatory mechanisms would be all that helpful, let alone realizable.

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Not that I am against democracy, whatever it means, but it seemed unlikely to me that the deliberative model that dominates “progressive” prescriptions could help much, given the scale and rate of emissions reductions climate science tells us are necessary. This was not a brilliant intervention, of course, but it proved an unpopular one. In fact, I raised it at a couple of later meetings, and it was almost always brusquely dismissed or studiously ignored. This led me to rethink my analysis, in the hope of making a more meaningful intervention. Upon reflection, I reframed it to say I did not think “democracy,” at least as it was understood by the admirably diverse but solidly left-liberal crowd in the room, could have much to do with what was necessary or possible politically. Climate change will inevitably elicit a large-scale, coordinated political response, which will (I said at the time) most likely take one of two forms: (a) a liberal-capitalist response (i.e.. the top-down assertion of a new carbon regime by the state in complex relationship with elites and capital), something Joel Wainwright and I (2012) have since called “climate Leviathan”; or (b) a mass-based response, perhaps, but by no means certainly, not as elite-coordinated as the Leviathan model—a model that in the moment I dubbed “climate Lenin”.<sup>1</sup> Between the two, it seemed to me, the Lenin option was infinitely preferable.

These remarks elicited even less discussion, something I had not previously thought possible. I told myself this was due to the Lenin reference. To be honest, however, I remain unsure if the problem was an inability to get my point across, or the fact that I have missed or misunderstand something important, and, unbeknownst to me, my comments are irrelevant. If the latter, I probably seemed like one of those grumpy old cranks who come to every public forum to raise the same point again and again. Others just hoped that if they did not respond, I would eventually give up. In any event, since I am in fact a little scared of becoming that person, give up is what I did. In ensuing conversations, I simply tried to say that climate change was almost surely going to upend capitalism, whether we liked it or not. Given this trajectory, it will clearly be a lot better if we do the upending first, on our own terms, rather than waiting for ecological catastrophe to do it for us, and then having to clean up the mess after (if that turns out to be possible).

In the years since, I have thought a lot about the relationship between democracy and political strategies relevant to current ecological-political-economic crises. This often leads to pondering the related question of actual and potential violence, which seems to many, me included, not only inseparable from the history of democracy (we cannot name a democratic polity that was not born in or of violence) but almost certainly looming on the climate horizon. The science suggests that on our present trajectory, we are accelerating more or less headlong toward an era of grinding scarcity. Violence is not a *necessary* outcome of scarcity, but if history is any measure, it is a highly likely outcome. If we take the scientific consensus seriously, is it really possible to imagine a non-violent, “democratic” response to the displacement, unemployment, hunger, and elite lifeboat politics likely to result from climate change? People I respect enormously, like Christian Parenti (2011), who has probably thought about this as long and hard as anyone, have for the most part abandoned

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<sup>1</sup> “Climate Leviathan” was the subject of a 2012 online symposium coordinated by the Antipode Foundation. The online discussion, and our reply, can be accessed at: <http://antipodefoundation.org/2012/08/28/symposium-on-joel-wainwright-and-geoff-manns-climate-leviathan-authors-reply/>.

the hope for a non-Leviathanesque non-violent mitigation-adaptation strategy. And to be honest, I am having a hard time not doing the same.

I hope it is not presumptuous of me to suggest that many people have thoughts like these running through their heads today, perhaps especially in the affluent global North. Despite burgeoning resistance all over the world, and despite some incredibly exciting radical challenges to the pessimism that often saturates my view of the future, I think many North Americans and Europeans find it hard not to get stuck in a position in which climate Leviathan seems like the only option. This position is rendered all the more contorted by the fact that even though it appears like the only option, those of us who feel stuck nevertheless know it cannot be the option, if for no other reason than it will not work. To imagine that all that is required is tweaking the current system to make it “green” seems crazy. But at the same time, it seems hard to imagine that democracy on almost any definition is adequate to the problem, and even harder to imagine that “democracy” is somehow going to fix things just because it is democratic. Indeed, although I know it does not exhaust what “real” democracy is, the idea that “average voters” in the U.S. or Canada should have *more* say in how we confront climate change scares the pants off me. They already seem to have far too much say; if you put climate policy in the hands of the electorates of the world’s dominant capitalist liberal democracies right now, my panic button tells me we’re doomed.

I think it fair to say that this tendency, which is really a distrust of “the people,” is not particular to me, however flawed or reactionary my own analysis may or may not be. Indeed, I would argue that it runs so deeply and strongly in modern “progressive” politics in the global North that I think it hard to underestimate. This sentiment is what drives, for example, almost two centuries of effort on the part of “progressive” intellectuals to explain working-class conservatism. Many of the people who attended that climate justice meeting (including me) can and do tie themselves in knots trying to answer the “what’s the matter with Kansas?” question (Frank 2004; cf. Halimi 2004), and can certainly learn a lot from those efforts. But even in the most compelling of these efforts—Mike Davis’ *Prisoners of the American Dream* (1986), for instance, or Stuart Hall’s work on Thatcherism (1988)—the explanation for the problem cannot, and does not, legitimate conservative or reactionary politics. The living political divide between “them” the people and “us” (the Left, “progressives,” the “educated,” or whatever the label) is an essentially analytical premise—the distance is assumed in the very idea that conservatism is a problem to be explained. Concern arises because “they” the people are acting so remarkably “unreasonably” or “myopically”—so unlike how they “should” act. Social scientists and cultural critics like Barbara Fields (Fields and Fields 2012) or Thomas Frank (2004) can of course help explain this “irrationality,” even perhaps its vindictive fundamentalist and racist variations. But an *understanding* of the material or symbolic factors that help shape fundamentalism or racism does not (if I am honest) make me want fundamentalists or racists to have any more decision-making power. At best, these analyses tacitly posit that if not for its ideological or material victimization by capital, the working class would “naturally” be left or socialist or at least anti-capitalist. Yet this is a purely speculative proposition. History is full of radical workers, but arguably no more than it is full of reactionary workers, too. And in either case, whether working-class conservatism is justifiable or not, few if any of its “left” analysts would accept the political supremacy of reactionary workers on the grounds that its class-basis rendered it legitimate.

I make no claim for the defensibility of these ideas. I know they are elitist, Euro/American-centric, and so forth. I place them at the center of attention only because I am certain that they are not merely an idiosyncratic product of my own fears on a bad day, and I am just as certain they are enormously powerful in climate politics in the liberal capitalist world. In fact, I would suggest that even if they are confined to a very small “we” (say, middle class, white, left intellectuals in North America), they must be named and critically engaged if for no other reason than “we” have an unjustifiably but undeniably disproportionate influence on what “left” can mean.

The obvious question that follows this assessment of (or better, reaction to) the current conjuncture, therefore, is the following: with what kind of politics does it articulate? Where does it come from, and where does it lead? I would go so far as to say that in my disdain for populist reaction, I am often not as far as I would like to think from the Keynes (1972, 297) who famously declared “the *class* war will find me on the side of the side of the educated *bourgeoisie*.” This is to say nothing of the historical irony of a left attack on populist appeal to raging ideology, since some of the most important moments of radical social change in history (the French and Chinese revolutions come to mind) were defined in no small part by mass appeals of a similar tenor. Would the Parisians who stormed the Bastille join a militia or the Minutemen today? We cannot be sure the answer is no.

In modern capitalist democracies, the appeal of this anti-populism—which I would argue is *the* force behind the non-radical or social-democratic Left (and some of the self-declared radical Left)—is deep and complex. So deep and complex that the solution is not to be discovered merely by committing to the “other side,” i.e., the side of the “masses.” In other words, it is not only a grave mistake to conflate mass politics with “radical” or “left” politics—it is equally spurious to assume that hegemonic elites’ fear of the masses and democracy (which we are usually more comfortable criticizing) is a fear of “radical ideas” or “the Left.” This is a tendency to which, for example, Antonio Negri is sometimes prone. Take, for example, in his (admittedly brilliant) critique of Keynesianism, Negri reads the rise of the “planner state” as unconditional evidence of capital’s “admission of working-class autonomy,” as a recognition of the fact that the “problem of repressing the powerful trade union and political movement of the working class” had “extended the revolutionary experience to the whole capitalist world” (1988, 12, 15). Indeed, he claims that across all capitalist polities, this revolutionary “experience showed itself to be homogeneous” (1988, 15). Yet I think that what we might call contemporary liberalism’s suppressed anti-democratic premise is founded much less on a fear of revolution than someone like Negri believes. Its grounds are rather much closer to the kind of “visceral” political analysis to which I sometimes find myself turning.

Modern liberalism is substantially constituted, especially in its state-forms and its modes of governance, by liberals’ efforts to ensure the bourgeoisie do not let their self-interest and myopia undermine their privilege and power. The (increasingly blurry) difference between a contemporary conservative and a contemporary liberal is that liberals know that if they do not understand the precariousness of their position, they are bound to lose it. And the reasons they feel their position is precarious are not, *pace* Negri, because modern liberals recognize in the multitude or the 99 percent the truth of the working class or the people as some historically “autonomous” force striving to free itself. Rather, they recognize in the multitude only the potential destruction of the social stability they believe

keeps chaos at bay. Liberalism has little fear of the masses or climate change *per se*; it fears the mob, the rabble, the “anti-people” (Mercier-Josa 1999, 94-95)—the force that will destroy not only the bourgeoisie but everything else as well (Žižek 2008, 264-266). The rabble is of course a very old specter, one that makes a hell of a lot of sense if one accepts the liberal theory of human motivation—*homo oeconomicus*. (In fact, one might even read Hardt and Negri’s trilogy as a “performative” attempt to conjure the multitude out of the rabble, something most of the global North’s (intellectual) Left are afraid to do, in case it actually worked.)

My point, however, is that the fear of the rabble is never very far from much of “the Left” opposition to capitalist liberal democracy. Take, for example, the response of “radicals” like Robin Blackburn and Robert Wade to the financial crisis. Rather than welcoming the crisis as Marx did the meltdown of 1857 (as he wrote to Engels: “the stock exchange is the only place where my present dullness turns into elasticity and bouncing” [cited in Rosdolsky 1977, 7]), Blackburn (2008; 2011) and Wade (2008; 2009) are mostly interested in stabilizing a system so that unrest does not destroy the whole kit and caboodle, ruining the lives of as many of the poor and undeserving (of such an outcome) as of the wealthy who might nevertheless deserve it. Their proposals are more-or-less unqualified attempts to save the institutions of capitalism while dethroning capital. Whether or not that is possible—especially in the face of environmental catastrophe—is a (maybe *the*) key question, and the answer is not at all clear.

I hasten to add that absolutely none of this is to point fingers. I place myself smack-in-the-middle of those at whom I aim this critique. This is, I dare say, a political paralysis far more common to my narrow but influential “we” than normally acknowledged. It is also a reason that Marx, among others, remains a radical resource in our current condition. For Marx makes one acutely aware of the need for action so radical it is quite frightening. To take him seriously as a person of the Left is to experience the knowledge that one’s world—especially if one is among the more fortunate—does not match one’s moral claims, and the only way to make it do so would be to take risks and attempt the kind of change that is most likely to require throwing it all away. That is a very unsettling experience, one that many of us would like to avoid having at all. We are not unreasonably tempted to turn instead to something that allows us to contemplate the chasm between “is” and “ought” without demanding the same kind of fear and trembling. The persistent power of that is hard to understate.

Ultimately, however, the even more imposing problem such reflections suggest is that it might be precisely that it is the liberalism I cannot shake that makes me care about climate change at all. Am I not, in the end, merely afraid we will *all* go down with the ship—and not merely those who deserve it? Should a radical embrace the inevitably radical revolution it will bring? To be honest, I do not believe that is the right answer—but that is not in any way a necessarily “radical” conclusion. It is, rather, a part of a broader politics whose valence is much more ambiguous, and whose nature I still do not understand.

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