

Assemblies for Democracy: A Theoretical Framework

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General elections are top-down events: attention focuses on political parties and their leaders. Personalities and success or failure move centre-stage. Policies get a mention, but are assessed like moves in a game of chess.

Can this top-down perspective be reversed?

Can a form of politics be found which retains a grassroots or 'bottom-up' emphasis?

In these notes, we attempt to do two things. We explain why, in our view, this question is important. And we explore challenges that a grassroots politics must face.

I

Why does it matter whether politics has a grassroots centre of gravity and emphasis?

Our discussion starts from an example. During the election, we watched televised debates amongst political leaders. Then we watched news programmes where leaders' debates were assessed. While we watched, we debated nothing – but we internalised a social message.

We learned that politics is an activity carried out by other people.

Grassroots politics is different. It is an attempt to “occupy” democracy. It unlearns the

lesson that televised debates teach. Why is this *unlearning* important? Why should politics have a 'bottom-up' emphasis? Such questions can be addressed in one of two ways.

They can be addressed as *tactical* questions, as when someone maintains: "Grassroots struggle is the most effective means of bringing about such-and-such a result". Or they can be addressed as questions where issues of *principle* are at stake. Grassroots struggle can be viewed as something intrinsically valuable (or as opening out on to something that is valuable for its own sake). The second approach – the "principled" rather than the "tactical" approach – is the one that we follow here.

We launch our argument with an uncontroversial statement. For the radical left, politics is struggle – and this struggle is for emancipation. Everything that we do has a fundamental purpose or aim: it is to bring *emancipatory social relations* into being.

No doubt, *emancipation* can be understood in different ways. But a generalisation can be offered. The radical left has rightly seen emancipation in *interactive* terms. It has claimed or, at least, it has assumed that *emancipation exists in and through interaction*. It sees emancipation as something which exists on an interactive terrain.

What do we mean by 'interaction'? Our term refers to something deeply familiar. When we interact with other people, we pay attention to them and feel curious about them and listen to what they say. We learn from them – as they do from us. We regard ourselves as free *in and through* other human beings, our horizons expanding as interactions unfold.

When we say that emancipation *exists in and through interaction*, our claim may (at first) have a forbiddingly "philosophical" ring. But all that we are doing is repeating a well-known idea.

The next step in our argument is where controversy begins. Interaction (as we understand the term) can take a number of forms. At one extreme, there is interaction that is equal and open and unconstrained: when we refer to a situation where individuals are free *in and through* each other, it is this form of interaction that we have in mind. At the other extreme, there is interaction that is *formal* and *rule-bound* and *designed to serve merely pragmatic aims*: interaction of this sort goes forward in social institutions (such as offices or schools or political parties). In present-day societies, *institutional* interaction is, sadly, widespread.

Our suggestion is that the two forms of *interaction* just mentioned are fundamentally different. Interaction that is equal and open and unconstrained *is more truly interaction* than interaction of a formal or rule-bound or merely pragmatic sort. Formal or rule-bound or merely institutional interaction is, indeed, interaction – but it is interaction in a secondary or indirect way. It is *alienated* interaction. It is interaction that takes a contradictory form.

What allows us to say that one form of interaction *is more truly interaction* than another? It is that interaction contains its own dynamic. When this dynamic is unconstrained, interaction flourishes. When this dynamic is made to flow in prescribed channels, as is the case when it is restricted by pre-given rules, interaction is distorted – and becomes alienated or contradicted. An analogy may be drawn with conversation: a “good” discussion follows its subject-matter wherever it leads. It *gives its law to itself*. So it is, we suggest, with interaction. Interaction *which is truly interaction* has an unstructured character. That is to say, it is not confined to previously-established channels. It decides on its own patterns and consults only itself.

At this point, we put the parts of our argument together. Emancipation is (we have suggested) fundamental to the radical left. It is through *interaction* that emancipation exists. For interaction to be “true” or “non-alienated”, it must be unstructured – in the sense that we have explained. A radical politics which fails to promote true or non-alienated interaction is a radical politics that has lost its way.

Grassroots politics makes interaction its centre of gravity. It focuses on interaction of an unstructured sort. *For this reason*, the issue of grassroots (or ‘bottom up’) politics is important. And there is more to say.

Our “more” turns on a general observation: throughout history, something resembling an iron law has prevailed. The law states that *social institutions generate further institutions*. What social institutions *never* generate (or *almost never* generate) is a situation where interaction is unstructured, and is the order of the day. This being so, grassroots freedom cannot be treated as, merely, a remote prospect. It cannot see itself as unrealistic in the present – and as something which may yet, by instrumental methods, be attained.

Our “iron law” has a political consequence. It is that a *postponed freedom* is one which trickles into nothing. An *interactive* freedom sought by *instrumental* methods is, from its beginning, a lost cause. If grassroots politics is serious about its future, it must start as it means to go on.

Phrasing this point differently, we may say: grassroots politics must have a *prefigurative* edge. It must anticipate the world which it desires, and act as though emancipatory social relations obtained. It must set aside present-day alienations, and assume that [mutual recognition](#) is in our reach.

The project of renewing grassroots politics is not merely important. It is the most fundamental challenge that radicalism has faced.

II

What challenges does a grassroots politics confront?

Present-day institutional politics is in crisis. At the heart of this crisis lies a contradiction between *political content* and *political form*. At the level of *content*, politics today has neoliberal and capitalist coordinates: throughout the world, political establishments struggle to defend markets and keep capitalist development on course. But this struggle cannot be openly acknowledged. As a result, states downplay questions of content and turn to a politics of empty and trivialising form.

In states such as the UK, an authoritarian and hierarchical élite is dominant – in both an economic and a political sense. The capitalist marketplace, with makes everything for sale, including basic social infrastructure, achieves the opposite of a construct for the common good. Instead, it [alienates](#). It focuses on the dictates of the market. In the UK, democracy is emptied of its content. Politics is trivialised and formal questions are moved centre-stage.

To say that capitalism is inherently opposed to democratic relations is to say nothing new. And, of course, capitalist ideology encounters a range of social and infrastructural constraints. Here, we do not attempt to be comprehensive. We focus, instead, on what may be called *procedural* requirements. That is, we concentrate on democracy itself. We maintain that voting (of the sort in the General Election) is one of democracy's *least* essential features. More important is interaction of a non-hierarchical – a “horizontal” – sort. For full democracy to be present, horizontality is required. In championing horizontality, Assemblies for Democracy (together with other progressive political movements) address an issue of a vital kind.

Regarding horizontal politics, two points strike us as important.

The first is that, where horizontality is in operation, democracy is no longer merely formal. In and through a horizontal discussion, fundamental social questions are raised. Democracy acquires its content. A horizontalist critique is valuable in a number of ways. It allows us to identify what is absent or missing in our lives. And it helps us to assess radical grassroots movements.

The second is, we think, no less important. Grassroots politics must be politics of a *prefigurative* kind. (We have introduced the idea of *prefiguration* earlier – but we return to it here, owing to its importance.) Grassroots politics must not only aim beyond the capitalist present; it must live and organise as though a world beyond capitalism exists. It must anticipate the future in the present. This is, we think, why horizontal democracy is important: horizontality is where, in grassroots movements,

patterns or organisation and images of the future meet. Grassroots politics not merely *aims at*, but *is*, mutual recognition.

At this point, we stand back. There is (let us acknowledge) no single form which grassroots politics must take. But there are very general characteristics – so to say, guiding principles – that we can discern amongst progressive grassroots movements.

Such movements display both diversity and common features. Their many-sidedness is, we think, part of their strength.

To make this point differently: it is difficult to say what final forms (if any) a post-capitalist society might take. Questions of structure, of organisation and of political economy cannot be decided in advance. For this reason, we find people across the world experimenting with different organisational forms and with conceptions of democracy. In time, the knowledge thus gained inspires new concepts and ideas, new measures of retrieval and new forms of advancement. In this way, global transition toward an emancipatory social reality may come about.

We can see this transformative process unfolding in certain parts of the world. In the global context, what is common amongst many progressive democratic movements is not only a shared emphasis on direct (participatory) democracy and horizontality. The deeper connection is an underlying dynamic of mutual recognition – understanding mutual recognition in an egalitarian and emancipatory sense. Positioned against the hierarchical, undemocratic and one-way relations of power that characterise the capitalist world, the mutually recognitive interaction of grassroots politics opens on to a landscape that is inclusive and participatory. Through participatory public engagement, [commonising](#) can emerge.

This said, questions about whether a revolutionary process needs guidance remain. We raise the question: what sort of guidance might this be? Guidance by a political party (be it a Leninist or a social democratic party) is a non-starter: guidance of this sort would perpetuate the institutional and corporate world. A different sort of guidance is called for. Revolution is not only a many-sided process of transition and development; it is also a collective process of healing and of deep psychological (emotional and relational) reconciliation. The basic constituents of actual democracy have a healing implication. These “guideposts” can provide us with critical direction where grassroots praxis and self-education are concerned. They can guide and interrelate practice in all the diverse sites of resistance and transformation – from medicine to education, from agriculture to technology, from science to psychology, and so on.

The example of certain progressive democratic schools and movements in Europe illustrates the participatory politics that we have in mind. When a problematic situation arises, an overall social philosophy is in place – one which ensures that basic organisational practice remains horizontal. Mutually recognitive and democratic

practices are retained.

Examples of such movements include Occupy-style initiatives, 15m, the movement of the squares, the Indignados – and so on. All illustrate dimensions of radically democratic, participatory politics. However, a point worth making here is that grassroots politics need not take the form of a mass demonstration – or be explicitly political. Grassroots politics can also take less obvious and less directly political forms. Alternative education (as in Summerhill, the Alpha Project for homeless people or the Social Science Centre, Lincoln), basic community projects such as community-based agriculture or energy initiatives, emancipatory constructs regarding the re-organisation of media and communication and, even, technology-focused initiatives – all of these may have an emancipatory grassroots logic.

Grassroots politics as we have described it can exist in diverse parts or sites of society. That this is so lends greater strength to a grassroots form of politics. Working toward transformations within the current structure – that is, working *in* and *against* and *beyond* current practices – means that we see change as resulting from a plurality of sources. We acknowledge the countless projects and initiatives and movements which struggle for ‘differential transformation’ (to use [Lambert Zuidervaart's phrase](#)). Such a view allows us to adopt a broad perspective across disciplines and social spheres. It prefigures an alternative world. It envisages a revolutionary transformation that is integral and many-sided.

David Sherman once said whilst discussing Adorno that you can't be rid of capitalism's coercive legacy overnight. We agree. This legacy of coercion is, for us, one more reason why prefigurative grassroots politics is essential to revolutionary change. Such a politics is the heart, or spirit, of a process of collective social healing and de-alienation.

III

How might Assemblies for Democracy proceed? We offer nothing like a constitution – but merely guidelines and general ideas. The preceding discussion has focused on *interaction* and *horizontality*. If grassroots democracy is to be sustained, its centre of gravity must be interaction of an open and unstructured sort. This, we have suggested, can best express itself in ‘horizontal’ terms.

In many social movements across the world, interaction and horizontality have become common sense. This has been so with Occupy and the Indignados – and the countless movements which have followed in their wake. A wider ‘Movement of the Squares’ is often spoken of today: it is a broad church of individuals and groups who interact in a horizontalist way.

In addition, there are numerous social movements which, though they do not always display horizontality, nevertheless share a common (if sometimes unacknowledged) antipathy to corporate and neoliberal imperatives: the Green movement (including anti-fracking campaigns), the anti-nuclear movement, movements for social justice, the Radical Independence Campaign in Scotland, groups which strive to preserve and extend the ‘commons’ (including the ‘digital commons’), the ‘pirate’ and anti-copyright movements, campaigns against surveillance, the anti-austerity movement (including ‘UKUncut’), the debt jubilee movement, campaigns against gentrification and homelessness, groups pushing for land reform (especially in Scotland). The list goes on. Each of these are potential partners (indeed practitioners) of an assembly-based democracy.

On what basis might such partnership rest? Our answer is, unsurprisingly, that it must rest on the principles set out above: interaction of a non-institutional kind.

Any democracy which takes *assemblies* rather than *parliaments* as its political basis needs to avoid the temptations of being drawn into the orbit of the latter. It needs to avoid the temptation of trading consensus decision-making for majority rule and representation, trading unstructured interaction for participation that is merely occasional – and structured, and role-defined. Assembly-based democracy must avoid thinking of *sovereignty* as something which professional politicians and parties grant. It needs, in short, to resist the lure of the old politics, with all its hierarchies and top-down structures of power.

We reiterate our point: the centre of gravity of a radical politics can only be *interaction*, interaction of a mutually recognitive sort.

Is this too stringent, too purist or ‘puritan’ a demand? Are we asking for ‘beautiful souls’, as the philosopher Hegel called them? We acknowledge the force of the criticism but deny that this is the case. It is true that involvement in traditional, institutional politics is sometimes unavoidable – in the present-day world. For example, the best way of resisting a particular piece of legislation may be to place legal obstacles in its way. Even the meagre opportunities for participation offered by the present order may, sometimes, be our only option. And this is to be expected. In a reified society, political issues will present themselves in a reified and mystifying way. In such a society, contradictory actions are inescapable; one cannot act and avoid getting ‘dirty hands’.

But, unless the assembly-form of grassroots politics remains the centre of gravity, democracy risks being eroded. Interaction becomes institutionalised. Grassroots politics becomes co-opted by state-oriented political parties. Hierarchy and the old order affirm themselves once again.

Other difficulties with our claims may be raised. One must consider, for instance,

whether assemblies can operate at anything more than a local level. Can they cope with “large-scale” issues, e.g. international problems such as poverty, refugees and climate change? What relationship should operate between assemblies? Should activists elect representatives to a congress or confederation? Does a ‘delegate’ system avoid the problems with representatives? Is leadership and hierarchy inevitable at a national or international scale?

We do not attempt to answer these questions here. Instead, we point a reader towards [responses](#) we have given [elsewhere](#). From what has been said in the present article, the essence of our response will be clear: any answer to these questions must acknowledge unstructured and horizontal interaction as emancipation's core.

In closing, we reiterate that grassroots politics is many-sided. What we have said is intended as a guiding principle which may connect diverse social movements and aims. We end by underlining the necessarily experimental nature of any assembly-based democracy. Because the content of politics is at issue in the conversations which an assembly nurtures, nothing can be foreseen or determined in advance. At heart, an assembly must be a prefiguration: it must anticipate the emancipated society towards which it aims. An emancipated society is an experiment in the democratic and liberated existence that it struggles to bring into life.