



### STRATEGIES MOVING FORWARD: SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND PROGRESSIVE GOVERNMENTS - A ROUND TABLE DISCUSSION

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#### Introduction

The following round table discussion between several notable activists, thinkers, and academics is intended to inspire interaction and discussion. It takes place as part of Heathwood's ongoing [research series](http://www.heathwoodpress.com/category/key-series-occupy-emancipatory-politics-radical-democracy/) (<http://www.heathwoodpress.com/category/key-series-occupy-emancipatory-politics-radical-democracy/>) on contemporary social movements. The discussion takes as its starting point the election of Jeremy Corbyn as leader of the Labour Party, and focuses particularly on how the Left (understood in a sense that is wider than just the Labour Party) moves forward from here. The Left has greeted Corbyn's election with considerable hope and enthusiasm, both in the UK and internationally. There are some similarities, moreover, with the response to Syriza's election in Greece in 2014. The campaign by Bernie Sanders to be leader of the Democrats is inspiring similar popular belief among progressives in the U.S. However, many questions remain with regards to the role of progressive governments and the relationship between such governments and social movements in creating revolutionary change.

Though this dialogue focuses mostly on Corbyn's Labour in the United Kingdom, the analysis which follows certainly also might apply to Sanders in the U.S., Tsipras in Greece, or any other potential "progressive government".

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#### R.C. Smith (Facilitator):

Welcome everyone and thank you for participating.



[\(http://www.heathwoodpress.com/heathwood-journal-of-critical-theory-issue-two-critical-theory-and-emancipatory-politics/\)](http://www.heathwoodpress.com/heathwood-journal-of-critical-theory-issue-two-critical-theory-and-emancipatory-politics/) It is notable that both Sanders and Corbyn have acknowledged in recent weeks [at the time of writing] the importance of grassroots social movements. But I'd like to start the discussion by referencing the [series of articles](http://www.heathwoodpress.com/category/key-series-occupy-emancipatory-politics-radical-democracy/) (<http://www.heathwoodpress.com/category/key-series-occupy-emancipatory-politics-radical-democracy/>) published by Heathwood as part of its ongoing research series on Contemporary Social Movements, Emancipatory Politics and Radical Democracy (see website). Here it is argued that participatory grassroots movements are the centre of gravity of an emancipatory politics. Recently it has also been suggested that the party should not be seen as the primary thrust of a revolutionary transformative politics. If it is to be expected, in other words, that 'in a reified society, political issues will present themselves in a reified and mystifying way', we can see why, in the current political system, a form of representation appears to be necessary. And yet party politics, with its reliance on leaders and often rigid hierarchy and all the rest, perpetuates an alienated, top-down institutional world. It represents the opposite of true democracy – direct, participatory democracy – which is principled on egalitarian (horizontal) social relations.

My own argument is that – if the party is to have legitimacy, even temporarily, it must remain responsive to a participatory mandate. If we take the idea that emancipatory politics must have a grassroots, prefigurative quality, the biggest success of a progressive left government will then be defined by whether it can establish a set of policies for the immediate relief of precarious social and economic life, and how it might put together a plan to assist the process of revolutionary transformation by way of radical reformism that supports the greater autonomy of prefigurative social movements.

Richard, I'd like to start with you. You've written a lot on contemporary social movements and the general horizon of emancipatory politics. What is your initial response to the election of Corbyn as Labour leader?

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**Richard Gunn:**

My response is to feel overwhelmed with questions. Will Corbyn change the Labour Party, by breaking the grip of the Blairite careerist establishment? Or will the Labour Party – that is, its Blairite establishment – change Corbyn? On a different (but closely related) issue: will the centre of gravity in a Corbynian politics be based on the grassroots? Or will the centre drift upwards, through co-option and assimilation – leaving us with a party of a traditional social democratic kind? Will success in elections come to dominate all else?

I don't have easy answers to these questions. My hope is that I learn as this discussion proceeds. But, at this

I don't have easy answers to these questions. My hope is that I learn as this discussion proceeds. But, at this early stage, I offer two reflections – one with a pessimistic and one with an optimistic ring.

My pessimistic reflection is history-based. Leaders of social democratic parties have an all-too-well-established track record of moving – sometimes suddenly, more often gradually – to the right. Why should Corbyn be any different? The establishment which he is up against is not, after all, merely the Blairite Labour Party but the neoliberal establishment with which Blairism intersects. The problem which confronts Corbyn and McDonnell is not merely whether a left-Keynesian set of policies works, in an “economic” or “technical” sense. It is whether such politics will be *allowed to work* – allowed, that is, by international neoliberalism. If left-Keynesianism is beyond what neoliberalism permits, talk of ‘people’s quantitative easing’ – for example – is apt to become dated and quaint.

My optimistic line of thought centres on grassroots politics. Corbyn – or, rather, Jon Trickett (Shadow Secretary for Communities and Local Government) – has declared: ‘We want the ordinary people of our country to engage. And we want a movement of citizens’ assemblies, reaching across all the parties and none, into every community’ (*LabourList* 18/9/15). The aim is, in part, to build on the success of Corbyn’s election to party leadership but there is a larger ambition: the Corbyn leadership (says Trickett) wants to develop a new constitutional and political framework for Britain. To the same effect, John McDonnell (Shadow Chancellor) promises that Labour will urge people to get involved in discussion: ‘I think Labour MPs will be shocked at the way in which they will be engaged in a democratic process of determining our policies’ (*The Observer* 20/9/15). How seriously, we must ask, should we take this turn to popular and grassroots politics? Should we consider that Corbyn is in good faith *and* that the all-too-familiar processes of co-option and assimilation are suspended? (My own feeling is that the Corbyn leadership *is* in good faith – but that issues concerning co-option and assimilation are more difficult to judge.). Will the participation which Trickett and McDonnell celebrate be subsumed into the grinding of the electoral machine? Or are we on the edge – the vertiginous and inspiring edge – of a new style of UK politics and a new form of democratic life?

It is, of course, impossible to answer this question confidently. But I offer a suggestion. Perhaps Corbyn’s success is linked to a dynamic that social democracy cannot contain. Perhaps Corbyn requires the support of people whose lives are precarious – and who turn their back on established parties in dismay. If this is so, what opportunities for the radical left are opened? What dangers (for dangers there are) arise? Traditionally, a radical and participatory politics has offered critical (or “yes, but”) support for left-Keynesian policies – while, at the same time, maintaining the autonomy of grassroots movements themselves. In short, radical politics has sought to perform a balancing act. If social democracy enters a period of crisis, is this balancing easier or more difficult to maintain?

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**R.C. Smith:**

Thanks, Richard. You’ve touched on some important points and raised some very important concerns. Let’s continue with the current course of discussion. I’d like to extend the same opening question to everyone, beginning with Christian as we work our way around the circle. Please feel free to respond to Richard’s opening thoughts as well.

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**Christian Fuchs:**

Who thought after the general elections in May that four months later the Labour Party would have a left-wing Leader and a left-wing Shadow Chancellor? Nobody. A social movement that related its political praxis to the party form brought about this extraordinary victory for the British Left. There has been a dialectical political articulation of the party and the social movement. So I am less pessimistic than Richard and see the very event of the creation of a left-wing Labour leadership already as a success that gives the Left in general tremendous hope, confidence and public visibility and can in a domino effect have significant impact on the upsurge of left-wing parties and movements at the international level.

But the enemies do not sleep. Led by Tony Blair, who argued that Corbyn’s victory would mean “rout, possibly annihilation” (*Observer*, August 13, 2015), the neoliberal forces in the Labour Party tried to, but could not stop

Corbyn. They will fiercely continue their battle. A right-wing press campaign led by the Daily Mail, the Daily Telegraph, The Sun and the Times that constantly redbaits and scapegoats Corbyn has developed. The Telegraph (August 22, 2015) for example published a Corbyn fiction story titled "Prime Minister Corbyn... and the 1,000 days that destroyed Britain":

"A loaf of bread passed the £5 barrier. Blackouts became increasingly common. The nation's few remaining factories fell idle. Hospitals could no longer afford to pay for basic medicines. [...] As riots became commonplace, families lived under self-imposed curfew. [...] 'Give him enough rope and he will hang himself,' a Blairite had said when Corbyn was elected Labour leader. That was true enough. The only problem was that he had hung the country too".

The simplistic and false ideological message conveyed in such reports is quite simple: Jeremy Corbyn is left-wing and therefore wants to create a centralised, state-bureaucratic economy and a Stalinist terror-regime; is a sympathiser of extremists, dictators, terrorists, racists, Islamists, anti-Semites, and communists; is a disloyal rebel and a vegetarian hippie, who is the worst dressed politician; he hates cars, celebrates immigration and multiculturalism. The ideology of scapegoating all progressives as the "Loony Left" is back. The BBC, the liberal media, including the Independent, Channel 4 News and partly even the Guardian, joined the chorus that has become even louder after Corbyn's victory was announced. The Tories published the video "Labour: A Threat to Our National Security" on YouTube and constantly repeat the ideology of Corbyn being a threat to economic and national security.

The heart of Corbyn's support is a mass movement of hundreds of thousands of activists who supported his campaign. Many of them have now become Labour Party members or are returning members, who fled the party under the warmongering neoliberal Tony Blair's rule. Their voices are never heard in the mass media coverage on Corbyn. Yet they are very media- and tech-savvy and know how to especially use the Internet and social media for political campaigning. The social media sphere is however not exclusively the people's microphone, but also the loudspeaker of right-wing anti-socialist movements. Whereas the traditional mass media are in respect to Corbyn relatively homogeneously right-wing in character and ideologically biased, social media is more contested and contradictory.

There is now a clear choice and struggle between the right-wing neoliberal authoritarian populism of Cameronism on the one side and democratic socialism and socialist democracy on the other side. This social struggle is also profoundly an ideological struggle. It therefore matters a lot that the movement continues, finds strategies for effectively challenging the continued Thatcherite assault from all sides, and communicates socialist democracy and democratic socialism as credible alternatives to authoritarian neoliberalism in the public sphere, acting as a pressure group, and gaining influence on the policy-making process in the Labour Party, which requires that the latter's bureaucratic structures are replaced by a more participatory decision making power.

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### **Gordon Asher:**

Thanks for the opportunity to contribute, Robert. Two central questions that I would like to pose for the radical (non-authoritarian) left:

- How are we to understand what is happening? What social relations are being (re)produced?
- How, if at all, can we/should we be engaging with/within these processes?

In exploring these I'd like to raise four interrelated issues (with thanks, also, to Leigh French):

*Movements and Parties:* Is there a real or merely claimed bifurcation between *movements* and *parties* in what we are experiencing? What is the nature of this popular movement? What is the composition of the political party being appealed to? How do these organisational forms/purposes relate to each other, and to other movements, assemblies and community struggles?

It seems that the movement(s) in question are centred upon sections of the Labour party. As such, should we be concerned that a rhetoric of movementism is (or becomes) an adjunct to institutional politics; serving to recruit, legitimise, and support policy actions and parliamentary politics? That is, a popular movement that views its



political praxis not merely as related to hierarchical, party forms of representation, as Christian suggests, but as primarily pouring energies, people and praxis into realisation through institutional/party politics?

Is Momentum (<http://www.peoplesmomentum.com/>), as the 'successor entity to the Jeremy Corbyn for Labour Leader campaign', an attempt to revive a mass membership party – and, rhetorically at least, a 'democratisation' of it via reversing aspects of centralisation (e.g. through management of communication, as we've seen at PMQs) – or the creation/manifestation of a social movement?

That is: is it the (contingent) revival of a (labour) movement which (historically) coalesced into a party, or is it a Party in search of a popular movement amidst a general crisis of legitimacy? And, in doing so, is it espousing 'better' management of the labour/capital antagonism, thus reproducing the social relations and logics of neoliberalism?

In other words, will it militate against the formation of non-hierarchical/anti-authoritarian, horizontal social movements that Richard, amongst others, has described in his writings – autonomous, democratic (in the radical, participatory sense), self-organised social movements *who* set *their* own agendas; creating and evolving collective agency and praxis that speaks to actual alternatives to capitalism and institutional/party politics.

*Populism?* Might we also think of this movement/party distinction-relationship in terms of *populism*?

Is there an association between what Christian has described as 'right-wing neoliberal authoritarian populism' and the kinds of populist membership claims we have encountered in (e.g.) Scotland recently? Might such discourses and formations be reactive to neoliberal securitisation processes connected to perceived/constructed fear and risk, seeking assurances of (national) protectionism in increasingly particularistic forms (serving to raise certain questions, while foreclosing others)?

Populism here is understood as the construction and mobilisation of sentiment and consensus around a homogenous, authentic 'people'/group in binary opposition to an identified/constructed enemy or 'other', who are blamed for our problems and crises, or to an existential threat, whether embodied in an external enemy or internal lack of competitiveness, etc.

As such it effaces issues of class and other intersectional oppressions and over-simplifies struggles – neglecting a complementary holistic analysis and orientation. Here populism focuses on reformism; on a supposed return to and reinvention of (if this were even possible within the hegemony of contemporary globalised capitalism) redistributive welfarism/left-Keynsianism/sovereign national protectionism which relies on a model of infinite economic growth, necessarily based on the oppressions and exploitations across other nations (the losers in national competition).

It serves to create support for – in the sense of consent, rather than full (democratic) participation – (mythical) notions of a liberal or social democracy that sit firmly within the container of representation and the 'post-political evacuation of real antagonism' – which still sit comfortably within a framework of technocratic neoliberal governance. Is populism emerging as the supplement of what Žižek's calls 'the inherent shadowy double of institutionalised post-politics'?

Does this imply the need to articulate the relationship and distinction between populism and movements – and understand the (contingent) forms of populism that are becoming manifest along with their correspondingly limited/limiting social relations and imaginaries? Is there an issue in terms of labelling populism as if it were such a social movement (of the type Richard describes), and treating it as such – with likely consequences of co-option and recuperation by neoliberal power structures and institutions (including the political party)?

*The State:* What conceptions of the state (under neoliberalism) are involved in what we are experiencing? Is there an assumption that the state is, at least potentially, benign or benevolent? This when globalised neoliberalism relies on the nation state, on shaping and reconfiguring it, while itself possessing inter/trans/supra-national aspects – a transnational network of institutions and power (as recent events in Greece and Ireland have emphasised).

*Environmental and Ecological Considerations and Crises:* A central worry is that there seems nothing in the economic models being proposed by the new-look Labour Party which addresses our most pressing crises:

climate chaos, resource depletion and environmental degradation. One can only conclude that a revived Keynesianism would continue to exacerbate our environmental and ecological crises, increasing the likelihood of reinforcing negative feedback loops and their associated tipping points.

By contrast what is urgently needed is the rapid transformation from capitalist systems, structure, practices, narratives and relations – and the development of resilience to changes that have and will be locked-in – while rapidly moving from a carbon-based system of immense energy consumption to economies which are sustainable.

*Social Democracy, Reformism or Mainstreaming Alternatives:* I think this worry only serves to emphasize that the changes Corbyn's election represents are taking place within, and limiting themselves to, a capitalist/neoliberal paradigm. That is, limiting themselves to opposing disastrous 'austerity' policies while advocating little more than a return to social democratic welfarism – rather than to helping create the radical alternatives that are so desperately needed.

How then, in John Holloway's terms, can we engage with these developments in ways that speak to thinking, acting, living and relating (through the evolution and creation of social movements and relations) in ways that are oriented 'in, against and beyond capitalism' (the state-corporate nexus of contemporary neoliberalism)?

– *In*: in that we are inevitably within capitalism/neoliberalism and attendant social relations

– *Against*: speaking to resistances to the deepening and expanding neoliberalisation of our social relations and societies

– *And beyond*: speaking to nurturing, evolving and creating transformative alternatives to them.

*A 'Yes, But' Orientation and Non-Reformist Reforms:* How is it possible (especially bearing in mind ongoing experiences in Scotland) for the anti-authoritarian left to orient itself (to develop strategies and tactics as to how we might approach reformist formations,) through what Richard describes as a 'Yes, But' stance, towards a society and world of genuine alternatives; by tactically supporting/pressing for certain social democratic policies as transitional demands ('non-reformist reforms' – Gotz; Albert) that are achievable and make a vital positive difference to people in the here and now, while building support for the diversity of transformational non-capitalist alternatives that are necessary for eco-social justice and the transformation of social relations – a prefigurative democratic culture evolved through networks of autonomous participatory social movements?

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### **R.C. Smith:**

This 'Yes, But' approach feels particularly apt when we consider the genuine concern that Corbyn may move further and further to the right. In all honesty, his economic policies aren't actually *that* radical. His policies feel or are made to feel extremely progressive because, after so many decades of the political context shifting right, social democracy today is served as radical socialism when it is really anything but. I think we must constantly remind ourselves of this in our analysis and in our understandable *want* to put some hope in Corbyn's politics. That said, in the here and now he definitely offers relief from the ever-hardening and precarious conditions in which people must exist. Still, a question that may be reserved for later: to what extent is Corbyn's politics legitimate before the struggle for actual radical socialism must assert itself and build on or from whatever potential achievements his possible might government make? What do you think, Penny?

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### **Penny Cole:**

1) *What does the election of Jeremy Corbyn mean for politics?*

Corbyn's election opens a new phase of the movement that began with the substantial 'Yes vote' in the Scotland referendum, and the defeat of Labour in the General Election.

Corbyn's election was not just a Labour Party affair. It was an extra-parliamentary movement of many thousands of people, angry about the degeneration of the political system and against austerity and war and the now attack

of people, angry about the degeneration of the political system and against austerity and war and the new attack on trade unions. John McDonnell recently told the Croydon Assembly it was “the end of top down politics”. That signifies the end of the Labour Party as we have known it.

## 2) What is the impact of this change?

The demise of Labour in its old form is an historic moment. Its formation at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was crucial to the development of parliamentary democracy. By offering an alternative to capitalist parties, it directed the attention of workers and democrats to parliament as a route for social change. This possibility gave the capitalist state some legitimacy and a certain stability at times of crisis.

The transition of Labour into New Labour, as the party of globalisation *par excellence*, signified the end of this particular role. In turn, the rejection of New/Nearly New Labour under Miliband by voters in Scotland and parts of England is a negation of this negation. Despite a longing for Old Labour, its return is impossible – except as farce.

The British state has faced a deepening crisis since the financial crash. First there was the inability of either of the two main parties to win decisive support from the electorate in 2010, then the existential threat posed by the Scottish referendum and now the election of a leader of the Labour Party who is unlikely to deliver ‘her majesty’s loyal opposition’.

The House of Lords’ challenges to the cuts in tax credits and to the Scotland Bill show how worried the State as a whole has become about the absence of legitimacy of the Tory government. Their Lordships want to avert an even wider challenge to Westminster.

This underlines the fragility of the present constitutional arrangements, shaken by diverse issues such as: EU membership, growing inequality, tensions within the ruling class (House of Lords, judiciary, army, police), deepening opposition to the drive to war and the domination of politics by corporate and financial élites.

## 3) What does this tell us about the prospects for fundamental change?

At this point in history we see that millions of people across the globe, seeing any chink in their state’s political armour, rush into the gap. So far they have mostly done it in a way that refers itself to the existing structures of power and constitution, the aim being to take them over and make them work for the majority.

We see this in many countries, in many forms and with varied outcomes; it is not yet a struggle for power but it does at least recognise that political power is the key question, rather than this or that protest movement or occupation of space.

To conclude, I want to quote Tony Negri’s interview with Roar collective from January this year:

*On this question of struggle at the institutional level and of political organization, I would like to conclude with two more general propositions. The first one is that after 2011 horizontality must be criticized and overcome, clearly and unambiguously — and not just in a Hegelian sense.*

*Secondly, the situation is probably ripe enough to attempt once again that most political of passages: the seizure of power. We have understood the question of power for too long in an excessively negative manner. Now we can reinterpret the question of power in terms of multitudes, in terms of absolute democracy — that is to say, in terms of a democracy that goes beyond canonical institutional forms such as monarchy, aristocracy and “democracy.” I believe that today the problem of democracy is best formulated and addressed in terms of the multitude.*

Whilst agreeing that the question of power is back on the agenda, I would argue that Negri’s proposition for a

“negative negation” of horizontalism doesn’t really contribute much to achieving that.

How can we go from the current political system to “absolute democracy” through such a negation? A negative negation can only be an abstract critique of movements, rather than a practical transformation of these movements into a movement for power.

If Negri means by negation “not just in the Hegelian sense” some kind of splitting from the movements from Seattle onwards then we should reject that. What would a negative negation of horizontalism look like? A return to ‘democratic centralism’?

Actually, I think a “Hegelian” negation of horizontalism would be a good thing, if it is understood as transcending whilst simultaneously preserving.

Achieving “real democracy” (which I would use as opposed to the very metaphysical “absolute”) requires a transition beyond the current political structures, which cannot be achieved by an abstract multitude but only by very specific multitudes in specific places and at specific times.

People are moved to action as a result of their class and social connection with the necessity for change that is the essence of the current political, economic and ecological crisis.

This necessity operates at a deep level and when it emerges, it interacts with the chance circumstances of moment, nation, history, politics and the given state’s position in globalisation. This interaction of necessity and chance often gives very unexpected results – i.e. Corbyn’s election.

We need to ask how the present “movement of movements” (as it has been called) can transcend its current limitations.

People must make the transition to real democracy, through their own struggle, which takes many forms and teaches them big lessons.

Many of those who were active in horizontalist movements like Occupy are already undergoing a “negation of negation”. Occupy set out to negate politics, refused in fact to have anything to do with it, and instead aimed to confront the banks and corporations – Wall Street and the Stock Exchange – directly, through protest, occupying their space, exposures and reasoned debate.

Now Occupy London has given birth to Occupy Democracy, which is focused on political democracy. Other “branches” of the horizontalist movement in Greece and Spain – have made the transition to becoming hybrid politico/communitarian movements. The fate of such movements when they gain parliamentary power – i.e., Syriza – is being absorbed and considered.

The election of Corbyn represents another negation of negation – we saw the negation of Old Labour into New Labour, and now we have the negation of negation of New Labour into this contradictory extra/intra parliamentary form, which may have similarities to Old Labour – but is not Old Labour.

For those of us who want to go beyond this moment, it is a waste of time critiquing it from the standpoint that it is not radical enough to bring about the change that is needed.

What we need to do is to grasp this living movement and prepare for further transitions (further negations) which are inevitable but whose form is not predetermined.

Taking a positive critical standpoint, we have to try to strengthen the trend within it towards a revolutionary transition.

The practical form that our work takes has to address the deepening crisis of the state alongside the clear opportunity to make a transition to real democracy. It is not enough to look at some kind of abstract super-democracy. It must be a real democracy that operates within a framework of law and constitution, even more so in the United Kingdom with its history of struggle for a democratic constitution and the universal franchise.



A network of democratic assemblies that unite people from diverse movements can create the conditions for challenging the authority of the present undemocratic state. We can aim to bring citizens into the process of creating a constitution that would transfer power to the majority. The challenge of achieving ratification or legitimation of a new constitution will in itself pose very concretely the question of who rules.

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**Richard Gunn:**

It would be ironic (would it not) if Jeremy Corbyn (leader of an established social democratic party) turned out to have a livelier sense of the significance of grassroots politics than does Negri (theorist of autonomist Marxism)? And yet I am tempted to side with McDonnell when he states that a Labour Party which urged people to get involved in discussion would turn the existing UK constitution on its head. What on earth does Negri mean when he declares that horizontalism must be 'negated'. Who does the negating? What is supposed to take horizontalism's place? Should the radical left simply stop discussing? (I have a suspicion that Zizek has precisely this in mind).

We should be clear that a programme of grassroots discussion faces dangers. We should acknowledge that, all too readily, such discussion becomes a ritual endorsement of already-established institutional forms. If such discussion is seen as a step in a career-ladder, such a step into conformism is almost inevitable. May the discussion invoked by McDonnell escape this pitfall? My response is that it may – as long as we are aware of the danger, and as long as we are ready to see that political support for an initiative and thinking about it uncritically are two very different things. The former doesn't entail the latter – as, I think, this round table discussion demonstrates. If Corbyn's election to leadership of the Labour Party is to reinvigorate the left, critical support (or 'Yes, But' support) must become a familiar pattern in left-radical thought. The days when support meant unflinching endorsement are (if they ever existed) long since gone.

Before passing discussion on to our next contributor, I would like to touch briefly on a further point. An emphasis on grassroots politics in radical discussion can sometimes (so I have learned) be confused with "romanticism" of a "revolutionary" and "purist" sort. It can be equated with a declaration that radical thought must address only small-scale or face-to-face issues. I stress that no such declaration is intended here.). Whilst I consider that the centre of radical (or revolutionary) politics must remain in grassroots social movements, and whilst I stress that political issues have roots in everyday life, I am far from wishing to press larger-scale issues (for example, ecological issues) aside.

As Robert said, earlier in our dialogue, political issues in a reified society tend to present themselves in an institutional or reified way: it is up to us to formulate the issues in a non-reified way. There can be no question of "purism" (whether "revolutionary" or "non-revolutionary"). What there can and must be is critique (and critical solidarity) that remains on guard.

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**R.C. Smith:**

Some great points of analysis. I certainly echo Richard's statements.

If I may, I'd like to jump in with a few comments of my own before handing things back to Christian.

I could be wrong but it seems to me that, through a combination of informed and studied perspectives, a general consensus is starting to form between us. It strikes me how much this consensus, if I am correct in drawing it, wants to confront and ultimately answer in a progressive way the issue of emancipatory organization and the building of *transformative power*. Some terrific observations have been presented, and overall one senses a real building of a vision forward. However, if there is one thing still missing in our dialogue so far, I think it has to do with a more substantiated and developed notion of *revolutionary transition*.

Marta Harnecker recently commented that: "progressive governments are often compelled to defend themselves, not only from elite obstructionism, but also from parts of the left who—failing to understand the complexity of the process and opposed to any tactical flexibility—attack them for not achieving profound social

complexity of the process and opposed to any tactical flexibility – attack them for not achieving profound social changes fast enough, treating them as if they, and not the elite, were the main enemy”. Though she doesn’t state it as such, Harnecker’s allusion to societal transformation as a fundamentally *complex, integrative and transitional process* is apt. It is an alternative viewpoint of social-systemic change that I have been arguing toward in my current research phase.

Moreover, in my contribution to this dialogue, I would like to bring attention to what I see a fundamental requirement in the relation between progressive governments and social movements: the need for an alternative view of societal transformation.

Previous to my comments here, emphasis has already been made on the prefigurative basis of radical praxis. What could be added to this consensus among us, I think, is the view of societal transformation as a many-sided sociohistorical-cultural process. On my view, there is no utopian endpoint. No final destination. The process of revolutionary transition is constant in that, in the long term, we must constantly strive for better, more progressive and emancipatory conditions. What I am alluding to here is a radical philosophy of history, and also a radical view of social-political praxis.

In the short-term, there are many well developed and advised policies which can set us on our way toward a post-capitalist horizon: worker co-ops, for example, are one such immediate development. But they are not an end. What sort of doors worker co-operatives may open in the future is something we should also always be open to. That goes for all things. Emancipatory reason does not deify or absolutize false ends; it is dialectical and operates on the basis of constant, normative engagement with the particular in relation to the universal – in this case, enlightenment principles of democracy, justice, egalitarianism – are constantly *in practice* whilst *in*

*development*, given the right conditions. What is the most progressive and emancipatory tomorrow may not be so in a year or a decade from now – we may have learned more, developed better systems, or designed even more just modes of organization. The politics of absolute ends is thus a false emancipatory politics.

On the other hand, if in the process of revolutionary transition we must work our way out of capitalism, step by step, inch by inch, the role of progressive governments in the here and now should be seen as an extension of social movements.

Here, I think the notion of “differential transformation” is extremely important. This notion, taking from Lambert Zuidervaat (2007) and advanced in a number of particular ways in my own work, is one that I argue allows for us to do more justice to all of the countless people and movements developing and experimenting with alternatives throughout the world across all sectors of society. Included in this view is the important insight that “significant change occurs at differing levels, across various structural interfaces, and with respect to distinct societal principles” (Zuidervaat). Moreover, “the primary levels in question are social institutions, cultural practices, and interpersonal relations. The primary structural interfaces lie among economy, polity, and civil society. The most relevant societal principles in this context are those of resourcefulness, justice, and solidarity” (Zuidervaat again).

The actual complexity of societal change is immense, but it is not impossible to coherently arrange and organize, from the bottom-up. From political economy to education, psychology, agriculture, technology, and so on – the revolutionary process of transition is many-sided, and progressive governments must learn to undertake a broader integrative and foundational social philosophical view. A part of that foundation, I would argue, concerns an alternative anthropology, epistemology and cosmology. Another part of the foundation concerns a critical retrieval of Enlightenment values; but perhaps that is beside the point given the direction of discussion in our current venue.

In general, what my own position entails is something I’ve discussed in detail in past research papers. In terms of practical political application, I offer several thoughts beginning with the relation between progressive governments and social movements:

*The False Binary:* If a reductive binary between the hierarchical, authoritarian, dominant, leader-reliant form of politics and the more or less alternative, horizontal, participatory grassroots vision of politics has cemented itself in contemporary reified society – what we can say, conclusively, is that this binary is false.

The essence of this binary is that, similar in rationale to a certain number of false enlightenment antinomies, mainstream politics is largely reduced to the institutional realm. It is based on rigid, unresponsive and instrumental models of representation, and also highly reified structures of organization which, I think, we can deduce as also being based on an instrumental and standardizing rationale principled on control and coercion. The political realm, in other words, has become reified; as a concept, politics is a matter of great abstraction and requires critical retrieval.

*Reified Politics:* Within our reified political climate, political parties can of course try to take up more progressive positions. Whether as a result of direct awareness of the requirement or not, left political parties like Corbyn's Labour, Syriza, Podemos, Partido X, UK Green Party, and so on are increasingly using a language which makes claim to the importance of autonomous and participatory movements. Where the binary emerges, however, is precisely the result of how emancipatory politics must necessarily be of participatory and more or less horizontal-democratic form – something we all seem to agree. Change, if sustainable, has to be from the bottom-up. The realm of politics, if critically retrieved, has to begin on the level of the grassroots and work its way up.

In my own two-part article offering a critical intervention regarding issues of praxis in Greece and beyond, I spoke of this binary in relation to deeper debates about theory and practice. I asked: if participatory social movements are the centre of gravity of an emancipatory politics, what role might the party or some other form of representation play in the building of transformative power in effort to transition our way out of capitalism.

Progressive parties are taking new approaches in attempt to create a bridge and, up to this point, they have largely failed. Why? Along philosophical and empirical lines, one part of the answer is found in a recent lesson from Greece: once the transformative power of the movements transferred to the party, the growing tidal wave of grassroots energy receded.

In Greece we witnessed mass mobilization, and the energy of the grassroots was truly inspiring – you could see, however tentative and fragile, a certain degree of transformative power being built. But, ultimately, energy from the streets faded once it began to transfer itself from participatory grounds to the institutional, hierarchical world of contemporary mainstream politics.

When it comes to Corbyn's leadership, it is too early to say how things will play out and what role participatory movements will play in shaping his policies. One thing that is sure is that Corbyn and others working with him should learn from the Greek lesson: the conduits or circuits of grassroots, participatory democratic power – i.e., transformative power, which I see as egalitarian and opposed to coercive power – were degraded, blocked and finally broken, as decisions regarding the future of Greek people and communities became 'out of the hands' of the people.

Syriza, too, it should be said – and this further attests to the point I am striking – ultimately betrayed its own mandate; it failed to transfer or successfully circuit the power of the movements. Maybe I am being harsh on Syriza – Harnecker is right in the quote above that we might attack governments for not making change fast enough. I am the first to understand that societal change is a complex process of transition. However, my issue is not in Syriza struggling to implement its policies in the midst of neoliberal attack after neoliberal attack – we must prepare to confront and defeat elite manoeuvres that are geared toward blocking progressive policy developments. My issue, and where I see one of Syriza's problems, is that it seems to have shut itself off from the movements which energized it into existence. Energy has been lost; a deepening of participatory politics, on an institutional, cultural and interpersonal level has not really been established, when I think it could have been.

*Transformative Power:* So what of the binary? In a sense – and without getting overly theoretical – I would say that what we're actually dealing with is a quasi-paradox playing out politically and socially, rooted in the dilemma of immanence versus transcendence. In the contemporary social-political context – i.e., representative democracy, probably the only form of democracy that capitalism (not to mention hierarchical society *writ large*) can actually sustain – it is unavoidable that horizontal participatory movements engage with some form of representation. To argue otherwise does not correlate with reality.

The reality of reified society and its equally reified politics is that, in order to reveal this binary as false, we must stretch our imaginations and, in turn, understand *how* and *what it means to* build transformative power. The fact

of the matter, I would argue, is that – and herein is the essential problem a theory of *revolutionary transition* must come to grips with – we have to work our way out of the current social-systemic circumstance. The notion of revolutionary sociohistorical-cultural transition is, at this point, vital.

How do autonomous grassroots, participatory movements confront the challenge of maintaining their energy and emancipatory thrust whilst also satisfying the need for radical reformism, the latter likely channelled through the party? How do we begin to transcend the (false) binary between the grassroots and representation, and work toward an alternative participatory democratic and egalitarian society? One cannot answer comprehensively within the limitations of this venue. However, a direction in which lies the answer might be provided. Richard, Christian, Gordon and Penny have already provided several important insights. Adding to the above, I offer a few points of summary based on my research, which I think ties back into our forming of a consensus and also offer practical suggestions of the way forward:

1) Movements are too fragmented and need to establish a form of symbolic solidarity. Differential transformation across distinct and separate social spheres is not enough; it has to cohere. Society as a whole must be transformed. If movements do not find solidarity in common struggle – because, let's face, the struggle is common – efforts toward transforming society are doomed to fail.

2) The issue is not, by and large, a lack of grassroots energy on the radical and progressive fringes of society. It comes and goes, yes; but I feel that the correct analysis suggests that transformative energy is never too far away from bursting back into life – just like Eros, in Marcusean terms, is never too far from bursting through repressive cycles.

The issue is also not one of imagination – I think the so-called “crisis of imagination” is unfounded. The progressive and radical fringes are rich in imagination.

Rather, the issue has to do with understanding what is and how to build *transformative power*. Solidarity – what I call symbolic solidarity, which dialectically maintains the universal and particular is a start (i.e., recognizes particular needs of people and particular claims of individual movements whilst informing and engaging with the universal solidarity of a broader emancipatory social philosophical horizon).

3) Power remains ambiguous. I have yet to read any comprehensive, systematic and detailed analysis which overcomes the ambiguity of power and provides a foundational understanding of how to build transformative – that is, emancipatory, egalitarian power. In fact, generally speaking, most theories of transformative power I've come across are very one-dimensional and tend to base their theory of praxis on half-baked and deeply ambiguous notions of power which lack normativity, cross-disciplinary substantiation, and a broader critical theoretical and empirical footing. Transformative power is a complex, integral and many-sided phenomena. Progressive governments and social movements must come to understand the complexities of, and how to build, transformative power on the basis of participatory, mutually recognitive praxis. They must come to understand, again, in the context of a more foundational social philosophy – critical theory – the differences between coercive and non-coercive power, and how to undertake the process of revolutionary transition in prefigurative and emancipatory ways.

4) On the field of action, Occupy-style movements have organized some fantastic prefigurative experiments, and we've seen over the years participatory movements maturing more and more when it comes to how they attempt to confront and understand the many complexities of transformative power in relation to the process of revolutionary transition. Theory, unfortunately, has largely lagged behind.

The biggest success of a Corbyn government will be defined according to not only whether it can establish a set of policies for the immediate relief of precarious social and economic life, but also how it might put together a plan to assist the process of revolutionary transformation by way of radical reformism that supports the greater autonomy of social movements – the latter being the actual energy behind the process of *revolutionary transition*. The role of Corbyn's Labour, in other words, is not to be the source of emancipatory societal change but a supporter of such change, which must necessarily live in and through prefigurative movements.

5) I think the goal for Corbyn's Labour or any other leftist party, should be to support the grassroots in the development of an alternative social world from within the current system, while working toward the abolishment of the party's own required existence as an entity.



I would go so far to say that this basic thesis signals the general 'truth context' of the current political situation: inasmuch that the success of a Corbyn government will be defined according to whether it can alleviate the immediate precariousness faced by people – i.e., radical reformism – it will also be defined according to its beginning to work toward dismantling representative democracy on behalf of the creation of a more participatory, responsive form of democracy which does not have the innate inclination we observe in history toward domination, coercion and injustice. The very long-term possibility of a revolutionary transition out of capitalism, and the immediate steps toward post-capitalism, depend to a significant degree on the formal establishment of participatory democratic engagement.

In this sense we can say that Corbyn and the Labour Party are legitimate only if they resist old temptations and look toward radical new political horizons, which translates in the increasing *critical diminution of their own hierarchical, authoritarian power* as a political party – that is, *the gradual critical deconstruction of the hierarchical power of the party itself*. Just as the UK Green Party has a policy – at least last I checked – which aims toward the deconstruction of the current representational system for a more participatory democratic system, which I believe also entails transforming or completely doing away with parliament, Corbyn's Labour is going to have to aim for the same.

6) Along these lines, I think we need to move beyond rigid debates between total and stifling hierarchy and the opposite of *horizontalism*. We see all the time, particularly in small scale experiments and case studies, how hierarchy can exist within a more or less horizontal social-political landscape. The notion that best correlates with this reality is what I call 'temporary hierarchy'. Hierarchy is described as temporary because, firstly, it is responsive to the horizontal conditions from which it emerged. Secondly, as a result of its being normatively responsive, it can be dismantled at any time.

The democratization of hierarchy, which, on the level of smaller scale experiments, often translates into recognition that all hierarchy may be dissolved, is a task the radical party must see itself fulfilling. For temporary hierarchy to work on a larger scale, there needs to be a form of normativity which safeguards against the hardening of hierarchy and its potential overthrowing of a participatory politics. What this normativity entails is something I've laid out in other places.

7) I think we need to recognize that the course ahead will not be easy and will present its successes and its failures. The process of revolutionary transition is one of constant work and struggle, likely without end. The main philosophical ethos, I think, which will avoid the reproduction of deep antagonisms is one based on a normative and phenomenological ethics – i.e., a responsiveness to the particular needs of people.

One of the main purposes of a Corbyn government, for me, would be to provide support – financially and also even through the organizing of experts across disciplines and social sectors – to help develop community support networks and programmes. These networks and programmes range from setting up democratic assemblies to helping educate and guide people in the development of worker self-directed enterprises (co-ops); in learning to practice horizontal participation and mutual (non-violent) communication; in organizing technical and even P2P infrastructure; as well as ensuring access to basic communication channels in which needs can be expressed without bureaucratic indifference. Community colleges could be used to help offer free education when it comes to basic practices of individual and collective well-being, as opposed to being orientated toward solely satisfying the needs of the market. Community commons-orientated agriculture – where people can have free access to quality food – is essential. Universal basic income, shortening the work week to three days, strengthening of the unions and of freelancers unions, etc. all go toward an initial re-imagining of the future of work and of society. In short: the policy options are extensive.

Finally, psychological and emotional support, which takes a person-centered approach – and the development of what I call a 'culture of healing', rooted in a critical retrieval of humanistic and enlightenment principles – should also be a primary focus of any progressive government. Transitioning from out of a deeply alienated, individualist world is not easy – it means an entirely different way of relating with one another, our selves and the world. One cannot overstate the damage that has been done within capitalist society when it comes to subject development, interpersonal relations, and even the status of the modern psyche. Inasmuch that revolutionary transition represents emancipation along the lines of labour and how we might organize consumption in a more egalitarian manner, it also represents a process of individual and social healing

consumption in a more egalitarian manner, it also represents a process of individual and social meaning.

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### Christian Fuchs:

A bit of time has passed since we started this discussion. In the meantime Jeremy Corbyn has been the Labour leader for almost four months. In my view, Corbyn has shown that he is a credible leader. Successes have included forcing the Tories to roll back their plans of cutting tax credits for low income earners and to cancel a government contract that provided support for Saudi Arabia's prison system.

At the same time it has become evident that there is a significant amount of MPs in the Parliamentary Labour Party, who constantly attack Corbyn in the media and are quite obviously planning to overthrow him. Even left-liberal media such as the *Guardian* are giving a constant voice to the Blairite attacks on Corbyn. Three selective examples can illustrate this circumstance: On 20 December 2015, Blair's former speechwriter and strategist Peter Hyman argued in a long essay in the *Observer* that Corbyn means an existential crisis for Labour:

*So this is the biggest existential moment in Labour's history. Labour may not survive. And it is not certain if it does whether it will ever win an election again, particularly with Scotland more or less written off. There are two strands, two parties if you like, that will never be happy bedfellows even in the broadest of broad church parties. So either the current Corbyn party will at some point need a home outside the Labour party or the mainstream of the Labour party will need to make common cause with others to forge a new party.*

On December 27, an *Observer* editorial described Corbyn as dogmatic. "Corbyn's own beliefs – on the role of the state, the economy, international relations, the nature of work – feel as though they have barely been modified since the 1970s".

On December 31, Peter Mandelson, who was a cabinet member under Blair and Brown, wrote in a comment in the *Guardian* that Corbyn "does not understand or respect the fact that Labour is a broad church, and that seeking to impose a hard-left blueprint on the party will end up disqualifying Labour from office". With pursuing "his own far-left agenda", Corbyn would risk "Labour civil war".

The interesting thing one can observe is that whereas all sorts of Corbyn opponents are constantly featured in all mainstream media, the voices of the hundreds of thousands active Corbyn supporters are never heard, which means a complete asymmetry of voice and visibility. The mainstream media coverage on Corbyn is a very good example of what Herbert Marcuse described as one-dimensional thought. The key point is not just how ideology is expressed, but also who never has a voice in such public debates and what is not said.

The Blairite opponents of Corbyn have two simplistic arguments that they repeat over and over again. The first one is that the Labour Party cannot win an election under a left-wing leadership. This is a completely static view of politics that assumes that democratic socialism is necessarily unpopular and that a party has to be neoliberal in order to win an election. But elections are battles of political ideas and the result of the next election will certainly not be pre-determined in 2015. Governments face their own contradictions and can become quickly very unpopular when specific events unfold, as Blair's war in Iraq shows. The main problem the Labour Party has faced in the past decades is that it has become ever more indistinguishable from Thatcherism. Corbyn poses a clear alternative to the Tories and has a discernable vision for society, which should be celebrated.

The Blairites' second simplistic argument is that Corbyn started a civil war in the Labour Party because he has a "hard left" agenda. But in fact it is not Corbyn, but the Blairites, who by such public statements aim at fostering such a conflict. They cannot and do not want to accept the failure of Blairism and any alternatives to neoliberal Labour policy agendas. They have started to fight a constant ideological war against Corbyn, in which the mainstream media plays a key role. They blame Corbyn to start a civil war because of being left-wing, but in fact are themselves starting such a war by making their claims. It is classical ideology: The warmongers are blaming their victims for having started the war because "they are different and their difference is an attack".

What we face is a paradoxical situation: There is a large grassroots base of Corbyn that hardly has public visibility and is constantly framed negatively in right-wing ideological attacks. And there is a part of the Parliamentary Labour Party that engages in these attacks just like the Tories and the mainstream media do and gains lots of public voice and attention for doing so.

The only anchor of hope that I see is that the grassroots support movement exerts bottom-up pressure on policy-making in combination with a reform of decision making power in the Labour Party, moving power away from MP towards the grassroots. Gordon asked in this context what the potentials of Momentum are. It is certainly extraordinary that Momentum has already managed to organise many local groups that have the potential to unite the Left by common causes and practice a movement-party-dialectic. It could be the foundation of the democratic networked assemblies whose importance Penny has stressed earlier.

In principle Momentum sounds very promising:

*What does Momentum want to do? Organise in every town, city and village to create a movement for real progressive change. Make Labour a more democratic party, with the policies and collective will to implement them in government. Bring together individuals and groups in our communities and workplaces to campaign and organise on the issues that matter to us (<http://www.peoplesmomentum.com/>).*

But I see three big risks:

1. The first risk is that Labour Party politicians involved in Momentum try to organise this movement like a political party in a top-down manner and thereby destroy the grassroots potentials and alienate activists.
2. The second risk is that Momentum becomes a playing field and battleground of the traditional sectarian left-wing infighting, which would soak up activists' energy and time and would strengthen Corbyn's opponents outside and inside of the Labour Party.
3. The third risk is that Momentum will be too inward-looking and preoccupied with the unavoidable battles with the Blairites and will therefore not focus its primary attention on developing credible democratic-socialist politics for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Gordon argued that it is now important that the movement develops and makes transitional demands. Robert said that the key question is how to build transformative power and suggested concrete contents of radical-reformist politics: universal basic income, strengthening co-ops and peer-to-peer infrastructure, fostering support for alternative communications, freelancer unions, commons-oriented agriculture, the shortening of the working week, free universal education, etc. I agree that these are all key important projects for progressive radical reformism. I think what should be added are the development of digital labour unions, a stress on the importance of increasing capital taxation (especially in light of transnational corporations' constant avoidance of paying tax), concrete suggestion for participatory budgeting projects that can strengthen alternative institutions, and the introduction of an advertising tax.

As a person who was engaged in the formation of the basic income movement in the German speaking world in the first decade of the 2000s, I always find it surprising how underdeveloped the whole discussion about basic income unfortunately still is in Britain. The British Left has not adequately addressed this complex issue. What I learned in the basic income movement in the German-speaking world is the complexity of basic income: it can be a neoliberal demand just like it can be a democratic-socialist demand. Also Milton Freedman supported the introduction of a basic income guarantee as project for rolling back the welfare state and corporate taxation.

The point is to advance a socialist universal basic income that is coupled with capital taxation. In my view, critically observing and challenging capitalist media power has to be a key task of the contemporary Left. Media, culture, the Internet and communications are key arenas of politics. The key challenge for the Left today is to ground a politics that can strengthen and develop the commons and the public good against the neoliberal

attacks that have continued since decades.

There are also two quite immediate challenges for the Left: Syria and Europe. Around 30% of the Labour MPs supported the British airstrikes in Syria. The war in Syria is tremendously complex because it is a clash of many differing political interests. Airstrikes are likely to hit many civilians, whose families may as a result become radicalised by Daesh, which may increase violence and terrorism, which may again increase Western military activity, which may again increase terrorism, etc. so that an endless vicious cycle and spiral of violence is sustained.

It is no doubt that Daesh is a reactionary force that needs to be removed along with Assad. But this also requires a viable democratic and socialist project for Syria and the entire region. The worst mistake the Left can make is to see Daesh as some form of anti-imperialism. It is itself an imperialist force. Miriyam Aouragh argues in this context that the Left is confused about Syria and needs a viable position. As the military intervention continues, public opposition to the military intervention is likely to strongly increase, which is a window of opportunity for both Corbyn and the Left in general, for which it needs to be prepared. At the same time the right-wing ideological rhetoric that presents law and order politics and ever more surveillance as the solution to security threats needs to be challenged. The whole understanding of security in military and national terms is failed. An alternative agenda that stresses the role of welfare and social security for guaranteeing stability in the world is urgently needed.

In 2015, we have seen two very significant and shocking events in European politics: the financial-imperialist extortion of Greece's left-wing government and the racist denial of the human right of asylum to refugees who have fled from war.

What I have found particularly annoying in this context is how many people on the Left have been arguing that Alexis Tsipras is a traitor who has turned into a neo-liberal and can no longer be trusted. They do not see that the organised political front of German capital managed to entirely dominate the agenda and put a gun on Tsipras head, arguing: "Either sign whatever we tell you to sign or your banking and economic system will collapse tomorrow". The tragedy is that given the continued austerity measures, Greece faces a crisis without foreseeable end and is an experimental field of how far neoliberalism can be taken, which means constant suffering for large parts of the Greek people.

Both events have shown that the European Union is *at the moment* not much more than a neoliberal economic project with particularistic political interests that completely lacks a democratic and social policy-dimension. What's happening in Britain is that this right-wing project is being challenged by a far-right agenda that questions those achievements of the EU that are worth defending, such as the European Convention of Human Rights and the free movement of labour in the EU. A left-wing anti-EU agenda would be a complete failure in this context and would only support the racist and nationalist ideology that the Right advances. Instead, what is needed are viable suggestions of how to foster a democratic-socialist Europe.

Many challenges lie ahead for a radical reformist democratic-socialist project.

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### **Penny Cole:**

In my previous contribution I highlighted the historic role of the Labour Party in channelling working class potential and action into achieving reforms through parliament.

If there is no capacity within the UK parliament to offer reform or to ameliorate peoples' conditions, as all parties agree if not in words then in practice, then what is the alternative movement to attract and to organise the working class?

And the same can be said about the European working class. The post-war European project based on free movement of people and better rights and social provision – a kind of extension of post-war German corporatist unionism to the rest of Europe – is in a state of collapse.

Corbyn has said he will nurture the grassroots nature of the movement that elected him, but in reality he is now well engrossed in the parliamentary grind. As Gordon rightly said, Momentum is "centred on sections of the



Labour Party” and with it “movementism becomes an adjunct to institutional politics”. That is to say, like the Varoufakis initiative for Europe, it has a reformist perspective. It believes that it is still possible to win reform through existing structures by democratising them, whilst leaving the underlying economic and social system unchanged.

But with the undermining of the power of the nation state, and the intensification of global capitalism’s insoluble crisis, it is not possible to bring about a contemporary reform like, for example, that which took place in the period after the Second World War.

Where is the Keynesian potential to be found for such a reform? Could you isolate the UK from the institutions of transnationalism? Or reform an EU which has to some extent already become a nascent transnational state – an embryonic form – which is developing into the 21<sup>st</sup> form of the capitalist state?

We cannot compare today to the period when the Common Market was formed, to counter the economic competition and confrontation that had led to war in Europe; and when the UK welfare state was developed under pressure from the working class.

The globalisation process has transformed the nature of both the UK state and the EU. We are at a kind of end of history in terms of the further development of bourgeois democracy.

To quote from William Robinson’s *A theory of global capitalism – production, class and state in a transnational world*:

*The national state is being transformed and increasingly absorbed functionally into a larger transnational institutional structure that involves complex new relations between national states and supra or transnational institutions, on the one hand, and diverse class and social forces, on the other. As national states are captured by transnational capitalist forces they tend to serve the interests of global over local accumulation processes.*

As Leslie Sklair put it in his book *The Transnational Capitalist Class* (2001):

*The truly fundamental change that capitalist globalisation has introduced... is that, for the first time in human history, there is indeed a material and ideological shift towards selling business as such as the only real business of the planet and its inhabitants. So, in the global capitalist system, agents and agencies of the state (among other institutions) fulfill the role of facilitators of the global capitalist project.*

In light of this fundamental change in the way the state fulfills its role, it is hard to conceive how this kind of reform could take place.

The slogan of DIEM25 is “The European Union will be democratised or it will disintegrate...”

But this disintegration is already underway, not under pressure from the masses but under the pressure of the crisis. The German banks have just had to reassure the markets about their asset-base, because it is clear that the Greek debt can never be paid and that Greece will collapse entirely into chaos if the demand continues for them to do it. And at the same time, all European banks are facing debt defaults by heavily indebted commodity and fossil fuel corporations.

In this chaotic period of disintegration of institutions, under the impact of the crisis of the system they exist to represent, channelling all our energies into trying to rescue or democratise them, which really is a counsel of despair. Those who advocate it have a strong tendency to underestimate the European masses, and to say that the only alternative to “saving the institutions” is a descent into right-wing chaos.

Is it therefore impossible that the masses can be won to a programme of transformation that goes beyond the system that oppresses them? Is the hegemony of capitalism in Europe, including the UK, so powerful that the

best we can hope for is to keep the hollowed-out theatre of parliamentary representative bourgeois democracy on the road, because otherwise the masses will support the extreme right? There is no evidence for this.

Robert suggested that one thing missing from the discussion so far is “a more substantiated and developed notion of revolutionary transition”, and he quotes Maria Harnecker saying “progressive governments are often compelled to defend themselves not only from élite obstructionism but also from parts of the left who – failing to understand the complexity of the process and opposed to any tactical flexibility – attack them for not achieving profound social changes fast enough, treating them as if they, and not the élite, were the main enemy”.

Of course it is crucial to engage – albeit critically – with all kinds of movements – protest movements and initiatives such as the constitutional reform being considered by Labour, led by Jon Trickett MP, or Varoufakis and DIEM25. You could not claim to be seeking real democracy otherwise. Some of the criticisms of Evo Morales’ government, for example, seemed to me to simply play into the hands of those who want to reinstate the rule of the élite.

But all too often what “progressive governments” and political parties really want is uncritical support and for the left to shut up and pretend that the ONLY way to achieve a better life for people is THROUGH the existing state, by voting for the aforementioned “progressive government” to go on running the system it has succeeded in temporarily heading up. That doesn’t seem to me to answer the question of *revolutionary transition* that Robert poses.

My first contribution referred to a quote from Tony Negri and whilst I was critical of aspects of it, I praise it and agree with the proposition that the question of power must be reinterpreted for today “in terms of multitudes, in terms of absolute democracy, that is to say in terms of a democracy that goes beyond canonical institutional forms such as monarchy, aristocracy and ‘democracy’.”

My objection to the term “absolute” democracy is first that it seems to refer to abstract multitudes, who don’t have any history and exist not in nations or regions, but float somewhere in a pure form. In my view there are “canonical institutions” that should be preserved and transcended. These would include the constitution, the rule of law, a conception of rights and, of course, democracy.

Extending the conception of law into a framework based on human beings’ law-governed place in nature, and the necessity for our survival to protect our eco-system, would be a positive negation of the current rights-based laws.

What is the form of movement/organisation that can bring about this revolutionary transformation? I believe that Negri is trying to think about this with his demand for a critique of horizontalism. Other people thinking about this include Jodi Dean, who critiques the tendency to make the individual’s “feeling” or needs into the main criteria, suggesting that this weakens movements and leaves the status quo intact – for of course, an individual cannot make a revolution, that’s for sure!

Is the form of movement/organisation that we need at this point simply an insoluble mystery? Or can we make this concept of transcending (by negating and simultaneously preserving) into a practical proposition and the basis for a movement. To repeat what I said in my first contribution here: “People are moved to action as a result of their class and social connection with the necessity for change that is the essence of the current political, economic and ecological crisis.” To build a Real Democracy Movement requires us to think what form of organisation can express this essence and become a vehicle for revolutionary transformation.

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**Gordon Asher (again, with thanks to Leigh French):**

There is so much that seems interesting and important in what’s been said by other contributors here. I’m going to restrict myself to three related issues that I hope raise important questions for the radical (non-authoritarian/hierarchical) left: Democracy; Neoliberalism and the Nation State; The EU and Possible Exits.

*Democracy:* The so called ‘representative democracy’ system (intimately tied to party politics – with parties rooted

in the nation state as container – Bookchin (2009)) or the UK (and of its constituent national territories) is neither of these things. It is not representative of, nor accountable to, those for whom it is claimed to be. Nor is it *genuinely* democratic. In that it does not lead to people actually being the decision makers – to people having, to the greatest degree possible, the ultimate power over decisions and policies, regarding all aspects of society, to the extent that they are likely to be affected by them. Rather, it has tended towards hierarchical, authoritarian, centralised rule through a set of institutions, systems and relations – electoral systems, political parties, constitutional structures and powers, limits on political ‘debate’, voice and participation, etc.

These, as we see across much of the supposedly democratic world today, leave real power in the hands of the wealthy and powerful. They have served to increasingly situate the governance previously provided by national or local states in the hands of formal and informal institutional arrangements of governing outside and beyond-the-state. It are these arrangements that are dubbed post-political or post-democratic (I prefer the term post-politics – referring to governance through technocratic neoliberal consensus – as post-democracy invokes a presumption that democracy was previously existent) and which give a much greater role to private economic actors *and* to parts of civil society (non-elected agencies). In explaining these ensembles of governance, as based in such compositions, we evidently need to get beyond what’s been popularised and in doing so partialised as a democratic disenfranchisement merely constituting ‘elites’ and ‘banksters’ (Swyngedouw, 2005).

It is vital to recognise (as Penny outlined previously) that ‘representative democracies’ are nested within (and indeed serve to maintain and evolve) much wider formal and informal, internal and external networks and structures of institutional and relational power that serve to further foreclose notions of legitimacy, accountability and participation (e.g. the EU, the UN, the World Bank, the IMF etc.) under conditions in which market forces ultimately set the rules. Indeed, the growing importance of these flexible and shifting alliances and partnerships at different levels of governance is itself a factor driving processes of political globalisation (Cerny, 1997).

This hegemonic (mis)conception is sold to us as democracy, when in reality it is merely a useful handmaiden of (symbiotic with and utilised to justify) rapacious capitalism across much of ‘the West’ (and elsewhere). It serves to manufacture, maintain and evolve the consent of the populace (Chomsky, 1995) as well as justifying (increasingly through discourses of security) discipline and control in the interests of neoliberalism’s state-corporate nexus.

Much of present debate takes place within this hegemonic paradigm – as if there is no alternative, as if this is as close to actual democracy as is possible. Whereas Daniel Murray in Sarah Amsler’s wonderful new book ‘The Education of Radical Democracy’ speaks to many of the issues we need to be discussing when conceiving and implementing genuine, radical democratic alternatives:

*Radical democracy has been conceived largely either as a reformist project of a more participatory and more deliberative nation-state or through hegemonic identities such as ‘the people’. The radical democracy project of the alterglobalization movement challenges these conceptions, breaking from current forms of political organization and taking participation, deliberation, difference and autonomy as fundamental principles. (Murray, in Amsler, 2015, p80)*

Murray’s identifications of reformist projects of a more participatory and deliberative nation state are recognisable in recent debates on democracy in Scotland around the independence referendum – that can in significant part be viewed as based on ontological and methodological nationalism (where the nation state

container is assumed as a natural and pre-given form, rather than challenged as a human social construct intimately linked to capitalism’s governmentality – neoliberalism’s state-corporate nexus). Similarly, recent debates on democracy around Corbyn’s election and the creation of Momentum can be seen as populist in nature. Earlier in this dialogue I explored populism and its central appeal to and conception or attempted formation of ‘the people’ – and further discussion of nationalisms follows.

Murray’s subsequent conception of a critical challenge to these projects can be seen as transformational – participatory democracy instituted across all spheres of society, aimed at people having control and voice with regard to all decisions that affect them, to the extent that they do. Democracy here is understood as centrally

regard to all decisions that affect them, to the extent that they do. Democracy here is understood as certainly concerning agonistic pluralism (Mouffe, 2000) as troubled by dissensus (Ranciere, 2015), in prefiguration. Further, as envisioning and working towards attachments and care, communities and societies, in a world that moves beyond the limits and oppressions of nation states and of 'the peoples'.

How then do we move, from the present dominant paradigm and realities of so-called representative democracy, towards the kind of genuinely participatory, radical democracy that Murray and Amsler associate with the 'alterglobalization movement'?

Might it be possible to utilise – i.e. build on and through – those first reformist conceptions of radical democracy that Murray outlines (conceptions that are reflected in the proposals and practices of, amongst other organisations/movements on the broad left, Corbyn's tentatively social democratic Labour Party and organisations such as Momentum (<http://www.peoplesmomentum.com>), as well as party political alliances such as RISE (<http://www.rise.scot>) and campaigning groups like RIC (<http://radical.scot>) in Scotland) towards a participatory democracy that is oriented to social relations beyond the nation state?

Is it possible to envision and shape these projects, as Robert has suggested, as both improvements on the status quo, and as steps towards such relations? How might the radical left(s) offer qualified support that is based on critique and an orientation towards transformational/revolutionary democracy; thus moving from (and in part through improved forms of) representation to participation? (Evolving movements and actual *parallel* institutions that can undertake such struggles, while prefiguring the values and objectives they espouse.)

### **Neoliberalism and the Nation State**

*Nation:* States are not natural but historically contingent, ongoing political constructs, reflective of power struggles of empire and colonialism. The contemporary nation state is intimately tied to capitalism both internally and externally.

One understanding of neoliberalism conceives it as an evolving form of governmentality and re-organisation of the state itself (an ever deeper penetration of any notion of sovereignty by neoliberalism): 'a mode of intervention that profoundly re-shapes social forms by acting on the conditions, especially the legal conditions, under which society operates' (Noys, 2010). A continual form of state intervention so that competitive mechanisms can play a regulatory role at every moment and every point in society to achieve a general regulation of society by the market – the creation of competitive logics/rationalities (Davies, 2015). The UK's institutions, systems of law and governance, its pursuance of economics and politics, sit within that, not aside or separate from it; but as fundamental functioning, reproductive participants in it.

In international law, sovereignty means that a government possesses full control over affairs within a territorial or geographical area or limit. If the UK (and also any present notion of/proposal for a so-called 'independent' Scotland) exists as fully within and reproducing international capital relations, then to what extent can it be 'sovereign' (within the realities of a nexus of powerful governments, institutions and financial interests: US, EU, NATO, UN, IMF, World Bank, WTO)?

As such, there is surely a need for the radical left's tactics and strategies to be oriented to a society and world beyond capitalism *and* the nation state (for it is inherently intertwined with neoliberalism).

*Ontological and Methodological Nationalism:* It seems then necessary in our thoughts and actions (visions, strategies and tactics for transformation) to move beyond ontological and methodological nationalism – i.e. the 'common sense' naturalisation/assumption of the nation state as pre-given container. To, as Graeber (2013) amongst others proposes, conceive of transformation/revolution as not limited to/within nation state containers but as supra/transnational (and oriented to a world beyond the nation state).

*National Populism:* Appeals to populist nationalisms are increasingly prevalent in contemporary political discourse, both in Scotland from the SNP through RISE and RIC and considerable sections of the Yes voting left in the Scottish 2014 referendum (which needs to be distinguished – for too often it is not – from both the considerable non-left Yes vote and the significant proportion of the left that voted No, or did not vote at all), and more widely (as for instance across the Labour party) to so-called 'British values' and 'British/English identity'.



*The EU and Possible Exit:* The EU represents an utilisation of ontological nationalism (and through a series of often contested and contradictory processes serves to combine, restructure and relate the nation states that constitute it, while engaging with other blocs, states and transnational bodies and organisations). Both the mainstream 'Stay' and mainstream 'Leave' positions and campaigns can be seen as nationalistic in nature. As is the SNP's stance of 'independence in Europe'.

The EU is not, and was not in origin, benign or benevolent. It is structurally and deliberately, fundamentally not un- but *anti*-democratic and is at the forefront of deepening and expanding contemporary neoliberalisations. In particular, we can determine this through so-called 'austerity' measures – in reality an example of 'disaster capitalism' (Klein, 2008), the rapid-fire corporate-state re-engineering of societies reeling from shock: privatisations (of public services, utilities and jobs, including frontal assaults on what remains of a welfare settlement), enclosures of the commons (a continual precondition for capitalist accumulation), deregulations, tax cuts/exemptions for the wealthy and corporations on top of corporate-welfare 'bailouts', accompanied by state and corporate securitisation/ militarisation and the concomitant rise of a 'surveillance society'.

Thus, attacks on the remnants of the limited freedoms and rights achieved through struggle – on free speech and assembly, and wider workers' and human rights – are being 'justified'. These reflect the debt-creating, extractionist, sovereignty-destructive, race-to-the-bottom, neoliberal 'structural adjustment' policies of the Washington consensus enforced on much of the Global South for decades. These are now selectively brought to bear 'at home' with a vengeance, under the cover of 'necessary responses' to contemporary crises. Crises they will inevitably continue to exacerbate in a downward spiral of deepening poverty, inequality, and oppressions. Recent events in Greece provide a stark example of such realities and the Troika's policies, practices and relations.

The EU also plays a central role (alongside the US and NATO – and its continual global expansion) in the ongoing militarisation of the continent; engagement in illegal, immoral and illegitimate wars and occupations; and the deepening and expansion of neo-colonialism across the globe. Further, rather than combatting the existential dangers of climate chaos, resource depletion and environmental degradation, its policies and practices are serving to further exacerbate these threats.

It is worth noting that all the above critiques would apply to the mainstream views of, and present options for, a 'separated' (to the extent that is even possible within a globalised neoliberalism) UK or Scotland.

*DiEM, Corbyn and the EU:* It seems worth asking where and how might a project like Varoufakis's recently formed DiEM (<https://diem25.org>), with its claim to be 'a movement' working and calling for the 'democratisation of the European Union' (through a conception of representative democracy within a capitalist paradigm) relate to present discussions? How does and might it relate to existing movements, organisations, projects and parties?

Is such a 'movement' and/or its objectives and means of achieving them radically reformist in a way that is worth engaging with in the manner outlined by Robert and others in this discussion? Varoufakis's position is certainly not radical, centred as it is on 'a commitment to parliamentary democracy, to liberalism, to the sovereignty

of parliament' (Varoufakis & Kutchinsky, 2016) and DiEM does not appear to be the kind of radical, autonomous or participatory movement that Richard describes (though it does appear to desire to work with such movements).

Further, where does Corbyn stand (with/within a very divided Labour party, though that is also true of the Tories and RISE – which presumably may play into the hands of others such as the SNP and its consensus democratic centralism, for whom a vote either way in the referendum could be portrayed as a victory) in relation to initiatives such as DiEM, and other reformist/progressive projects such as Plan B (<https://www.euro-planb.eu>) and Another Europe is Possible (<http://www.anothereurope.org>) – all of which appear considerably further to the left than UK Labour's position, which for the present at least seems intimately comfortable with(in) contemporary capitalism?

*The Left(s) and the EU:* We regularly see those on the left recommending exit from the EU asked to provide some notion of what this would look like: how a nation state would operate and relate to other states and organisations (trans/supra national bodies and networks – such as the EU, the UN, IMF etc.), within/under a

globalised neoliberal project, in ways that would speak to espoused values.

However, it is surely equally important to ask those on the left who recommend remaining within the EU – what that would look like from a radical, left perspective: how they envision that. Rather than continuing down a path of ever deeper, expanding neoliberalisation – how they propose to roll back and transform the EU's neoliberal project.

Which of the various options (and achievable possibilities) provides a better terrain and set of possibilities for deepening and expanding ongoing struggles for eco-social justice? (As an aspect of that – which does the least harm – not merely within the nation state container of the UK, but with regard to others, through our policies and relations globally?) .

*'Leave, But' and 'Remain, But':* Perhaps it might be useful to think, organise and work in terms of 'Leave, But' and 'Remain, But' positions on the EU Referendum?

The Yes/No question that is being posed is in many ways diversionary. Much of the critique of existing anti-democratic apparatuses it seems we can collectively agree on. The actual question being 'What else?' Which is where differences in underlying orientations become clearer.

In this Richard's position developed during the Independence Referendum in Scotland (Gunn, 2014; Asher & French, 2014) may prove useful. In problematising either stance (proffered by the 'Yes' and 'No' campaigns) as any kind of morally superior, ready-made solution his proposal concerned taking a position that would serve to orientate the radical left regardless of which side won the referendum and enable struggles speaking to both resistance and necessary alternatives. A position that goes beyond the limits of institutionalist thinking and options (the neoliberal order of things), reformulating issues 'in an interactive way'; 'most important – it would support the autonomy of social movements. (By the "autonomy" of social movements, I mean their freedom from all institutional structures – for example, states and corporations. I mean social movements' freedom to develop in their own interactive terms.): 'a peace movement, an ecologically-sensitive movement, a movement for social justice and a movement for participatory democracy'.

Evolving Richard's stance in the contexts of the EU Referendum to propose voting 'Leave, But' or 'Remain, But' provides us with positions that enable rejections of pro-capitalist *and* national populist agendas espoused by *both* the main 'Remain' and 'Leave' campaigns. Such 'But' positions are oriented to transformative, prefigurative processes of being and becoming that move beyond the state-corporate nexus, beyond both nation state and capitalism – initially at least, through revolutionary reforms – doing so through participation in and engagement with movements.

These positions are concerned with attempting to ensure, that we have the most promising terrain to work on and movements to work with, *whatever* the actual referendum result. Further, to ensure that our time, energy and commitments during the referendum period (and after) are focused on *our* chosen goals and priorities – not taken up and distracted by agendas set by institutional politics.

Such positions could unite much of the radical left as actually focused on eco-social justice, and on the evolution of the kinds of movements and assemblies that the other authors in this dialogue have proposed, rather than being focused on (and constrained by) institutional choices and avenues such as the referendum and party politics. Amongst other benefits, this could avoid the splitting of the radical left that we have witnessed both during, and even more starkly since, the Independence Referendum in Scotland.

*Revolution/Transformation:* A central question in what we have been discussing in these exchanges seems to be – what and whom are the necessary agents of change and transformation? Where do we locate our agency and most effectively use it?

How do we move from our contemporary *here's* towards our utopian *there's*? And, in doing so (for the necessary radical democratic and social politics), does this involve party or self-organisation (or movements that are neither) – or both/all of these?

How do and should such groups engage with each other in ways that speak to the transformation of social relations towards a radical democratisation of the Commons – i.e. across all spheres of society, as entailing projects for the revolutionising of not just political or economic life, but every aspect of human existence.

If we accept that revolution/transformation (viewed as an ongoing process of being and becoming, rather than being conceived of as sudden rupture) is only practically possible in the contexts of our historical present (at least in significant part – for wider public support and engagement is essential and we are where we are in terms of movements and parallel institutions on the UK radical left), through ‘revolutionary reforms’ (non-reformist reforms oriented to transformation of knowledges, subjectivities and consciousness, of social relations and institutions) – how should the radical left proceed strategically and tactically?

How do we broaden the kinds of dialogues and engagements we are having here across our movements, groups, organisations, unions and political parties – and through doing so build the sort of transformative power for revolutionary societal transition that Robert discusses?

In opening that question up to a looser categorisation that’s more explicitly inclusive of non-branded strategies and tactics, of non-coercive relationships and shared ethical commitments (Day, 2005), how do we evolve our social movements, groups, organisations, and ourselves so as to enable multiple approaches for engaging and forming practical affinities across all these?

And through doing so, how do we make changes in what Fielding & Moss (2011) describe as ‘radical increments’, whilst understanding these processes to be in constant flux of makings and unmakings, rather than being any mechanical ratchet of gains. Thereby articulating such changes within and orienting ourselves to broader, transformational, utopian visions in their messy plurality – and doing so, sustainably, with the kind of temporal urgency that ever deepening crises, especially those of climate change and its consequences, demand?

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Robert C. Smith is a writer and researcher in the fields of philosophy and Frankfurt School critical theory, with special interest in an interdisciplinary course of study that ranges widely between (although not limited to) psychology, existential-phenomenology, epistemology, anthropology, history, science, economics, education, and systems theory. While his work focuses primarily around the advancement of Frankfurt School critical theory, his main research interests (to date) include questions of ideology, power and violence; dominating social systems; epistemology and anthropology; foundational theories of social transformation and radical democratic alternatives; as well as broad interdisciplinary social critique. He also writes on many intersecting topics including totalitarianism, authoritarianism, politics and contemporary protest movements, globalisation, the commons, postmodernism, aesthetics, subjectivity, collectivity, multidimensional and holistic theories of knowledge, human rights and ecology. Robert is the author of several books and almost 100 articles. In the summer of 2016, he will be switching his focus to a decade-long research effort concerning Philosophy of Science. Robert is the founder of Heathwood, and currently serves as executive editor.



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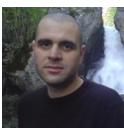
Richard Gunn lectured on political theory at the University of Edinburgh from 1975 to 2011. Between 1987 and 1997, he was a member of the Common Sense editorial collective. He currently writes and researches on an independent basis. His personal website (<http://richard-gunn.com>) contains papers dating from the 1980s to more recent years. Richard is an Editor and Fellow at Heathwood.



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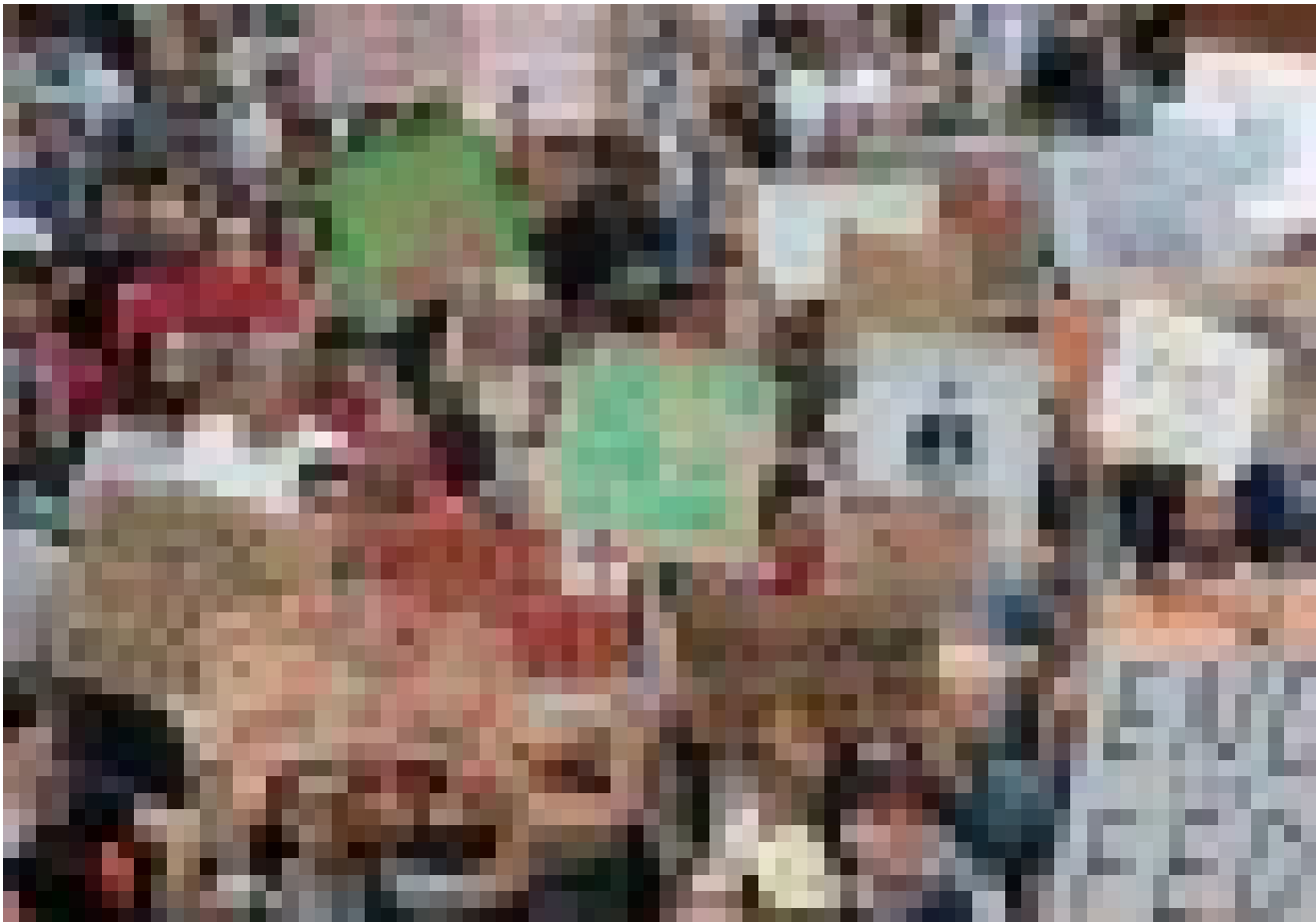
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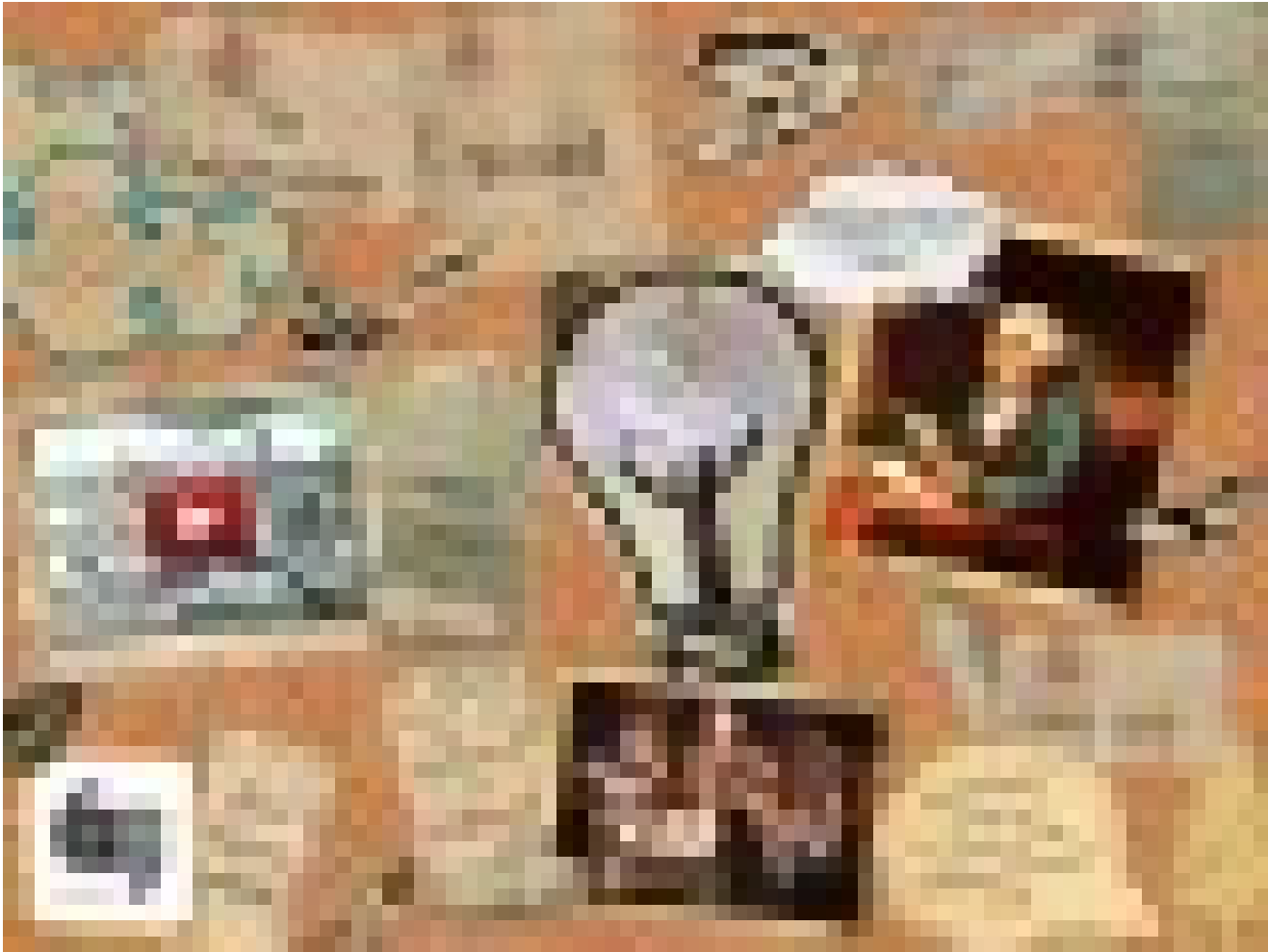
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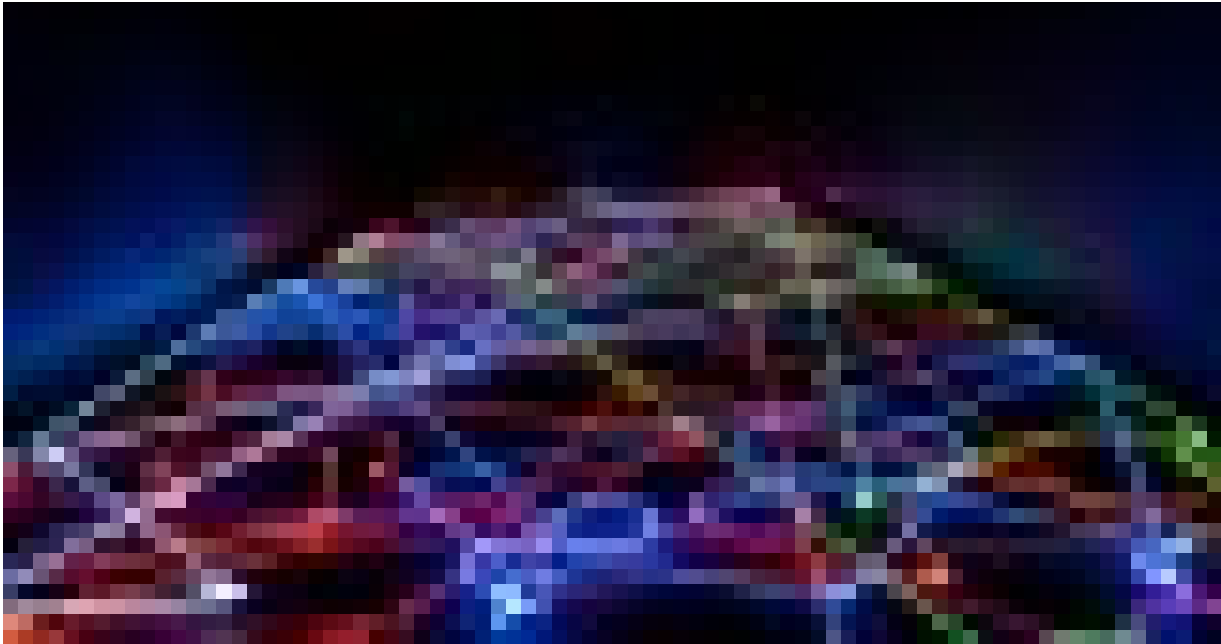


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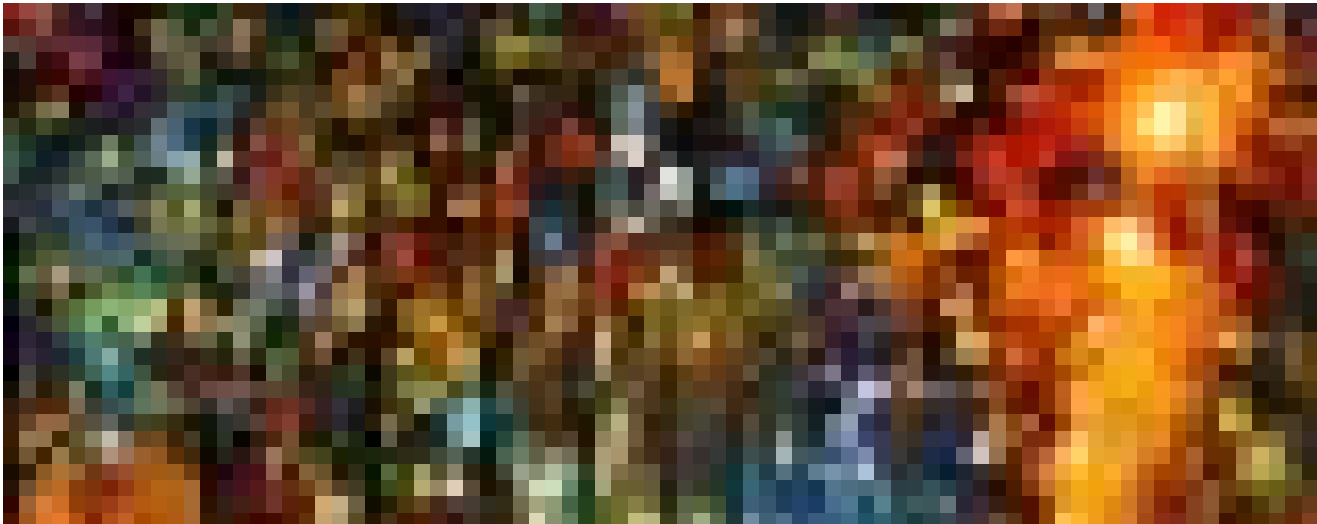




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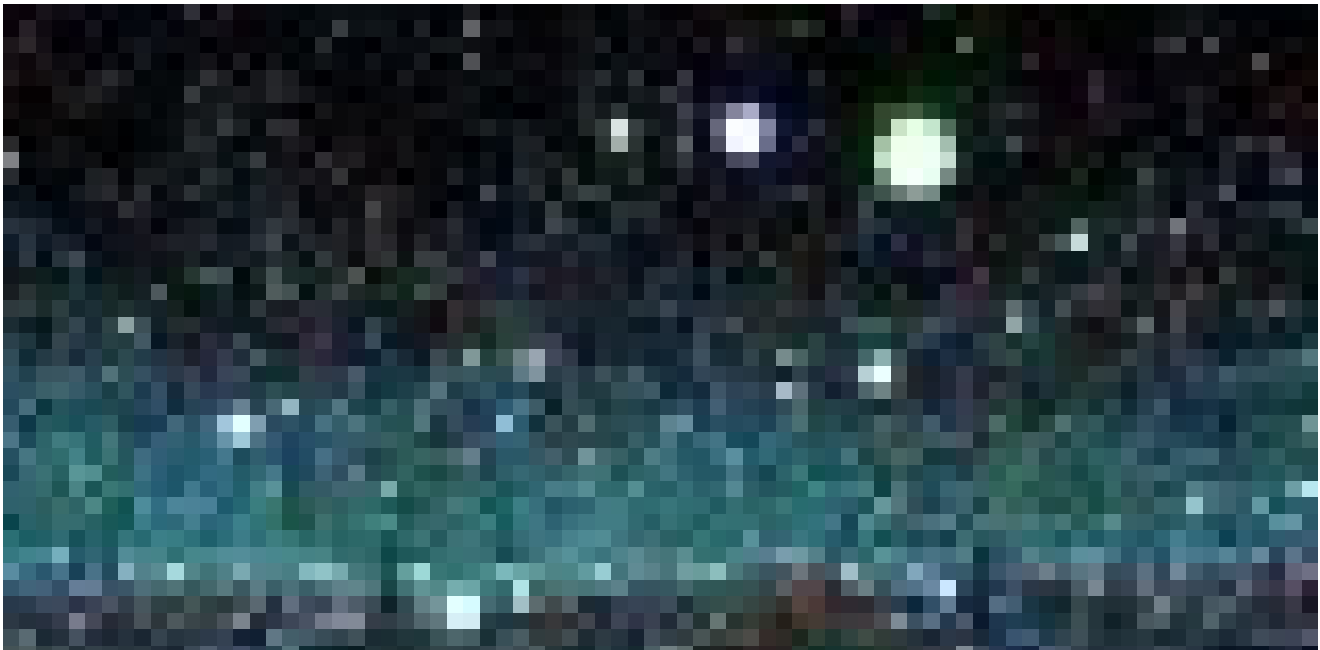


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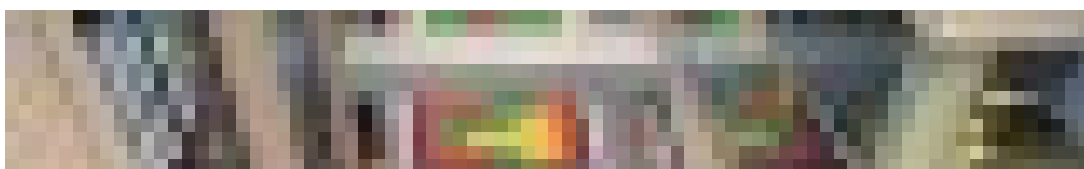
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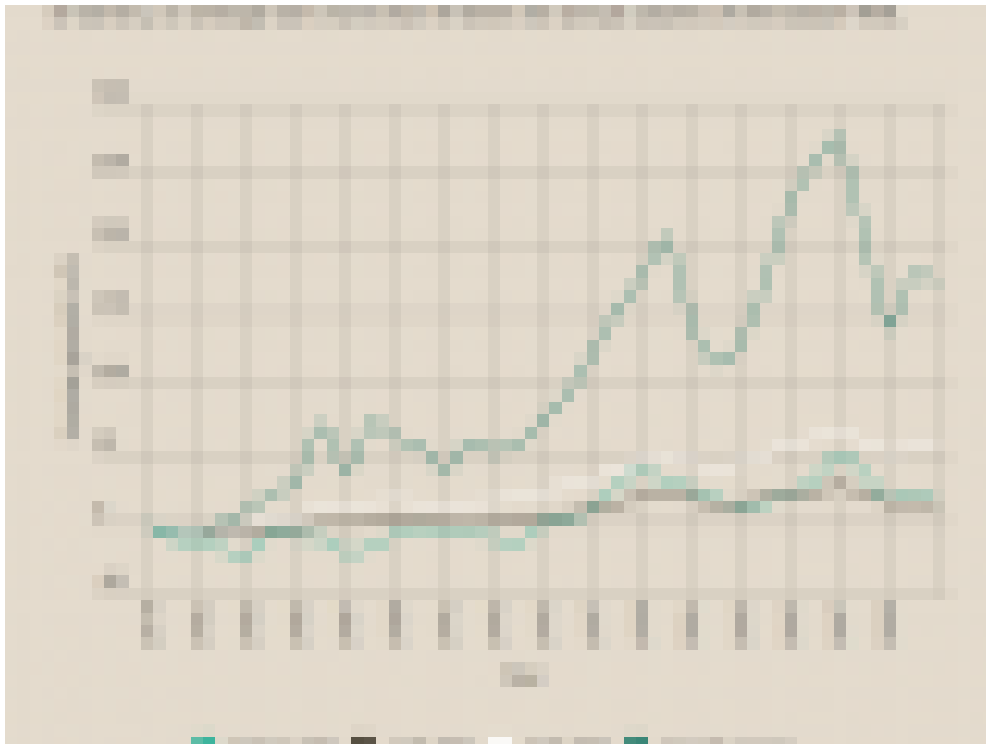
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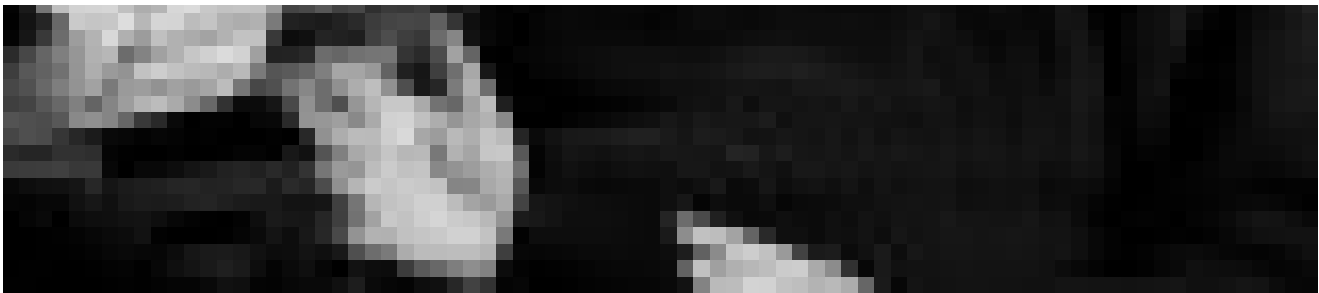
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