

INVENTING THE FUTURE

Postcapitalism and a World Without Work

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Chapter 1

Our Political Common Sense: Introducing Folk Politics

The next move was ours, and we just stood there, waiting for something to happen, like good conscientious objectors awaiting our punishment after our purely symbolic point had been made.

Dave Mitchell

Today it appears that the greatest amount of effort is needed to achieve the smallest degree of change. Millions march against the Iraq War, yet it goes ahead as planned. Hundreds of thousands protest austerity, but unprecedented budget cuts continue. Repeated student protests, occupations and riots struggle against rises in tuition fees, but they continue their inexorable advance. Around the world, people set up protest camps and mobilise against economic inequality, but the gap between the rich and the poor keeps growing. From the alter-globalisation struggles of the late 1990s, through the anti-war and ecological coalitions of the early 2000s, and into the new student uprisings and Occupy movements since 2008, a common pattern emerges: resistance struggles rise rapidly, mobilise increasingly large numbers of people, and yet fade away only to be replaced by a renewed sense of apathy, melancholy and defeat. Despite the desires of millions for a better world, the effects of these movements prove minimal.

A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO THE PROTEST

Failure permeates this cycle of struggles, and as a result, many of the tactics on the contemporary left have taken on a ritualistic nature, laden with a heavy dose of fatalism. The dominant tactics – protesting, marching, occupying, and various other forms of direct action – have become part of a well-established narrative, with the people and the police each playing their assigned roles. The limits of these actions are particularly visible in those brief moments when the script changes. As one activist puts it, of a protest at the 2001 Summit of the Americas:

On April 20, the first day of the demonstrations, we marched in our thousands towards the fence, behind which 34 heads of state had gathered to hammer out a hemispheric trade deal. Under a hail of catapult-launched teddy bears, activists dressed in black quickly removed the fence's supports with bolt-cutters and pulled it down with grapples as onlookers cheered them on. For a brief moment, nothing stood between us and the convention centre. We scrambled atop the toppled fence, but for the most part we went no further, as if our intention all along had been simply to replace the state's chain-link and concrete barrier with a human one of our own making.¹

We see here the symbolic and ritualistic nature of the actions, combined with the thrill of having done *something* – but with a deep uncertainty that appears at the first break with the expected narrative. The role of dutiful protestor had given these activists no indication of what to do when the barriers fell. Spectacular political confrontations like the Stop the War marches, the now-familiar melees against the G20 or World Trade Organization and the rousing scenes of democracy in Occupy Wall Street all give the appearance of being highly significant, as if something were genuinely at stake.² Yet nothing changed, and long-term victories were traded for a simple registration of discontent.

To outside observers, it is often not even clear what the movements want, beyond expressing a generalised discontent with the world. The contemporary protest has become a melange of wild and varied demands. The 2009 G20 summit in London, for instance, featured protestors marching for issues

that spanned from grandiose anti-capitalist stipulations to modest goals centred on more local issues. When demands can be discerned at all, they usually fail to articulate anything substantial. They are often nothing more than empty slogans – as meaningful as calling for world peace. In more recent struggles, the very idea of making demands has been questioned. The Occupy movement famously struggled to articulate meaningful goals, worried that anything too substantial would be divisive.³ And a broad range of student occupations across the Western world has taken up the mantra of 'no demands' under the misguided belief that demanding nothing is a radical act.⁴

When asked what the ultimate upshot of these actions has been, participants differ between admitting to a general sense of futility and pointing to the radicalisation of those who took part. If we look at protests today as an exercise in public awareness, they appear to have had mixed success at best. Their messages are mangled by an unsympathetic media smitten by images of property destruction – assuming that the media even acknowledges a form of contention that has become increasingly repetitive and boring. Some argue that, rather than trying to achieve a certain end, these movements, protests and occupations in fact exist only for their own sake.⁵ The aim in this case is to achieve a certain transformation of the participants, and create a space outside of the usual operations of power. While there is a degree of truth to this, things like protest camps tend to remain ephemeral, small-scale and ultimately unable to challenge the larger structures of the neoliberal economic system. This is politics transmuted into pastime – politics-as-drug-experience, perhaps – rather than anything capable of transforming society. Such protests are registered only in the minds of their participants, bypassing any transformation of social structures. While these efforts at radicalisation and awareness-raising are undoubtedly important to some degree, there still remains the question of exactly *when* these sequences might pay off. Is there a point at which a critical mass of consciousness-raising will be ready for action? Protests can build connections, encourage hope and remind people of their power. Yet, beyond these transient feelings, politics still demands the exercise of that power, lest these affective bonds go to waste. If we will not act after one of the largest crises of capitalism, then when?

The emphasis on the affective aspects of protests plays into a broader trend that has come to privilege the affective as the site of real politics. Bodily,

* emotional and visceral elements come to replace and stymie (rather than complement and enhance) more abstract analysis. The contemporary landscape of social media, for example, is littered with the bitter fallout from an endless torrent of outrage and anger. Given the individualism of current social media platforms – premised on the maintenance of an online identity – it is perhaps no surprise to see online ‘politics’ tend towards the self-presentation of moral purity. We are more concerned to appear right than to think about the conditions of political change. Yet these daily outrages pass as rapidly as they emerge, and we are soon on to the next vitriolic crusade. In other places, public demonstrations of empathy with those suffering replace more finely tuned analysis, resulting in hasty or misplaced action – or none at all. While politics always has a relationship to emotion and sensation (to hope or anger, fear or outrage), when taken as the primary mode of politics, these impulses can lead to deeply perverse results. In a famous example, 1985’s Live Aid raised huge amounts of money for famine relief through a combination of heartstring-tugging imagery and emotionally manipulative celebrity-led events. The sense of emergency demanded urgent action, at the expense of thought. Yet the money raised actually extended the civil war causing the famine, by allowing rebel militias to use the food aid to support themselves.⁶ While viewers at home felt comforted they were doing something rather than nothing, a dispassionate analysis revealed that they had in fact contributed to the problem. These unintended outcomes become even more pervasive as the targets of action grow larger and more abstract. If politics without passion leads to cold-hearted, bureaucratic technocracy, then passion bereft of analysis risks becoming a libidinally driven surrogate for effective action. Politics comes to be about feelings of personal empowerment, masking an absence of strategic gains.

Perhaps most depressing, even when movements have some successes, they are in the context of overwhelming losses. Residents across the UK, for example, have successfully mobilised in particular cases to stop the closure of local hospitals. Yet these real successes are overwhelmed by larger plans to gut and privatise the National Health Service. Similarly, recent anti-fracking movements have been able to stop test drilling in various localities – but governments nevertheless continue to search for shale gas resources and provide support for companies to do so.⁷ In the United States, various movements to stop evictions in the wake of the housing crisis have made real gains

in terms of keeping people in their homes.⁸ Yet the perpetrators of the subprime mortgage debacle continue to reap the profits, waves of foreclosures continue to sweep across the country, and rents continue to surge across the urban world. Small successes – useful, no doubt, for instilling a sense of hope – nevertheless wither in the face of overwhelming losses. Even the most optimistic activist falters in the face of struggles that continue to fail. In other cases, well-intentioned projects like Rolling Jubilee strive to escape the spell of neoliberal common sense.⁹ The ostensibly radical aim of crowdsourcing money to pay the debts of the underprivileged means buying into a system of voluntary charity and redistribution, as well as accepting the legitimacy of the debt in the first place. In this respect, the initiative is one among a larger group of projects that act simply as crisis responses to the faltering of state services. These are survival mechanisms, not a desirable vision for the future. *

What can we conclude from all of this? The recent cycle of struggles has to be identified as one of overarching failure, despite a multitude of small-scale successes and moments of large-scale mobilisation. The question that any analysis of the left today must grapple with is simply: What has gone wrong? It is undeniable that heightened repression by states and the increased power of corporations have played a significant role in weakening the power of the left. Still, it remains debatable whether the repression faced by workers, the precarity of the masses and the power of capitalists is any greater than it was in the late nineteenth century. Workers then were still struggling for basic rights, often against states more than willing to use lethal violence against them.¹⁰ But whereas that period saw mass mobilisation, general strikes, militant labour and radical women’s organisations all achieving real and lasting successes, today is defined by their absence. The recent weakness of the left cannot simply be chalked up to increased state and capitalist repression: an honest reckoning must accept that problems also lie *within* the left. One key problem is a widespread and uncritical acceptance of what we call ‘folk-political’ thinking.

DEFINING FOLK POLITICS

What is folk politics? Folk politics names a constellation of ideas and intuitions within the contemporary left that informs the common-sense ways of organising, acting and thinking politics. It is a set of strategic assumptions that

threatens to debilitate the left, rendering it unable to scale up, create lasting change or expand beyond particular interests. Leftist movements under the sway of folk politics are not only unlikely to be successful – they are in fact incapable of transforming capitalism. The term itself draws upon two senses of ‘folk’. First, it evokes critiques of folk psychology which argue that our intuitive conceptions of the world are both historically constructed and often mistaken.¹¹ Secondly, it refers to ‘folk’ as the locus of the small-scale, the authentic, the traditional and the natural. Both of these dimensions are implied in the idea of folk politics.

As a first approximation, we can therefore define folk politics as a collective and historically constructed political common sense that has become out of joint with the actual mechanisms of power. As our political, economic, social and technological world changes, tactics and strategies which were previously capable of transforming collective power into emancipatory gains have now become drained of their effectiveness. As the common sense of today’s left, folk politics often operates intuitively, uncritically and unconsciously. Yet common sense is also historical and mutable. It is worth recalling that today’s familiar forms of organisation and tactics, far from being natural or pre-given, have instead been developed over time in response to specific political problems. Petitions, occupations, strikes, vanguard parties, affinity groups, trade unions: all arose out of particular historical conditions.¹² Yet the fact that certain ways of organising and acting were once useful does not guarantee their continued relevance. Many of the tactics and organisational structures that dominate the contemporary left are responses to the experience of state communism, exclusionary trade unions, and the collapse of social democratic parties. Yet the ideas that made sense in the wake of those moments no longer present effective tools for political transformation. Our world has moved on, becoming more complex, abstract, nonlinear and global than ever before.

Against the abstraction and inhumanity of capitalism, folk politics aims to bring politics down to the ‘human scale’ by emphasising temporal, spatial and conceptual immediacy. At its heart, folk politics is the guiding intuition that immediacy is always better and often more authentic, with the corollary being a deep suspicion of abstraction and mediation. In terms of temporal immediacy, contemporary folk politics typically remains reactive (responding to actions initiated by corporations and governments, rather than initiating

actions);¹³ ignores long-term strategic goals in favour of tactics (mobilising around single-issue politics or emphasising process);¹⁴ prefers practices that are often inherently fleeting (such as occupations and temporary autonomous zones);¹⁵ chooses the familiarities of the past over the unknowns of the future (for instance, the repeated dreams of a return to ‘good’ Keynesian capitalism);¹⁶ and expresses itself as a predilection for the voluntarist and spontaneous over the institutional (as in the romanticisation of rioting and insurrection).¹⁷

In terms of spatial immediacy, folk politics privileges the local as the site of authenticity (as in the 100-miles diet or local currencies);¹⁸ habitually chooses the small over the large (as in the veneration of small-scale communities or local businesses);¹⁹ favours projects that are un-scalable beyond a small community (for instance, general assemblies and direct democracy);²⁰ and often rejects the project of hegemony, valuing withdrawal or exit rather than building a broad counter-hegemony.²¹ Likewise, folk politics prefers that actions be taken by participants themselves – in its emphasis on direct action, for example – and sees decision-making as something to be carried out by each individual rather than by any representative. The problems of scale and extension are either ignored or smoothed over in folk-political thinking.

Finally, in terms of conceptual immediacy, there is a preference for the everyday over the structural, valorising personal experience over systematic thinking; for feeling over thinking, emphasising individual suffering, or the sensations of enthusiasm and anger experienced during political actions; for the particular over the universal, seeing the latter as intrinsically totalitarian; and for the ethical over the political – as in ethical consumerism, or moralising critiques of greedy bankers.²² Organisations and communities are to be transparent, rejecting in advance any conceptual mediation, or even modest amounts of complexity. The classic images of universal emancipation and global change have been transformed into a prioritisation of the suffering of the particular and the authenticity of the local. As a result, any process of constructing a universal politics is rejected from the outset.

Understood in these ways, we can detect traces of folk politics in organisations and movements like Occupy, Spain’s 15M, student occupations, left communist insurrectionists like Tiqqun and the Invisible Committee, most forms of horizontalism, the Zapatistas, and contemporary anarchist-tinged politics, as well as a variety of other trends like political localism, the

slow-food movement, and ethical consumerism, among many others. But no single position embodies all of these dispositions, which leads us to a first qualification: as an uncritical and often unconscious common sense, folk politics comes to be instantiated to varying degrees in concrete political positions. That is to say, folk politics does not name an explicit position, but only an implicit tendency. The ideas that characterise this tendency are widely dispersed throughout the contemporary left, but some positions are more folk-political than others. This brings us to a second important qualification: the problem with folk politics is not that it starts from the local; all politics begins from the local. The problem is rather that folk-political thinking is content to remain at (and even privileges) that level – of the transient, the small-scale, the unmediated and the particular. It takes these to be sufficient rather than simply necessary moments. Therefore, the point is not simply to reject folk politics. Folk politics is a necessary component of any successful political project, but it can only be a starting point. A third qualification is that folk politics is only a problem for particular types of projects: those that seek to move beyond capitalism. Folk-political thinking can be perfectly well adapted to other political projects: projects aimed solely at resistance, movements organised around local issues, and small-scale projects. Political movements based around keeping a hospital open or preventing evictions are all admirable, but they are importantly different from movements trying to challenge neoliberal capitalism. The idea that one organisation, tactic or strategy applies equally well to any sort of struggle is one of the most pervasive and damaging beliefs among today's left. Strategic reflection – on means and ends, enemies and allies – is necessary before approaching any political project. Given the nature of global capitalism, any postcapitalist project will require an ambitious, abstract, mediated, complex and global approach – one that folk-political approaches are incapable of providing.

Combining these qualifications, we can therefore say that folk politics is necessary but insufficient for a postcapitalist political project. By emphasising and remaining at the level of the immediate, folk politics lacks the tools to transform neoliberalism into something else. While folk politics can undoubtedly make important interventions in local struggles, we deceive ourselves when we think these are turning the tide against global capitalism. They represent, at best, temporary respite against its onslaught. The project of this book is to begin outlining an alternative – a way for the left to navigate from

the local to the global, and synthesise the particular with the universal. Such an alternative cannot simply be a conservative reversion to the working-class politics of the last century. It must instead combine an updated way of *thinking* politics (a shift from immediacy to structural analysis) with an upgraded means of *doing* politics (which directs action towards building platforms and expanding scales).

OVERWHELMED

Why did folk politics arise in the first place? Why is it that folk political tendencies, for all their manifest flaws, are so seductive and appealing to the movements of today? At least three answers present themselves. The first explanation is to see folk politics as a response to the problem of how to interpret and act within an ever more complex world. The second, related explanation involves situating folk politics as a reaction to the historical experiences of the communist and social democratic left. Finally, folk politics is a more immediate response to the empty spectacle of contemporary party politics.

Increasingly, multipolar global politics, economic instability, and anthropogenic climate change outpace the narratives we use to structure and make sense of our lives. Each of these is an example of what is termed a *complex system*, which features nonlinear dynamics, where marginally different inputs can cause dramatically divergent outputs, intricate sets of causes feedback on one another in unexpected ways, and which characteristically operates on scales of space and time that go far beyond any individual's unaided perception.²³ Globalisation, international politics, and climate change: each of these systems shapes our world, but their effects are so extensive and complicated that it is difficult to place our own experience within them. The global economy is a good example of this. In simple terms, the economy is not an object amenable to direct perception; it is distributed across time and space (you will never meet 'the economy' in person); it incorporates a wide array of elements, from property laws to biological needs, natural resources to technological infrastructures, market stalls and supercomputers; and it involves an enormous and intricately interacting set of feedback loops, all of which produce emergent effects that are irreducible to its individual components.²⁴ In other words, the interaction of an economy's parts produces effects that cannot be understood just by knowing