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Radical Philosophy and the New Social Movements

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We all know how many ways philosophers, radical or otherwise, can think of to disagree. Sometimes the disagreements are too trivial for anything but make-work projects, sometimes too profound to be non-trivial (who really loses sleep over the question of whether everything is an appearance?), and they often involve theorists from different traditions talking past one another. Exceptions are when those who share common macro values disagree in evaluating a living phenomenon over which nonphilosophers also disagree. Such is the case regarding the evaluation of new social movements on the parts, respectively, of Barbara Epstein and of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe:

Through the late eighties radical movements have become increasingly diffuse and divided from one another. Many activists try to comfort themselves by arguing that there is a lot going on on the left; many projects, many organizations. But the fact remains that this activity is not very visible, even to the left itself. The right is in power and has succeeded not only in setting the terms of public discussion but also in winning broad public support. The left has not been able to put forward any effective challenge.¹

We are living . . . one of the most exhilarating moments of the twentieth century: a moment in which new generations, without the prejudices of the past, without theories presenting themselves as "absolute truths" of History, are constructing new emancipatory discourses, more human, diversified and democratic.²

The objects of these evaluations are the new social movements—women's, peace, ecological, municipal, antiracist, gay and lesbian, and so on—which in the 1980s and early 1990s have increasingly become the focus of attention for socialist and other radical theorists and which have also come to be important players in local and sometimes national and transnational politics.

Theorizing about the New Social Movements

From the perspective of socialist vanguard party politics, such movements are regarded as "spontaneous" expressions of popular discontent worthy of attention if they can be made to serve the aims of revolutionary politics claimed to advance the objective interests of the working class. More recent attention to the new social movements, however, rejects any approach that diminishes their importance in terms either of their goals or of their potential as crucial players in a radical transformation of society. Current debates concern the related questions of whether or how the aims of social movements should be prioritized and how, if at all, their activities might be coordinated.

At a limit approaching vanguardism, there is the opinion of Leo Panitch and Ralph Miliband that

these movements have undoubtedly enlarged and enriched the meaning of socialism. All such movements are an essential part of the coalition of forces on which a socialist movement must depend. However, no such "new social movement" can obviate the need for a socialist party (or parties). Nor can they replace organized labor as the main force on which a socialist movement must rely.³

At another limit is the sort of position expressed by Gavin Kirching:

Left activity should . . . not be directed to "making socialists" at all. For if this is not something that can be done within the conventional parameters of politics then a Left political activity should not be about "creating socialists" but about involving people in specific struggles around specific issues.⁴

Between these positions are those that call for some sort of association—a "democratic alliance," as Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers call it⁵

—which is more than a series of ad hoc coalitions but less than a political party. Among many other discussions of this topic are those of Sheila Rowbotham and the other authors of the influential *Beyond the Fragments*, Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, Jean Cohen, Stanley Aronowitz, and Laclau and Mouffe.⁶ With the important exceptions of Claus Offe and Rudolph Bahro, who make reference to the Green Party, and of Sheila Collins, in her defense of the Rainbow Coalition's relation to the Democratic Party,⁷ the forms such associations might take are left unspecified.

One reason for this is that we now have a generation of radicals who have experienced the shortcomings both of organized left-wing party politics and of such things as the student and antiwar movements in efforts toward a social transformation (indeed, who often find themselves confronting neoliberal political hegemony instead) and who are accordingly cautious about making organizational prescriptions. Another source of indecision, however, is that there are disagreements with theoretical implications. For example, while Aronowitz seeks ways to ascertain how one social movement may come to acquire the “moral authority” enabling it “to set the agenda for left politics,” Cohen and Rogers insist that an alliance be built around a “democratic principle” that precludes any such privileged role.⁸ These are not the sorts of disagreements that can be resolved by appeal to conditions for organizational effectiveness, since they involve contested theoretical claims. Thus it is neither surprising nor inappropriate that a good deal of debate pertaining to the new social movements has been highly theoretical in nature. Nonetheless, it seems to me that the main arguments are still too abstract.

Some contributions to the debate ought to be set aside, since despite their colorful prose, they are easily seen to be pejoratively ideological in rushing to conclusions by grossly misrepresenting positions they contest or by advancing transparently unsound arguments. An example of the first tendency is the sweeping attack by Ellen Meiksins Wood on nearly all the left champions of new social movements, when she incorrectly attributes to them the view that social transformation will come about through “a non-antagonistic process of institutional reform” led by intellectuals and motivated by “a disembodied democratic impulse.”⁹ An example of the second sort of dead end is Perry Anderson's prioritization of working-class struggle over women's liberation on the ground that the latter is essentially individualistic, being rooted in “the division

of labor between the sexes," which is "a fact of nature: it cannot be abolished, as can the division between classes, a fact of history."¹⁰ How could Anderson have failed to acquire at least secondhand knowledge of the mountain of feminist literature attacking such an identification of sex and gender?

To be distinguished from these sorts of intervention are attempts to construct a theory, or a metatheory, of society by reference to which social movements may be situated. One example is the concept of "social positions" sketched by Bowles and Gintis in which power is "heterogeneous," and another is the social ontology explicated by Laclau and Mouffe based on the inescapable "nonfixity" of "social positions."¹¹ Or, arguing from the side of prescribed working-class prioritization, there is Milton Fisk's distinction between a society's "basic framework," which is an economic structure, and its "stimulus causes," which may be any of a number of extraclass oppressions or struggles against oppression.¹² Reflection on these attempts usefully structures thought about social movements and their possible relations to radical social transformation; and the debates they have sparked, such as those between Laclau and Mouffe and Norman Geras¹³ and between Fisk and his critics,¹⁴ illustrate how deep the philosophical roots of these political disputes go.

However, as the debates enter the 1990s, they begin to take on a "stuck record" character, the form of which is familiar to any student of the history of philosophy. Initial positions get staked out with reference to some live question (e.g., about the relation of science to religion in the case of medieval debates over nominalism and realism or about determinism in history with respect to controversies over laws and explanation in nineteenth-century German and again in twentieth-century Anglo-Saxon philosophy of history). Heated debate soon loses all but perfunctory reference to its originating questions. And warring camps, rallying around heroes and attacking villains, find alternative language in which to repeat abstract charges and counter-charges. In the case of debates over new social movements, positions are reiterated over whether the working class should be taken as primary in strategies for radical social change, and whether such strategizing can or should be grounded in foundational theory of social philosophy.

Now what would count as an appropriate answer to such questions depends in part on how key terms—notably, "primary" or "foundational"—are meant, but even an answer that makes sense can fail to

respond to questions that need answering. As a first step to formulate questions and to hypothesize at least directions for response to them, I prescribe that radical philosophers enter the terrain of actual politics. By this I do not mean just that radical philosophers should, according to the accepted formula, preface the statement of their theories with admonitions to make philosophy relevant to struggle and conclude with comments about political strategy, but that they should engage in what might be called, with reference to the topic of this chapter, the “critical interrogation” of social movements. Since consistency requires that the chapter itself engage in such critical interrogation in a way that is atypical of philosophical essays (radical or otherwise), perhaps I shall be forgiven for indulging in a bit of autobiography to introduce this concept.

In an effort to relate socialism to democracy, I found that at nearly every crucial point, “data” available only through internal critiques of movement politics were required in order to make theoretical advances. Accordingly, I prescribed that democratic-socialist researchers undertake this activity,¹⁵ hoping readers would not notice the nearly complete absence of such concrete inquiry in the very work prescribing it and that others would undertake the called-for studies. The gap was noticed, however, and I was not to escape my own prescription. The reason for this was that the Canadian Society for Socialist Studies had undertaken to publish its 1988 annual on the theme of new social movements,¹⁶ and I was hardly in a position to avoid doing editorial work on the project. Nor do I regret doing so.

We sent letters to a large number of radicals who were active in social movements in Canada asking them to share with our readers something of the history of their movements and to reflect on their strengths and weaknesses as potential players in a radical social transformation. The result was a mixed bag of contributions by those who had time to write something and with different relative emphases on descriptive accounts and prescriptions. We found that we could sort out those parts of an account that were rooted in actual experience and those deduced from radical theories some authors brought with them to the project, and thanks to direct acquaintance with some of the movements, we knew that alternative, sometimes strongly conflicting, accounts were possible. Still, the range of movements represented was broad: parent power in Toronto, a standing International Women’s Day committee, defense of abortion clinics, an organization of visible

minority women, a coalition of peace movements, gays against the police, a coalition of trade unions in Quebec, an organization of disabled women, a labor-ecology alliance, and others.

Reading the critical accounts was most enlightening. Putting aside (as far as one can) ideas already formed about how social movements might relate to radical change, we read and reread the contributions, trying to draw conclusions rooted in the authors' own critical reflections. We concluded that the fruit of much more such interrogation is required on the part of radical theorists addressing the new social movements. Indeed, if I am not mistaken, the most important radical theorizing to date has been carried on in just this way, namely, in critical reflection by socialists on trade-union and other working-class movements and by feminists on movements of women. More specifically, common characteristics of otherwise quite diverse movements challenge some socialist-theoretical preconceptions about the new social movements and suggest ways that philosophers might participate in projects of radical transformation.

New Social Movements: Some Characteristics

Some features of the movements discussed in the Socialist Studies publication are well known to movement activists, old and new. Chief among these are the money problem, the problem of developing leadership, the problem of momentum, and the problem of burnout. The authors seem to place a high priority on ensuring that however leadership is developed and exercised, this not be carried out at the expense of organization democracy, and one senses a less moralistic, more sympathetic approach to the inevitable toll of burnout on a movement's members. More interesting for the purpose at hand than these problems are two features often misrepresented in left-wing conceptions: that movement participants are content to operate within the boundaries of existing states while shunning either revolutionary or reformist political party activity, and that these movements are single-issue associations. Neither characterization is adequate to ways the activists we listened to regard their efforts, and at least the second supposes a paradigm inappropriate to conceptualizing the new social movements or a project of radical social transformation to which they might contribute.

Contrary to the notion of social movements as primarily content to maneuver within currently constituted states, we found general skepti-

cism about the state reported by authors in the collection. Sometimes this is reflected in central debates over directions carried on within a movement, such as is reported by Susan Prentice, when she discusses the controversy between those who wanted the main emphasis of the day-care movement in which she is involved to be on community-run, local day care and those who wanted state-run day care.¹⁷ Even those in the latter camp, however, recognized that democratic control of the quality of state-run day care and continuing community input are essential, and they shared with members of other movements a realization that all levels of the state in Canada work much more against accessible, quality day care than for it. Thus, at the same time that they were concerned to press appropriate state bodies to make gains, movement activists almost never saw this as the only goal, and achievements were always conjoined with appreciation that such gains are precarious.

A more accurate way of regarding the relation of new social movements to the state than that of simply asking how far they pursue goals through it is the approach of Offe. The collection in which his recently translated essay on the topic appears is dedicated to examining "the changing boundaries of the political" occasioned by the growth of the new social movements. Offe characterizes something as "political" when it is considered an appropriate candidate to be a matter of binding public policy (arrived at by generally recognized means). His claim is that the new social movements have sometimes succeeded in forcing what had been merely private concerns into forums of public debate over whether they should be political concerns and sometimes in making them political in this sense.¹⁸ Thus regarded, the new social movements are engaged in a far more radical enterprise than the caricature suggests—namely, challenging the contours of the public and the private.

Similar comments apply to the stance of the social movements toward political parties. Here again, it would be wrong to classify them as either anti- or proparty. One reason members of social movements resist subsumption in party politics is that the shifting of alliances is seen as making this difficult. A more general worry has to do with a bias for participatory democracy built into movement politics: it is, after all, the belief that direct action by voluntary movements of people is possible and desirable that contributes to their joining social movements. The general skepticism about political parties is that they will insist on mediating between movement aims and action. At the same time, just as the state is recognized simultaneously as an obstacle and as a locus of po-

tential gain, so are parties, or at least parties that have some claim to being of the left.

This is quite evident in the case of Canada's social-democratic New Democratic Party (the NDP), which employs explicitly socialist rhetoric (sometimes) and has a certain base in organized labor. Those authors who discuss this party pragmatically regard it as a presence, like the state, to be profited from or to be gotten around, depending on the circumstances. Moreover, rather than being either for or against the NDP, all contributors, including those who are members of it, perceive both the potentialities and limits of this party, and often express the view that important gains can be made by and through it, provided that movements maintain a certain distance. Collins reflects a similar stance regarding the Vermont Rainbow Coalition's relation to the Democratic Party.¹⁹

The main caricature I wish to address is that new social movements are objectionably single-issued. In one respect any movement clearly does direct its attention to a single cluster of issues—namely, those whose oppressive features have motivated people to form and join the movement. On a traditional socialist view, this is seen as a severe limitation on the potential of new social movements to effect a radical social transformation. Radical champions of movement politics, on the other hand, see issue orientation not only as an inevitable feature of present-day activism, but as a healthy precursor to the pluralism they regard as central to a transformed society.²⁰ Reflection on the contributions to the Socialist Studies volume lends support to the latter perspective by indicating ways that movement politics may simultaneously be rooted in specific concerns while broadening the horizons of their members' aspirations and laying the basis for conjoined activities. Of course, on a traditional socialist perspective, this is just what is supposed to happen (and sometimes has happened) in the case of working-class movements. Critical interrogation of social movements, however, reveals how this can take place without having to posit a dubious historical metaphysics within which one group's aims are supposed somehow to embody those of all the rest.

The topic can be addressed first by considering some cultural dimensions of movement politics as perceived by activists themselves. I suppose it is a commonplace that political movement activity has as one of its effects partially to "construct" the identities of participants and that in the course of movement politics symbols play an important role both

internal to a movement and in defining the movement to those outside it. What is striking about the contributions to the volume is the number of activists who are conscious of these dimensions of movement politics and who place them at the center of their concerns in what might be called a “noninstrumental” way. That is, while many political activists have regarded forging an identity of members with a movement as a way to maintain loyalty, authors in our survey who treat the subject perceive rather that a principal aim of the movement is to create a sense of pride and self-worth.

Thus Joanne Ducette and Sharon Stone of the Disabled Women’s Network see their movement’s struggles as victorious even when specific political aims were not achieved, since the spectacle of disabled women assertively defending themselves broke the helpless, “wheelchair” image of the disabled both to the world and to the disabled women themselves. Carmencita Hernandez cites the ability of visible minority women to secure a speaker’s place at a mainstream women’s conference as a major victory: “When [our speaker] Fely Villasin mounted the stage it was a statement made by the [visible minority] women: We can speak for ourselves!”²¹ Although from the point of view of securing some specific political goal aimed at by the conference, this was no doubt an event of slight moment, it helped to play an important role in the project of identity construction. This is one way that the movement exceeded single-issuism.

Also in a noninstrumental way, activities of a movement, even a movement itself, come to take on symbolic significance beyond themselves (the “signifier comes to exceed the signified,” as Laclau somewhere put it in making a similar point). Thus, Patricia Antonsyshyn and others report how in defense of Toronto’s Henry Morgenthau abortion clinic, an escort service to help women run a gauntlet of intimidating protesters became symbolic of the struggle for women’s emancipation generally. And Tim McCaskell notes the way that a Right to Privacy Committee, formed for the specific purpose of defending those rounded up in a massive police raid against the gay baths, “*was* the gay community” of Toronto and beyond.²² These examples are noninstrumental partly in virtue of the fact that nobody in the movement set out to “create” a symbolic event or organization.

At the same time, it is misleading to regard movement-embodied symbols functionally, as, for example, Offe does in explaining their role as “[making] up for lack of formal organization.”²³ Movement activists

seem well aware of the potential of any of their actions (slogans, names, high-profile members, etc.) to take on symbolic significance and well come this, not for the sake of internal cohesion but for the sake of the aims of the movement. This point is of more than obvious significance, as is seen in trying to explicate the phrase "aims of the movement." The symbols that movements create simultaneously are occasioned by and extend beyond the immediate issues that generate them. I return to this point below after noting some additional features of social movements that strain a paradigm wherein social movements are contrasted with revolutionary political parties. Such a contrast is no doubt appropriate to the extent that it is thought essential to revolutionary parties that they act in accord with a well-defined and comprehensive plan (from which "correct lines" can be derived on any topic).

I suspect that those with this notion of a non--single-issue organization think of the new social movements as interest groups of the sort the 1950s political-scientific Pluralists liked to study; but there are significant differences. Unlike the case of interest groups, movement aims are expected by participants to *expand* to the extent that the movement is a healthy one. Prentice develops this topic in her account of the daycare campaign, tracing the history whereby the button slogan "Universal Care" came to be replaced by "Kids Are Not for Profit" and McCaskell explicates the process of internal questioning about the motives for the bath-house raids which led participants in the movement to expand its aims from defense of those charged by the police to a more general attack on police power and the structure of municipal power. Similarly, Kari Dehli and the others discussing a local effort by parents to secure some control over the quality of education in their children's school address the way this led to a broader campaign concerned with teacher training, heritage language, and the political economy of a municipal education policy.²⁴

Yet another difference between social movements (at least those of our survey) and interest groups is that virtually all their participants saw the forming of alliances with others as not only advantageous but as a good thing in itself, and nearly all the authors describe concerted efforts to seek more or less stable liaisons with other movements. No doubt this can be explained in part after the manner of Hilary Wainwright by reference to the interconnectedness of capitalist, state, and patriarchal sources of oppression and by Offe's indication of the need of weak movements to draw on one another's strength,²⁵ but these explanations do not get to the heart of the matter. Rather than looking at

general causes for the forming of alliances, it seems more fruitful to attend to some aspects of movement politics that make alliances possible. I discuss two such aspects, one related to what is called “the paradox of success” by Antonyshyn et al. and another concerning shared visions.

To the extent that a movement succeeds in gaining whatever goal motivated its formation, it loses membership and momentum: this is the paradox of success. The problem is regarded more grave by some of the authors than by others, and I speculate that how grave it is seen to be depends on whether one harbors the goal of an umbrella political party and hopes that a specific movement can be turned into one. It is certainly true that insofar as they are oriented to a specific range of goals, social movements are greatly impeded from turning into such parties; however, this is also one of their strengths from the point of view of forming alliances, since it simultaneously makes them nonthreatening and defines a range of issues on which joint action can be taken. Laurie Adkin and Catherine Alpaugh’s description of the labor/ecology alliance in Windsor and Detroit, The People for Clean Air Alliance, is typical: “Backgrounds and interests are varied, and the coalition has already experienced serious divisions. Its members are determined, however, to tolerate these differences and to coalesce around the goal of stopping the [Detroit] incinerator.”²⁶

It follows from this account of having limited goals as a relative strength that an alliance is threatened by the “danger” of success (to date, alas, this danger is still remote in Windsor and Detroit) just as by the heterogeneity of its membership. But as Alpaugh and Adkin describe, the compensating feature of the alliance is that it has helped to nurture an alternate vision of society on the part of its members.

For many of those who have taken a stand against the city government and their corporate partners, it has illuminated a whole new way of looking at society. It’s not just the incinerator that has to be stopped, but this insane world of “unlimited” production and consumption. An industrially produced environmental crisis is here, and only a direct confrontation with industrial society and its power structure will turn it around. What we need . . . is a vision of a different way of life based on *being* not on *having*.²⁷

To the extent that participation in a coalition is one of the things that generates such a vision, this makes the paradox of success itself para-

doxical, or rather, dialectical. Having relatively limited goals helps to facilitate alliances, which in turn expands participants' goals.

Consideration of the notion of visions takes us back to the way movements embody symbols. Most radical philosophers of my generation recall how specific movements against the war in Vietnam came to be thought of first as parts of *the* antiwar movement (even though there never was a centrally coordinated movement) and then as a symbol of human emancipation generally. In this case (and perhaps also in the evolution of the women's movement) the expansion of symbolic significance and the development of a vision drove each other, but one might say that symbolic expansion was the leading force: the vision as a widespread phenomenon gelled in response to the symbol. In the new social movements it strikes me that the vision is rather more up front from the beginning, that is, visions partly motivate the conscious creation and expansion of symbols.²⁸ Moreover, contrary to what critics of social movement-oriented politics such as Wood allege,²⁹ there are some fairly clear convergences among visions reported, and they are more specific than just "humanism." In particular, anticapitalist, antistatist, and pro-democratic values are common features of each movement's visions, and most include an antipatriarchal value as well.

Radical Philosophy in Movement Politics

Let me now address some tasks of radical philosophers suggested by critical interrogation of this sample of social movement politics. Of course, the best place for radical philosophers to pursue movement-advancing theory is as active parts of the movements to be advanced, and I am assuming such an organic association. I am also assuming skepticism about the ability to distinguish neatly between philosophical and nonphilosophical theoretical labor, while nonetheless making a rough distinction between those areas where radical philosophers can best serve as "adjuncts" to the work of other theorists and those areas where uniquely philosophical contributions might be made.

An important task of philosophers in the first category is to contribute to the understanding and advancement of the cultural dimensions of movement activity discussed above. So far this has largely fallen to pro-movement theorists with training in literary disciplines. The growing interest in discourse and poststructuralist theory in North American

philosophy is beginning to bring radical philosophers into this area of work to the extent that sometimes controversies over the importance of the new social movements proceed as if this were essentially a debate about the merits of discourse theory itself. But viewed as political projects of creating symbol-driven projects to affect political consciousness and action on the part of movement activists, useful contributions can be made by philosophers from a variety of other orientations, addressing questions, for example, of personal identity, language, or the phenomenology of self–other. There is also room to question traditionally assumed boundaries among cultural analysis, political theory, and economics, which philosophers, again from different traditions, adept at classifying “the disciplines” might challenge.

In the adjunct category there are several additional, fairly obvious tasks. (1) Understanding the political economy of a society in respect of the problems and possibilities faced by new social movements requires the work of philosophers as well as economically trained theorists, for example, to address questions of economic determination or ways of conceiving macroeconomic orders, such as capitalism or socialism.³⁰ (2) Participants in movements against racist, sexist, national, and other oppressions need to continue pursuing thought about the historical and sustaining origins of these oppressions, about which all the easy answers have already been given. (3) The ecology movement has put several concepts usefully on the agenda, some of which—“sustainability,” “empowerment,” “transgenerational obligation,” and others—need theoretical elaboration. (4) Insofar as movements politically campaign to gain and defend group rights, this concept and the connected ontological question of the relation of groups to individuals require ongoing work. Many more examples come to mind.

A point of entry to the question of what (relatively) unique philosophical work remains is to consider the difficulty of ascertaining criteria for what counts as a movement enjoying “successes.” In his contribution to the *Socialist Studies* annual David Langille sets down criteria—effecting major changes in public policy, achieving the stated goals of a movement, changing public opinion, laying the ground for continuing effectiveness, and changing the structure of society as a whole³¹—but there are too many of them, and they require interpretation. Offe cites the simple criterion of succeeding in making an issue a matter of public policy debate,³² but this seems to leave too much out. A task for philosophers, then, is to figure out what “movement success” might mean and

how to go about ascertaining when or to what degree it is achieved (or even whether it is desirable to try ascertaining this). One reason I think this is both a useful and a uniquely philosophical task is that it brings one up against theory-laden issues with practical implications about which there is ongoing debate on the part of movement activists: to what, reform and revolution and unity of vision.

In thinking about traditional ways of making the reform–revolution distinction (revolution as discontinuous with the past, reform as continuous; revolution as extraelectoral, reform as electoral; and so on), it is not too difficult to carry out the destructive job of showing inadequacies of the reform–revolution paradigm.³³ More difficult is to develop a theory of social transformation that would yield categories appropriate for conceptualizing political activity not now well described (or well carried out) as either revolutionary or reformist.

A hypothesis to focus radical philosophical tasks in this regard comes to mind when we reflect on the most general feature of all social-movement goals (clearly recognized by all participants) to overcome systemic oppression. The hypothesis is that in place of a classification of movements, policies, activities, and so on into those that are revolutionary in one of this world's traditional left-wing senses and those that are reformist, such things should be designated “radical” (or “transformatory” or, indeed, “revolutionary”—as nothing is meant to hinge on the terminology) when they are likely to make antioppressive progress. To my way of thinking, this means that they must actually attack at least some of whatever makes a specifically resisted oppression systemic (e.g., sexist or racist educational institutions and not just individual prejudicial attitudes) *and* that relative success in resistance to one form of oppression must not be purchased by inhibiting antioppressive progress with respect to other forms of oppression.

This seems to me enough to characterize radical politics. On this perspective, the line between radical and nonradical politics is not sharp, and such questions as what sorts of activities can make the most progress in specific circumstances or when nonradical politics is to be encouraged (or allowed, or resisted) are matters of political judgment that take account of local circumstances. In keeping with the second criterion of radicalness, radical politics will always involve trying to find ways to make movement activities mutually reinforcing and to avoid advancing one movement at the expense of others. Sometimes necessary evil types of choices must be made that involve ranking two or more

movement activities as to importance. For reasons given elsewhere, I believe that, even admitting the possibility of these unfortunate situations, such estimations should be made on a case-by-case basis and that it is a mistake for radical philosophers to seek criteria for a general ranking.³⁴

Let me be clear about the focus of this prescription. It is not denied that radicals should seek out sources of oppressions, as this is clearly required to identify their systemic natures. Nor should radicals be inattentive to the interrelation of different forms of oppression. The worry some seem to have that absence of a shared macrotheory of history and society will lead to mutually isolating attitudes is belied by the critical interrogation of actual movement politics. Among the movement activists of our study were some with different general theoretical orientations (Marxist, non-Marxist feminist, deep ecological, etc.) and some who seemed contentedly agnostic about macrotheoretical controversy. None had any trouble, however, seeing how such things as class, race, or sex oppression reinforce one another, and it is fair to conclude that each of them was receptive to making use of theoretically guided empirical/political analysis carried on from within any orientation, provided it was practically helpful in understanding such things.

It is not even being claimed that seeking to discover a "direction" to history or proving something to be the ultimate and sole source of all oppressions is *necessarily* doomed to failure. That is, a prescription against making this the prime or definitive pursuit of the radical philosopher is not deductively based on a theory of knowledge, language, or human nature. (Although, as we see at the end of this chapter, room also remains for traditional philosophical work, carried on by philosophers who may be radicals.) The prescription is derived, rather, from critical interrogation of the history of movement politics, within which claims to philosophically based privilege for one movement have worked *against* such politics. What is being insisted on is that radical philosophers embed their labor within movement politics in focusing on the problematic questions they address and in evaluating alternative solutions. This applies, also, to radical philosophers who persist in seeking ultimate foundations of oppression or primary struggles. I suspect that critical movement interrogation would force such a person profoundly to rethink such questions as what constitutes "primacy" or "a foundation."³⁵

By contrast, continued consideration of the notion of oppression and

of the topic just set aside of unity of vision suggest some questions appropriately addressed by philosophers that go somewhat beyond adjunct work. (The claim of this chapter that such questions can be addressed adequately—i.e., in such a way as to advance radical politics—without reference to macrophilosophical theory cannot be refuted without circularity or triviality by appeal to macrophilosophical principles, but then it also cannot be supported without actually trying, which is what the chapter prescribes.) One question concerns “systematicity.” I have the impression that movement activists have insufficiently precise concepts of what makes some form of discrimination systematic and that those radical philosophers who have addressed this subject typically argue backward, that is, to justify an antecedent conviction that, for example, capitalism or patriarchy are primarily oppressive. A constructive use of philosophical talents might, then, be to address the concept of what makes an oppression systemic (or systematic or structural).

A second task pertains to the term “oppression” itself. I do not see how this or any analogous term can be voided of normative implications. It is not just that the aspirations of some category of people are generally thwarted that makes them suffer oppression, but that in addition this is morally unjustifiable. I am not suggesting that radical philosophers function as moralists or that they try to persuade movement activists to accept a favored ethical theory. Rather, I believe that the approach to moral questions evolved in “applied ethics,” where philosophers closely reflect on actual social or institutional situations to help organize thought by drawing out moral implications and sorting types of reasons and relevant considerations, be brought to bear on topics pertinent to social-movement activism.³⁵

Radical philosophizing that focuses on oppression necessarily has a negative orientation, since the dimension of “movement success” it is designed to facilitate is combative. Debates over unity of vision have a positive focus. Thus Collins:

It was precisely a coherent moral vision that was missing from the populist, single-issue, and community-organizing politics of so many white activists during the 1970's. . . . The revival of ethical and moral values in the arena of national policy was perhaps the true genius of the Jackson campaign of 1984. The ability to gain wider adherence to these values and to translate them into specific policy proposals and political strategies will be the real litmus test of the Rainbow Coalition's viability.³⁶

This point of view at once challenges that of Kirching, quoted near the beginning of this chapter, which denies that unity of vision is required at all, and that perspective which insists that unity of view must be anchored in goals specific to one hegemonic movement.

If, with Collins, one rejects these alternatives, there remains the problem to find a normative basis for shared values that is at once universally motivating and compatible with the pluralism required for any politics carried on jointly by movements with different goals—to construct a concept of democracy that helps one to achieve unity in difference. It is recognition of this problem that leads Laclau and Mouffe to reject what they see as an objectionably foundationalist and antipluralist essentialism. This, in turn, has prompted the reply (for example, of Geras)³⁷ that in rejecting what they call essentialism, Laclau and Mouffe lose any possible grounding for unity of action.

I think the reply to Geras by Laclau and Mouffe on this score is on the right track:

By locating socialism in the wider field of the democratic revolution, we have indicated that the political transformations which will eventually enable us to transcend capitalist society are founded on the plurality of social agents and of their struggles. Thus the field of social conflict is extended, rather than being concentrated in a “privileged agent” of social change. This also means that the extension and radicalization of democratic struggles does not have a final point of arrival in the achievement of a fully liberated society.³⁸

Of more interest to the task now at hand than the debates in which Mouffe and Laclau have been involved over nonfoundationalism and working-class primacy is that aspect of their efforts addressing a difficult problem they share with the many other radical theorists who similarly highlight democracy. This is to defend the normative value of democracy as a unifying vision and at the same time to avoid making it a supervalue that overrides particular movement-specific ones, thus in a paradoxical way democratically undercutting democratic pluralism.

The task is problematic because there is a temptation for philosophers to make apodictic prescription, and in the case of those philosophers who support radical movement politics (even those who reject foundationalism), this will be compounded by movement fragility. As all the authors of our study noted, sustaining new or old social movements is difficult in part because of the heterogeneity of goals among movements and in part because of the heterogeneity of values among

the members of a single movement (aside from the shared antioppressive values that brought them together). Thus, there is an impetus for movement radicals to seek overarching values as a kind of glue. Movement-friendly radical philosophers, then, rally to the call and do what we are best trained in (producing general philosophical theories) to justify democracy as the sought-after common value.

Closer examination of movement heterogeneity helps to show how the temptation in question might be countered. From our survey of social movements I concluded that participants considered the problem of *intermovement* heterogeneity more grave than the problem of *intra-movement* heterogeneity.³⁹ The reason for this is that the former challenges much-needed coalitions, while the latter becomes threatening as a movement begins to confront the “paradox of success.” When an oppressive force is still strong, it serves as a common enemy uniting members of a movement with otherwise divergent values. This means that there is an inverse relation between the gravity of the heterogeneity problem in actual politics and the difficulty of philosophically defending pluralist democracy.

Intermovement cooperation can be pragmatically defended by appeal to the common advantages of democratic forums for reaching consensus or negotiating differences and of promoting intermovement pluralistic mutual respect for maintaining coalition solidarity. To the extent that philosophical skills are required at all in this regard, they are interior to intermovement democratic politics (e.g., to help activists find common ground by distinguishing avoidable and unavoidable conflict, real versus apparent difference, and so on). To some extent intramovement heterogeneity can also be pragmatically addressed, but depending on how radically different are movement members’ concepts of such things as what constitutes a good life, pragmatic solutions alone are strained, and they become more so as movements succeed. When oppressive limitations to people leading their lives as they wish are breached, questions about how a meaningful life should or can be led come to the fore.

In these circumstances radical philosophical work is called for to provide conceptual frameworks to reconcile specifically democratic and extrademocratic values. Mouffe and Laclau’s efforts to wed a neo-Gramscian political theory to antifoundationalist linguistic theory is one approach. Carol Gould’s modified foundationalist theory to ground democracy in a concept of individual freedom is another, as is Iris Marion Young’s solution in terms of a pluralized theory of justice, and other

approaches⁴⁰—whether complementary or not it may be too soon to ascertain—come to mind. Such philosophical work is the sort that could also be potentially useful when confronting decisions about whether or how appropriate forms of persisting cross-movement organization might be constructed, since in this case heterogeneity can be anticipated to persist. Here prescriptions about necessary organizational forms are not deduced by the radical philosopher and dictated to activists; rather, movement-embedded philosophical theories are of potential use to radical movement activists confronting context-specific political questions.

Radical philosophers may also wish to address such questions as what the meaning of life is, and they may even wish to defend the view that democracy, somehow regarded, is after all the supreme value. From the perspective of this chapter, however, such efforts are in one respect extrapolitical. The tasks of the radical philosopher qua radical are to act as an adjunct to antioppressive politics in the ways suggested above, to employ appropriate philosophical skills to identify systemic oppression, and to help integrate democratic and extrademocratic values in radical political activity. True, the prescribed contribution of the philosopher to this project is less orderly and its conclusions less decisive than radical philosophizing that deduces a comprehensive political position from principles of whatever the philosopher thinks is the font of politics. But does it not seem that if such an approach could have succeeded, it already would have done so?

Notes

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1. Barbara Epstein, "Rethinking Social Movement Theory," *Socialist Review*, 20 (Jan./March 1990): 57.
2. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985), p. 80.
3. Ralph Miliband and Leo Panitch, "Socialists and the 'New Conservatism,'" *Socialist Register: 1987* (London: Merlin, 1987), pp. 512–13.
4. Gavin Kitching, "A Reply to Ellen Meiksins Wood," *New Left Review*, 163 (May/June 1987): 121–28 (quotation on p. 128).

5. Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers, *On Democracy: Toward a Transformation of American Society* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), pp. 173–75.
6. Sheila Rowbotham, Lynn Segal, and Hilary Wainwright, *Beyond the Fragments: Feminism and the Making of Socialism* (Boston: Alyson, 1979); Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Democracy and Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1986); Jean L. Cohen, *Class and Civil Society* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1982); Stanley Aronowitz, *The Crisis in Historical Materialism* (New York: Praeger, 1981); Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.
7. Claus Offe, "Challenging the Boundaries of the Institutional Politics: Social Movements since the 1960's," in *Changing Boundaries of the Political*, ed. Charles S. Maier (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 63–105; and Offe, *Contradictions of the Welfare State* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1984); Rudolf Bahro, *From Red to Green* (London: Verso, 1984); Sheila D. Collins, *The Rainbow Challenge: The Jackson Campaign and the Future of U.S. Politics* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1986).
8. Stanley Aronowitz, "Theory and Socialist Strategy," *Social Text*, 16 (Winter 1986/87): 1–16 (quotation on p. 14); Cohen and Rogers, *On Democracy*, pp. 174–5.
9. Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Retreat from Class: A New "True" Socialism* (London: Verso, 1986), 133.
10. Perry Anderson, *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism* (London: Verso, 1983), p. 91.
11. Bowles and Gintis, *Democracy*, pp. 96–98; Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, chap. 3.
12. Milton Fisk, "Feminism, Socialism, and Historical Materialism," *Praxis International*, 2 (July 1982): 117–40.
13. Norman Geras, "A Critique of Laclau and Mouffe" and "Ex-Marxism without Substance," *New Left Review*, 163 (May/June 1987) and 169 (May/June 1989). Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, "Post-Marxism without Apologies," *New Left Review*, 166 (Nov./Dec. 1987): 79–106. Despite the fact that the specialized audience interested in the details of this debate will have already read it in the *New Left Review*, Geras has seen fit to reproduce and reiterate his contributions in his *Discourses of Extremity* (London: Verso, 1990), thus spinning the "stuck record" referred to below. By contrast, though surely continuing importantly to differ, Milton Fisk and Ernesto Laclau have turned to more creative work: Fisk, *The State and Justice: An Essay in Political Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Times* (London: Verso, 1990).
14. Milton Fisk, "Why the Anti-Marxists Are Wrong," *Monthly Review*, 38 (March 1987): 7–17; and "A Basis for Solidarity: Reply to Wraley & Albert," *Monthly Review*, 39 (Dec. 1987): 50–55; Ray Wraley, "Milton Fisk and the

- Anti-Marxists," and Michael Albert, "Why Marxism Isn't the Activist's Answer," *Monthly Review*, 39 (Dec. 1987): 41–42 and 43–49, respectively.
15. Frank Cunningham, *Democratic Theory and Socialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 210–11, 229–30.
16. *Social Movements/Social Change*, ed. Frank Cunningham, Sue Findlay, Marlene Kadar, Alan Lennon, and Ed Silva, 1988 volume of *Socialist Studies/Etudes Socialistes* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1988; hereafter cited as *Social Movements*). Copies of this volume may be obtained from the publisher, Between the Lines, 394 Euclid Avenue, Toronto, Canada M6G 2S9.
17. Susan Prentice, "Kids Are Not for Profit: The Politics of Daycare," in *Social Movements*, pp. 98–128.
18. Offe, "Challenging the Boundaries," p. 71.
19. Collins, *Rainbow Challenge*, pp. 319 ff.
20. The point is well developed and argued in Iris Marion Young's *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), chap. 6.
21. Sharon D. Stone and Joanne Doucette, "Organizing the Marginalized: The Disabled Women's Network," in *Social Movements*, pp. 81–97; Carmen-cita Hernandez, "Visible Minority Women," in *Social Movements*, pp. 157–68 (quotation on p. 161).
22. Patricia Antonyshny, B. Lee, and Alex Merrill, "Marching for Women's Lives: The Campaign for Free-Standing Abortion Clinics in Ontario," in *Social Movements*, pp. 129–58; Tim McCaskell, "The Bath Raids and Gay Politics," in *Social Movements*, pp. 169–86 (quotation on p. 172).
23. Offe, "Challenging the Boundaries," p. 94.
24. Kari Dehli, John Restakis, and Errol Sharpe, "The Rise and Demise of the Parent Movement in Toronto," in *Social Movements*, pp. 209–27.
25. Hilary Wainwright, Introduction to *Beyond the Fragments*, ed. Rowbotham et al., p. 4; Offe, "Challenging the Boundaries," pp. 93–94.
26. Laurie E. Adkin and Catherine Alpaugh, "Labour, Ecology, and the Politics of Convergence," in *Social Movements*, pp. 48–73 (quotation on p. 58).
27. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
28. This marks a difference from earlier social movements not noted by David Plotke in his criticism of those who see a new "cultural politics" in the new social movements ("What's So New about New Social Movements," *Socialist Review*, 20 [Jan./March 1990]: 81–102; see pp. 89–92). A main thesis of Plotke's argument is that radical champions of the new social movements overestimate their importance because they are preoccupied with rejecting an ossified version of Marxism. It is noteworthy, however, that the activist authors whose reports we studied had little or nothing at all to say for or against either Marxist or non-Marxist theoretical frameworks.
29. Wood, *Retreat from Class*, p. 179.

30. Some interesting suggestions along these lines are in Paul Browne, "Reification, Class, and 'New Social Movements,'" *Radical Philosophy*, 55 (Summer 1990): 18–24. In my view these suggestions can stand independently of Browne's attempt to show that a Lukacsized Marxism preserves a class-centric approach to new social movements.
31. David Langille, "Building an Effective Peace Movement: One Perspective," in *Social Movements*, pp. 189–208 (see pp. 190–91).
32. Offe, "Challenging the Boundaries," p. 94.
33. Cunningham, *Democratic Theory*, pp. 282–91.
34. *Ibid.*, pp. 230–35. In brief, the reason to prescribe against this philosophical task is that it reinforces sectarianism by making judgments of political importance hinge on contested and, despite the confidence with which philosophers are wont to write, unproven and tentative high theory.
35. Though he does not make specific reference to applied ethics, one philosopher who articulates a position between moralism and foundational ethics, and who also puts his philosophical talents to the service of active radical politics, is Kai Nielsen. See the essays collected in his *Why Be Moral?* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1989).
36. Collins, *Rainbow Challenge*, p. 329.
37. Geras, "Ex-Marxism," p. 77, among other places.
38. Laclau and Mouffe, "Post-Marxism," p. 106.
39. I am abstracting from the complication that inter- and intramovement heterogeneity interpenetrate, since some people in one movement may share the antioppressive values of those in another, and movement memberships overlap; however, I believe that the summary comments below can be modified to accommodate this situation.
40. Carol Gould, *Rethinking Democracy: Freedom and Social Cooperation in Politics, Economy, and Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), chap. 3; Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (chap. 6; other efforts are Laclau, *New Reflections* (see Parts I, III, and IV), and my "Democracy and Socialism: Philosophical Aporiae," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 16, no. 4 (1990): 270–89.