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What *is* Radical Politics Today?

Jonathan Pugh

A crisis makes you rethink your life. The recent economic crisis is no exception. All of us are now thinking how our lives could be run differently. This recession seems to be giving more cause for reflection than most – not only about how the economy is managed, but also about the environment and society more generally. Neo-liberalism has governed our lives for nearly thirty years. Many feel that its Right-wing ethos of deregulation, privatisation and liberation of corporate power has not only failed the world's financial systems, but more fundamentally degraded the environment and the social fabric of life. Despite all the expert predictions, history did not in fact end in 1989 with the triumph of neo-liberalism.

While there is much to despair at in our current situation, there is also an underlying sense of anticipation – change is coming. Specific events are certainly contributing to this mood: not only the collapse of the global financial systems, but the mobilisation of people in protests on ever larger scales, the symbolic and historic election of Barack Obama, the end of the George W. Bush presidency, changing international relations with the Middle East and Asia, the rising power of China and some countries in Latin America, to name just a few.

Before we get too excited though, the 'revolution' is not coming anytime soon. No grand alternative ideology or movement of the masses is waiting in the wings, ready to seize the opportunity. This leads to the obvious question of this book: What *is* radical politics today? What is the spirit and nature of radical politics in our times? For this particular book, what *is* Left-wing and progressive radical politics? Where they once offered the grand ideology of socialism, what do they offer now? This book is a broad survey, a step into the character of radical politics today.

Let's start this survey with a general definition: What constitutes a 'radical politics'? The term was originally coined to describe a politics which gets to the roots of a problem. The Latin noun 'radix' means 'root'. But radical politics not only gets to the roots of a problem. If it is effective, it also turns over, or 'roots out', and redefines how society functions. This of course does not have to mean revolution, in the sense of a communist or Islamic state revolution for example. It does not mean that radical politics is confined to particular causes or issues. To take just a few examples, in our definition of 'radical politics' we could include the radical impact of feminism, modernism, Islam, mass education and health care, Christianity, neo-conservatism, the Chinese model, feudalism, Right- or Left-wing radicals. All have caused radical changes in society.

We look to radical politics to provide an alternative view of the world, when that world is in trouble. Indeed, if we remember, neo-liberal capitalism was once a radical alternative to the problems of nearly forty years ago. The 1970s were defined by inflation, increased accumulation of capital, unemployment and a variety of fiscal crises. Neo-liberalism beat the other main radical contender at the time, socialism, in apparently getting to the root of the problem, overturning it, and redefining how society functions. Neo-liberal capitalism was developed by leaders like Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher and a network of powerful international institutions, such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. Often called the 'American Model', low wages and high inequality are not central concerns for this system, whose primary function is the liberation of corporate power. Neo-liberalism and free market forces became the organising framework for society; from the deregulation of finance, to privatisation of health care and educational systems. By the mid-1980s it was no longer radical, but the accepted norm.

I believe that the end of this decade will be singled out by historians as a defining moment in radical politics. We will talk of 'post-2009' in times to come, but not because there has been a 'grand radical moment'. This moment is significant precisely because people will look back and ask: what *was* radical politics then? Given the lack of a clear alternative to neo-liberalism when the financial crisis and recession hit, historians will pay great attention to the spirit, disposition and temperament of radical politics in our times. They will consider such prominent examples as today's anti-globalisation movements, anti-capitalists and environmentalists. Historians will explore the character of radical neo-conservatism, the Chinese model and radical Islam. They will examine the spirit of the anti-war protests, peace and justice organisations. They will interrogate the radical impact of multiculturalism, identity politics

and non-governmental development agencies, as the fortunes of these ways of doing politics rise and fall.

But we should not wait for historians. We should begin this survey now. In the crucial years of a crisis which has affected the lives of so many people, it is important to understand the nature of radical politics, today.

The first major challenge we encounter in our survey has already been implied. There are apparently many ways of being radical today. Some argue that this is the weakness of contemporary radical politics. It has split into too many different factions, or is dominated by people who are disconnected from the rest of society. Here the examples of creative artists, suicide bombers, anti-capitalists, tree-huggers and anarchists, incapable of mobilising under a single banner, are often used as illustrations. But so are the small group of out-of-touch elites who ran Bush's radical neo-conservative agenda, or the dictators of the Chinese or Islamic state projects. In short, many think radical politics today does not have support from broad sections of society.

Others say that this fragmentation is the strength of radical politics. It provides an opportunity for different groups to challenge the status quo – those environmentalists, feminists, peace movements, for example, which are slowly chipping away at specific injustices. Moreover, many also argue that grand visions of society – like socialism, neo-liberalism or the Islamic state – oppress those who don't believe in them, as much as they support those who do. A grand alternative is therefore not the answer at this time of crisis. In today's diverse cultures, many believe it is better to deal with injustices as they arise in particular situations, rather than produce a single radical solution for all. These people believe radical politics should be creative, taking many different forms, as 'women', 'Muslims', 'Christians', 'the poor', respond to the different circumstances which they face. They argue that it is neither possible nor desirable to produce a one-size-fits-all vision for society.

However, others think that today's radicals do not work hard enough at reaching out to different parts of society, at bridging the gaps; that they are not seriously committed to their radical causes. The modern protest – such as Live8 and Make Poverty History – is often seen as illustrating this. At these protests people meet up with their friends for the day, listen to Bob Geldof or Bono talk about poverty, and express their personal outrage at the world. But when it comes to actually working collectively for instrumental change and rolling up their sleeves, these protesters are much less interested. They are more worried about being seen at the right protest, wearing the right coloured bracelet.

The supporters of these media events instead say that while this may be true to a certain extent, something needs to be done. They draw our attention to the effectiveness of modern protests in other areas; for example, their creativity in drawing our leaders' attention to important issues, like mass starvation in a globalised world. In a 24/7 media-driven society, it is necessary to put on ever more elaborate events, in order to grab our attention, money and time for radical causes.

From just these brief examples, it should be clear that there are many ways of thinking about radical politics today. Its spirit is broad and diverse. Written for students and the general public, this book is not concerned with complex theoretical debate. Rather, it presents conflicting and contradictory, often provocative characterisations of radical politics today. It includes original works from leading commentators (mainly from the Left and progressive politics residing in the USA and England). These gradually build up a broad picture of radical politics today.

The book is structured by the following four themes:

1. The place of grand visions in contemporary radical politics;
2. New forms of radical politics;
3. Radicals' response to diversity and difference in society; and
4. What today's radicals think about the state.

The importance of an overarching 'big idea' or 'grand vision' of how society should function varies between individuals and to a large extent depends on their political allegiances. Unlike neo-conservatism and Right-wing Islam for example, Left-wing and progressive radical politics today do not, in general, offer *grand visions* for change. Instead, their *new forms of radical politics* tend to focus upon particular issues, contexts and events – including wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the environment, or the injustices of sweat shops and animal experimentation. There is also an emphasis upon specific identities, such as expressing the concerns of interest groups like 'Muslims', 'women' or 'the disabled'. There is no obvious alternative overarching plan for society, coming from the Left and progressives.

This also illustrates how contemporary radical politics is dominated by the themes of *diversity and difference*, in what is perceived to be an increasingly complex world. Societies are often fragmented; communities and individuals disconnected from each other. Many radicals therefore see it as their role to articulate the claims of people that are not being heard. In turn, *the role of the state* is increasingly to mediate between these different,

often competing interest groups. Against this backdrop, to some radicals the state is the problem, to others the solution; to some it is irrelevant, and to others it is indispensable in creating the radical changes that society needs today.

1. Grand visions

In his contribution **Zygmunt Bauman** argues that radical politics today is often not that radical. He ascribes this to our addiction to debt and industrial growth. Most solutions to the present crisis, which have come from both government and society, will push us further into debt, since they generally rely on returning us to the status quo and guaranteeing the availability of limitless credit. Yet radicals on the Left have not developed a grand counter-vision to this. For Bauman, we specifically need to develop radical international organisations which impose limits on consumption, raising the revenue needed to deal with the environmental crisis and social exclusion at a global level. A truly radical politics – which curtails exploitative attitudes – is lacking. In direct contrast, **Frank Furedi** argues that the rise of environmentalism and the precautionary principle are obvious examples of where radical politics has gone wrong. For Furedi, such risk-averse ideals form the basis of a reactionary approach, pervasively holding back radical politics today. Instead we should confront the limitations on development, tackling those who put the economic and environmental crisis down to human selfishness and greed. For Furedi the issue is not whether radical politics comes from the Right or Left; both have become risk averse, neither is therefore radical.

Paul Kingsnorth agrees that politics today lacks a radical edge precisely because it is locked into Left/Right history, but for very different reasons to Furedi. For Kingsnorth, both Left and Right are against ‘Deep Green’ ideology – whose grand vision puts nature resolutely above human progress, uplifting it to a spiritual level. This form of radical politics, dominant in radical debate in the 1960s, has more recently been sidelined. While in agreement with Kingsnorth, **James Heartfield** reaches the opposite conclusion. He says that in putting nature first, although limited in number, deep green campaigners manage to oppress the working masses. They directly attack workers whose jobs rely upon environmental destruction (coal miners, for example). For Heartfield, this shows how radical politics today is dominated by environmental elites who show disdain for ordinary people. Heartfield, like a number of contributors, argues that radical politics today betrays ‘the workers’, because it is disconnected from the public.

It is therefore interesting to note that while Right-wing neo-conservatism was the most powerful form of radical politics in recent memory, **Terrell Carver** comments that it never had broad-based support from the public. Rather, with a lack of a credible alternative from the Left, elite neo-cons in Washington manipulated systems of government with devastating consequences. So in her contribution **Clare Short** does not celebrate the transformative powers of non-governmental organisations, such as the green parties, development, environmental, anti-war and peace activists. For nowhere have they managed to break through, achieving significant change or political progress. This means that the Right, in the form of neo-conservatism and increasingly Right-wing versions of Islam, has simply stepped into the vacuum. Indeed, Short believes that the radical Right will strengthen in coming years, reinventing itself, as people look for a compass to orientate them out of this crisis.

Edward Soja, however, says that in the wake of the economic crisis of 2008, radical politics does not 'revolve around absolute or categorical choice, such as that between capitalism and socialism. More than ever before, this is not a simple either/or choice.' He argues that 'Whatever happens in the aftermath of these epochal events, radical politics today is shifting its focus, moving away from an all-embracing anti-neoliberalism towards a renewed hope that radical change is possible.' In his contribution, which goes against the grain of authors like Furedi and Heartfield, Soja does not look to grand visions, but instead to the emergence of diverse ways of resisting spatial inequalities across the world, as radical politics today takes on many new forms.

2. New forms of radical politics

David Chandler, in contrast, argues that many new forms of radical politics are dominated by personal and isolated protests. While this makes protesters feel better about themselves, it does not meet the demands of real political change. He says the 2003 anti-war march, anti-capitalism and anti-globalisation protests, the Make Poverty History campaign at the end of 2005, the World Social Forums or the radical jihad of Al-Qaeda, are all illustrative of highly individualised protests. There is no attempt to build a social or collective movement. And so, theatrical suicide, demonstrating, badge and bracelet wearing become ethical acts in themselves: personal statements of awareness, rather than attempts to engage politically with society.

Contradictory judgements are a theme of this book. In her contribution **Hilary Wainwright** is more supportive of new forms of radical

politics today. She says that they reflect a move away from a hierarchical view, with knowledge being the exclusive privilege of a few (the leaders of a party, for example), to an understanding of diverse and plural sources of knowledge and resistance. From the 1968 student movements and the 1970s women's movement, to the World Social Forum and anti-war campaigns, the emphasis is upon developing inter-communication, through complex networks of resistance. In examining performative artworks, **Dora Apel** discusses the type of protests which contributors like Chandler would surely criticise. But Apel says that while 'protest actions, performative artworks and images by themselves arguably have limited ability to effect direct political change, their power should not be underestimated'. For example, such acts held the American government to account for their actions in Abu Ghraib.

Michael Watts is therefore drawn to the following question. Can radical politics, often geographically dispersed and fragmented as it is today, amount to a significant challenge to the status quo? While the answer is not clear, Watts argues that resistance to neo-liberalism – if we are to chart the larger landscape – is heterogeneous and worldwide. The recent revolts in France, the factory occupations in Argentina, the oil nationalisation in Bolivia, and the insurgencies in Iraq are all symptomatic, even if the national and local dynamics differ greatly. For Watts, we should not be gloomy; he sees regular opportunities as neo-liberalism constantly fails.

Jason Toynbee, however, is more sanguine about new forms of radical politics. Reflecting upon crisis and political transformation at this watershed moment, Toynbee says that: 'There's no guarantee, or even likelihood, that recession and the more intense poverty it brings will lead to a resurgence of working-class consciousness and resistance. As the 1980s showed all too well, recessions can weaken resistance by making solidarity more difficult to build.' Toynbee's chapter shows how, as Part II unfolds, this interrogation of the spirit of social engagement and commitment in radical politics is intensifying today.

The following three chapters highlight a range of concerns in this regard. **James Martin** acknowledges that the test of today's radical commitment is not that of the last century: namely, demonstrating allegiance to a party or social group. Yet without a programme and organisation to bring the different groups together, many radicals are failing. The proliferation and pluralisation of new forms of radical politics – from internet blogging to diverse ways of protesting – has meant that commitment 'flattens out'. The challenge for radicals is to find new but serious radical commitment, leading to meaningful political change.

In their contribution **Jeremy Gilbert** and **Jo Littler** take the example of the Green New Deal, produced by the New Economics Foundation. This shows how some radicals are practically trying to address the real worry over fragmentation and gesture politics. The Green New Deal aims to move against the anarchic withdrawal that characterises and alienates so much of radical politics today. It instead seeks to engage with a wide range of people, from civil society, through to the state, via a broad range of strategies, in order to address the environmental and economic crisis simultaneously.

The general thrust of **Doreen Massey's** chapter, which closes Part II, is that the crisis presents an opportunity for disparate forms of radical politics to come together. She points out that neo-liberalism only became the norm because so many people worked hard collectively, through a broad range of strategies, to make it so. It will therefore take collective effort to turn over and uproot. Massey, like Gilbert and Littler, talks about the Green New Deal. In doing so she highlights how concern with more than 'one off' stunts is becoming increasingly important for those interrogating the spirit of radical politics in our times; particularly post-crisis. The nature of collective action is being seriously examined.

The first and second parts of the book highlight that today's radicals are sometimes criticised for not being committed enough; for being reactionary, or disengaged from the general public. While several commentators lament the death of grand visions, others count this as a blessing. Some believe that radical politics is most effective when experimental and creative, and is better able to deal with the particularity of injustice. Others say that the possibilities for universal transformation are reduced post-crisis, as radical politics focuses too much upon the micro level.

Others still are beginning to discuss how the present crisis may be a turning point: an opportunity for collective action to be reinvigorated through invention and hard work, and renewed social engagement around newly constituted publics. From this departure, the third section explores how contemporary radical politics deals with diversity and difference within society.

3. Diversity and difference

This is a prevailing theme for many authors, as in radical politics today widespread attention is given to multiculturalism, identity politics and more recently violence and Islam. As in the previous parts of this book, many contributors are poles apart in their perspectives.

Most agree that as the second millennium ended identity politics gained influence in radical politics, replacing other grand visions. **Gregor McLennan** is concerned that this has brought radical politics to a crucial juncture. Too much, and for too long, has the 'politics of difference' dominated. For it is not possible to run organisations – like schools or hospitals – through pressure-group politics alone. So McLennan reflects a mood of restlessness around endless pluralism; calling for a turn towards a majoritarian, broadly secularist radical politics, uplifting people's capacities.

However, **Tariq Modood** goes against this emerging grain within radical politics, arguing for multiculturalism *as a* radical politics. Multiculturalism, despite what others say, has a radical content. Modood asks us to think about the many Muslims adopting multicultural, rather than the violent, less democratic, approaches in recent years. For Modood, a successful multicultural ethos shows how Muslims can be radical, engaging peacefully in passionate debates, while living in diverse societies. However, **Nick Cohen** argues that there is a different side to multiculturalism. He says: 'postmodern multiculturalists have taken the liberal idea of tolerance and pushed it into an extreme relativism which holds that it is wrong for liberals to attack previously disadvantaged groups – "the other" – even when "the other" espoused ideas which were anti-liberal. In short, it has become racist to oppose sexists, homophobes and fascists from other cultures.' Cohen argues that many Left-wing, liberal-minded people don't oppose certain abhorrent aspects of radical Islam. Radical politics today is worse off as a result.

Coming from a different perspective, **Amir Saeed** and **David Bates** point out the similarities between Muslim beliefs and the traditional Left. They have more in common than what divides them. In turning to multiculturalism, they say, 'Right-wing commentators fear the concept of multiculturalism because it implies an erosion of core, national values in favour of diverse cultures. Whilst more liberal commentators appear to suggest that the concept actually creates divisions in society by emphasising difference rather than stress the common ground.' The challenge is to bring together like-minded Muslims and non-Muslims, offering an alternative to free market capitalism.

Alastair Bonnett takes yet another tack on this issue of multiculturalism. He writes that multiculturalists draw upon the myth of a departed universal fellowship, in order to critique the lack of coherence in society. Indeed, Bonnett points out that all radical politics is generally nostalgic for lost utopias and universal aspirations that provide it with direction.

This opens up a new concern for our survey and interrogation of radical politics today – what is radical politics becoming nostalgic for post-crisis? In his contribution **Ken Worpole** gives one answer. Like many others in this book he says radical politics needs to return to a belief in universal needs and conditions. This is illustrated by the example of modern childhood and education. Reminding us that poverty and lack of opportunity still blight the lives of millions, Worpole demonstrates how difficult it has become to create collective, progressive visions for change through educational systems. Yet he also points to how few radicals in recent years have been concerned with such universal aspirations.

Illustrating this point **Sheila Jasanoff** questions those who claim that education, science and technological innovation are universally to the benefit of all. Drawing upon examples such as Harvard University, she argues that the new knowledge economies and technological innovations are locked into dominant imaginations, which drive us in particular directions, heedless of history, culture or social context. Jasanoff writes that there are two ways to respond – one modest, the other radical. The modest approach maintains the dominant narrative of progress; that of the North of the globe. The radical approach politicises innovation, where political alliances are built by disparately concerned people, challenging those who claim that technological innovations are ‘universally’ good for all.

Nigel Thrift also explores the tensions between universality, the university and radical politics. Weighing up the pros and cons of universities, he argues that they need to be defended because of their radical potential to drive society collectively forward for the better, particularly at a time of stagnation and despair. However, Thrift wonders whether many so-called combative radicals from the Left fully realise this point. For to say that universities are vital civilisational forces, without which we would all be worse off, can sound fey and oppressive to the full-blooded Left-wing radical. Thrift, however, believes that this reveals a lot about the nature of such radicals today. It demonstrates a narrow focus upon critique, and a suspicion of authority and expertise.

As **Will Hutton** points out, radical politics on the Left needs a strong, unifying utopian vision. It also needs to be more supportive of the state and institutional structures. When the economic crisis hit, most people turned to the state, not the market, to step in. It is also important for radical politics on the Left to develop strong, overarching narratives, as a response to the rise in ugly Right-wing nationalisms, and the failures of the centre ground in mainstream Western politics. Hutton argues that such countervisions are necessary to mobilise people’s imaginations and

desires; to seize the present opportunity for progressive change. But they can only be achieved through the development of strong institutional structures.

4. The role of the state

Further conflicting perspectives are brought out in the last part of the book. Turning to the theme of anarchism, **Saul Newman** acknowledges that radicals have tended to look upon it less favourably in the last few years. Nonetheless, he encourages the reader to take a closer look at its successes. Newman says withdrawal from collective representation, the state and institutions is strictly the only proper radical act. He calls for celebration of such experiments today, saying: 'this is not an escape from politics – precisely the opposite: it is an *active withdrawal* that fundamentally calls into question the symbolic authority of the state'. **Chantal Mouffe** disagrees in her contribution. Mouffe distinguishes between two approaches dominating contemporary radical politics: the first as 'critique as withdrawal' from the state; the second as 'critique as engagement' with it. She is unequivocal: withdrawal leaves a vacuum, which is frequently filled by the Right. Despite this, a significant number of contemporary radical theorists still believe withdrawal is more valuable. Turning against this tide, she supports those who extend a 'war of position' deep into unjust state practices, building coalitions across a range of geographical sites, not an exodus. Mouffe thereby illustrates how some leading postmodern and radical thinkers today are looking more favourably upon the state as an agent of positive change.

David Featherstone specifically targets Chantal Mouffe for criticism however, saying she sees: 'the national as the key site where political antagonisms are to be constructed and negotiated primarily through parliamentary politics'. Featherstone believes this makes it tricky to recognise and engage with key contemporary movements bringing neo-liberalism into contestation; namely, the transnational counter-globalisation movements. In contrast to Featherstone, **Alejandro Colás** and **Jason Edwards** explicitly agree with Mouffe's sentiments about the nation state. These contributors write that 'without the powerful resources of the modern state – its capacity to collect and reinvest revenue; to regulate the economy and redistribute wealth; to provide for or coordinate the delivery of the necessary infrastructure in securing basic human needs – struggles for radical democracy can get stuck in the debilitating treadmill of constant protest, perpetual mobilisation and

ubiquitous antagonism.’ Mouffe, Colás and Edwards alike criticise those who seek to operate too much outside the state.

However, **David Boyle** points out that many people are concerned with the way in which the state has over-centralised many services, prescribing ever more regulations and statistics to discipline ordinary life. Boyle’s chapter reveals a wider desire for authentic social interaction, connection and engagement within radical politics today. This seeks to act against what many radicals see as the overbearing control and power of the state.

In contrast, in the last chapter of the book **Saskia Sassen** explores how state power can be used for progressive means, particularly in the sphere of international human rights. She says the recent crisis demonstrates that the state is increasingly the main agent for global change (notably in the USA). With the growing power of state intervention, radicals have once again been re-thinking their stance towards government. Sassen asks of the USA: ‘could the emergent internationalism of the executive branch, now used to further the global corporate economy, be used for addressing some of our pressing global challenges?’ Such provocative statements, contentious within this book of conflicting opinions, demonstrate the diverse but open possibilities within radical politics today.

5. Initial reflections

We are at a watershed moment for radical politics. Despite a global crisis, there is no obvious alternative to neo-liberalism for people to mobilise around. Given that the dominant institutions of politics have visibly failed us all, radical politics is being forced into the spotlight. For after the spectacular collapse of neo-liberalism, everyone is reflecting upon the radical alternatives. The question – what *is* radical politics today? – is no longer of peripheral concern to the population at large. This is a sobering time.

As an important aside for students, we should remember that in the 1980s and 1990s large amounts of money were injected into Right-wing think tanks and educational institutions (particularly in the USA). Whereas the Left was uncertain about its educational agenda, the Right certainly was not. This meant that educational institutions focused upon the (now discredited) theories underlying neo-liberalism. Neo-liberal ideology filtered through the educational system, which became a point of indoctrination. Given that neo-liberalism is now discredited, millions of people educated in the 1980s and 1990s, in turn, naturally have a

sense of alienation from both education and politics. Because when the economic crisis came, these were not places where seriously discussed alternatives to neo-liberalism could be found.

This book therefore seeks to reinvigorate the importance of a critical survey into the spirit of radical politics in our times. As will now be seen, there is a wide range of perspectives to reflect upon.

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Note

1. If you are interested in this ongoing project, please email: Jonathan.Pugh@ncl.ac.uk. Or respond through the magazine, found at: <http://www.spaceofdemocracy.org>

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