

# Reclaiming Radical Politics

**Jenny Pickerill**

## Introduction

In university textbooks radical politics is often defined as operating outside of formal political systems and advocating major political, and social, structural change. In the process radical politics often rejects polite lobbying as a tool and instead engages in vocal, challenging, and at times illegal (though often non-violent) activism. In simplest terms, in such texts, radical politics is counter-opposed to reformist politics which are much more pragmatic, willing to work within existing government structures (or with industry), and satisfied with achieving changes in legislation.

If we were to accept such a definition we allow activists' relationship to the state to define what is radical. In other words, anything which is 'outside' of formal political structures can be deemed radical. This definition also confines radical politics to a debate about methods. Voting, lobbying or consulting your MP is acceptable because

these are forms sanctioned by government, but civil disobedience, boycotts, direct action or violence are (to varying degrees) deemed less acceptable because they are channels of political expression the government would rather we did not use.

There are clear consequences of this definition. If radical politics are only those outside of formal political structures they can be more easily marginalised, perceived as non-democratic, irrational and, most importantly, homogenised – grouping anarchists with terrorists, and direct action with violence. The focus on methods prevents a broader consideration of the ideas of radical politics in and of themselves. Moreover, these consequences are evident in the British and United States governments' approach to what they perceive as a growing problem of 'radicalisation'. The term, also used by academics in terrorism studies (see the new *International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence* at Kings College London), is used to refer to the journey individuals take from adopting radical ideas to involvement in extremism, in the form of violence or terrorism. Although both the Home Office (British) and Department of Homeland Security (US) are clear that they are principally concerned with terrorism and the use of political violence, their use of the term is still broad, vague, and value-laden. It determines radical as being external to government, illegal, dangerous, and ultimately prone to violence. Moreover,

accusations of radicalisation are targeted as much towards environmental, animal rights, and anti-capitalist groups, as they are towards Islamic terrorism<sup>1</sup>.

Rather than rely on such a limiting definition we should reclaim the term and instead consider radical politics through its constitution, contribution, and expression. If we do this then we can conceive of radical politics as being about negotiating some of the key contemporary political and social challenges of today. Valuing radical politics, rather than fearing it, we can see it as sites of creativity, practical attempts to improve society, and hope. We are able to move beyond circular debates about appropriate methods (or tactics) for change, and beyond ideological definitions which seek to draw boundaries outlining who is radical and who is 'not radical enough'; and so I wish to outline just some of the ways in which groups I have worked with, or been part of, have looked to the future and realised that we can change it. Although personally most interested in left-wing radical politics, my research has encompassed a broad range of groups from environmental, anti-capitalist, anti-war, peace, Islamic, and Indigenous movements.

---

<sup>1</sup> M. Townsend and N. Denning (2008) 'Police warn of growing threat from eco-terrorists' *The Observer*, 9 November, p.17

These movements have variously tackled seven key political tensions: (1) responding to issues as they are now, while simultaneously building alternatives; (2) balancing the need for knowledge with the need to take immediate action; (3) confronting difficult subjects; (4) working across scales; (5) determining the most appropriate forms of organisation; (6) dealing with political, social and cultural difference; and (7) celebrating success while also learning from failures. Importantly, unlike some other forms of politics which side-step tensions or claim they do not exist (such as David Cameron's assertion that class will soon become irrelevant), they tackle these. Radical politics continuously experiences and revisits these tensions, bringing particular solutions from which we can all learn.

### Prefigurative action

A key component of radical politics in Britain today is the quest to be prefigurative. That is to act now as we wish the world to be, or to 'be the change you want to see'. Examples include establishing new forms of independent media (such as Indymedia), social centres, and the use of open source software. Crucially it means not waiting for a revolution before we start to change, but seeking to build alternatives while simultaneously responding to political problems as they currently are. There is a tension here in priorities and tactical choices. Encapsulated in the recent slogan for

the Climate Change camp at Kingsnorth, Kent (August 2008) - 'Low-Impact Living, Real Solutions, High-Impact Direct Action' – it involves both being oppositional (direct action) and propositional (advocating low-impact living). It can involve objecting to government policies at the same time as working through governmental structures. For example, in recent years there has been a substantial growth in the number of Low Impact Developments across Britain: sites of experimentation in low impact living. A radical form of eco-housing and livelihood, these are residential communities which request formal planning permission when feasible, but in many other cases construct their dwellings anyway.

This attempt to advocate, and practise, solutions at the same time as disrupting, challenging and intervening in political debate is a particular strength of anti-capitalist and environmental radical politics. While it might appear that oppositional and propositional activism co-exists uneasily – activists having to work with, against, and separate from existing political structures simultaneously - prefigurative action reflects the messy reality we are in and the urgency of change.

## Balancing knowledge and action

A long-standing tension in radical politics is the need to take immediate action against the quest to understand better the situation we are in, often through improving our knowledge. It is important to know our history and to have the intellectual tools to know how we got to be in the state we are, but we have to do this without retreating to entrenched ideologies or a form of aloof and disengaged academia. In Britain, the frustration with the detachment of intellectuals from the passion and commitment necessary for radical politics, fed into approaches taken by groups like Earth First!, which advocated 'deeds not words', eschewing intellectual knowledge. But this prioritisation of direct action, and an anti-academic ethos, ultimately limited the groups' ability to broaden their appeal and make best use of knowledge available. In later campaigns, such as the Heathrow Camp for Climate Action (August 2007), work published in academic science journals was used to legitimise their direct action, signifying a more pragmatic balance between the need for knowledge and action.

### Working across scale

The scale at which we take action is important. Radical politics neither wants to be too small scale (thus being seen as local or parochial) but neither does it want to be too far removed from people's everyday struggles (by being too global in its

demands). The slogan ‘think globally act locally’ coined by David Brower (founder of Friends of the Earth) has become a mantra for many activists. It asserts that we need to have a global outlook but that our local actions will have an impact. It was inverted by some anti-capitalist activists - ‘think locally act globally’ – who argued that we should act at a global level (through, for example, internationally co-ordinated days of action) while understanding the implications of political issues locally (such as the impact of World Bank policies upon farmers).

Either way, radical politics accepts the ‘ties between local and global are ... varied, subtle and shifting.’<sup>2</sup>. But this acknowledgement does not resolve the dilemma and the pressures to work politically across scale. Networks such as People’s Global Action operate through global meetings, regional collectives, and new information and communication technologies (internet, email, mobile phones etc). Organised through a network of dispersed groups they link together what might otherwise be isolated local actions and project them into the international political arena. Radical politics might be able to ‘think globally’, looking beyond particular issues to their broader context, taking inspiration and ideas from other countries, and understanding distant others’ plights as part of our own (through solidarity

---

<sup>2</sup> S. Maddison and S. Scalmer (2006) *Activist wisdom: Practical knowledge and creative tension in social movements*. Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, p160.

networks). But ensuring small-scale actions have a broader impact is still much harder to do.

### Organising differently?

In recent years radical politics in Britain has been typified by the adoption of non-hierarchical models of organisation. That is the reliance upon networks, loosely formed groups without membership criteria, no designated leaders, no spokespeople, often no offices, and no funding. This is to ensure that anyone can participate, whilst developing forms of politics which positively encourage people to take an active role and personal responsibility for political issues.

These forms of participatory democracy have long been practised in social movements but this historical experience has not resolved its tensions. The 'Tyranny of structurelessness' written by Jo Freeman<sup>3</sup> identified a down-side to non-hierarchical 'informal' organising – it replaced leaders with friendship cliques who

---

<sup>3</sup> J. Freeman (1972) 'The Tyranny of Structurelessness' *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*, 17, pp. 151-165; p164.

made the key decisions – ‘control of the many by the few was not eliminated’.<sup>4</sup> In part this was because truly participatory organising involves endless meetings, and some anti-capitalist and environmental groups who have adopted this model complain of how long it takes to make a collective decision, especially by consensus (where as far as possible decisions are made only with the agreement of all present). Not that they have abandoned the approach, but instead tweaked it by using affinity groups (a small group which works closely together on a chosen task and makes independent decisions, but is based on mutual trust) and spokescouncils (the meeting point of all, or representatives of, many autonomous groups).

There are other consequences of adopting a non-hierarchical approach. The media like to talk to spokespeople and by not having any, groups have little coherence in the message the media receive. Sometimes it also serves radical politics to communicate with government; anti-war groups for example have sought direct input to political decisions, but the state has a very hierarchical view of politics and only wants to engage with leaders of groups whose structure they can understand.

---

<sup>4</sup> F. Polletta (2002) *Freedom is an endless meeting: Democracy in American social movements*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

## Difficult subjects

The most powerful of political campaigns often simplify their message to a simple notion (Obama's call for 'change' for example), eradicating the complex reality in a quest to reach a broad audience. In the process difficult subjects are overlooked or ignored. Radical politics acknowledges that we often need to confront these difficult subjects and 'question the boundaries of the political'.<sup>5</sup> in order to enable progressive change. These 'subjects' include those of gender, sexuality, religion, (dis)ability, and race. Such encounters can take us out of our comfort zones and experiences. They complicate what we think we know. The tension lies in the costs of dealing with these difficult subjects without complicating our messages. There is also a personal need in activism too - to be surrounded by supportive like-minded others in order to sustain ourselves emotionally.

The anti-war and peace movements in Britain began some of these difficult conversations in their broad alliance with many Muslims post 9/11. Overt religious identification has been rare in far-left politics - even the Christian roots of CND remain muted - and so understanding the place of Islam in anti-war activism has

---

<sup>5</sup> F. Polletta (2002) *Freedom is an endless meeting: Democracy in American social movements*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, p230.

provoked a range of reactions. At the very least the rising prominence of Muslim voices highlighted quite how homogenised the movements had become and quite how uncomfortable dealing with the combination of peace, gender, and religion made some people feel.

### Bridging difference

These difficult subjects are often key obstacles in the formation of alliances and coalitions between groups or movements. Academics continue to conceptualise social movements as a collection of separate issue-based networks (such as environmental, peace, Indigenous, or global justice movements) partly because working across these is practically and politically very difficult. Although many within these movements might agree in principal, disagreements quickly arise in political approaches, priorities, goals, tactics, ideologies, and histories.

Radical politics seeks to cross these boundaries. In Australia, environmental and Indigenous activists have tried to focus on their commonalities to find pragmatic solutions to the dilemmas of ensuring environmental protection while respecting Indigenous land rights and Indigenous practices. The complexities in bridging

differences are enormous, particularly given the ongoing racial marginalisation of Indigenous people. Moreover, it is often not the most radical groups who take these important steps to bridge difference. In Australia two traditional hierarchically-organised conservationist organisations (Australian Conservation Foundation and WWF) have had most success in gaining the trust of Indigenous activists, and have built long-term campaigns on these issues. Sometimes those we least expect to, do the most radical work.

### Constructive reflection and hope

Finally, radical politics relies upon constructive reflection – taking time to celebrate successes but also to reflect upon, understand and learn from failures. Knowing why something worked, and why something did not, is rarely as easy as it sounds. But anti-capitalist movements are adept at examining their strengths and weaknesses and include activists, such as Starhawk, who publish thoughtful pieces for and on the movement.

Nevertheless radical politics is an emotional journey. It incorporates dealing with difficult subjects across boundaries of difference in an era where they are marginalised by the state. Although much radical politics of today contains a hope for the future (evident in its prefigurative politics), and a vitality of continuous invention (always looking for new ways of doing things and using new technologies), it can be

a long slow journey to change. Hope is not always enough. Activists are increasingly aware of how important emotions are in sustaining a commitment to political activism<sup>6</sup>. Yet work is still to be done in convincing some that ensuring emotional sustainability is an important activity when there remains so much more obviously political work to be done.

Throughout these examples I have side-stepped often asked questions about radical politics – what has it changed? Did it work? What affect did it have? Although important, these questions can quickly take us back to the question of methods. What I have wanted to show instead is that, as important as questions of tactics and strategies are, we need to take a broader (and longer-term) perspective of radical politics. If we judge radical politics simply by particular markers of political achievement we do it an injustice. We could take some examples of change as evidence of success (such as the curtailment of the road building programme in Britain in the late 1990s after widespread direct action), but we quickly become embroiled in debates as to the scale and pace of change achieved. Although it is possible to do this we then miss much of what radical politics actually contributes. It is in its ideas, creativity, shift of focus, and how through what might appear to be mundane practices (endless meetings, careful negotiations across difference,

---

<sup>6</sup> R. Solnit (2005) *Hope in the Dark: The untold story of people power*, Edinburgh, New York: Canongate.

improving our knowledge) that change is effected, even if this change remains hard to measure.

What we must do is reclaim radical politics from the academic and government definitions. As we do this it becomes clear that it is for all of us to own, all of us to change, and there is no time like the present; 'there is a time and place in the ceaseless human endeavour to change the world, when alternative visions, no matter how fantastic, provide the grist for shaping powerful political forces for change. I believe we are precisely at such a moment.'<sup>7</sup>.

Most importantly, radical politics asks difficult questions and cannot always provide the answers. It is disruptive, oppositional, and challenging. We need all of these things to enable progressive change. As radical politics has tackled the tensions discussed above, it has done so not in the search for a unified solution but with the knowledge that disagreement is important, powerful, and necessary. Just as it evokes hope that things can change, it does so critically. It is not a political party calling for supporters (as with Obama's 'change' campaign), or an ideology searching for followers. Radical politics is unruly, difficult, uncontrollable, and urgent. The time is now, as ever, for radical politics.

---

<sup>7</sup> D. Harvey (2000) *Spaces of hope*. Berkeley: University of California Press, p195.

*Jenny Pickerill is a Senior Lecturer in Human Geography at the University of Leicester. She is interested in how collective action, participation, spaces for dialogue, autonomy and anarchism can create pathways towards environmental and social justice.*