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# Political Traditions: Left Political Movements and the Politics of Social Justice

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## POLITICAL TRADITIONS

### *Left Political Movements and the Politics of Social Justice*

THAD WILLIAMSON

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#### **Leadership and the Left: The Ambivalent Relationship**

In the 1996 Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh, the renowned Marxist philosopher G. A. Cohen famously posed this question: “If you’re an egalitarian, how come you’re so rich?” An equally pertinent question might have been, If you are an egalitarian, why do you insist on being in charge? That question poses the essential dilemma of leadership for left political traditions: how to reconcile the practical necessity of leadership (both in building social movements and in actually governing) with the aspiration to build a genuinely democratic society that is both inclusionary and egalitarian.

Left political traditions, in this chapter, refer to systems of political thought and theories of political action that aim to transform existing political and economic institutions so as to increase substantially the political and economic power of ordinary people, to eliminate or reduce invidious forms of social inequality, and to prevent private interests from trumping the common good. Although the Left (so defined) shares some goals with liberalism, civic republicanism, and even conservatism, it differs from those political traditions (as generally understood) in that it does not seek to legitimate existing political, economic, and constitutional structures or provide an account of how modest reforms might help them work better. Rather, it aims at root-and-branch systemic change. What role leaders and leadership have to play in that transformative project raises particularly interesting and difficult issues that we will aim to demarcate.

Traditionally, left political and social theorists have made a strong distinction between radical politics aimed at transforming capitalism and liberal politics aimed at achieving gains within the parameters of the existing system. This distinction is still meaningful, but as we shall see, it is not, upon closer inspection, entirely clear-cut. Indeed, an interesting feature of recent social thought is the growing convergence between more radical, left traditions and liberal and civic republican political theories. Marxists and post-Marxists such as G. A. Cohen have largely abandoned traditional Marxist conceptions of social change and have acknowledged the centrality of the idea of *justice* (a term often derided by Karl Marx) and normative values more generally in advancing a positive ideal of a better society (G. A. Cohen, 2000, 2009). Other left theorists frame their critiques of contemporary capitalism in terms of the requirements of democracy: Such analysts characteristically claim that the integrity of democratic politics is threatened or constrained by the inequalities of power characteristic of modern capitalism—including not only inequalities between citizens but also the disproportionate political influence of corporate interests, resulting from both direct lobbying activities and the capacity of capital to block or disrupt progressive economic policies by withholding investment (J. Cohen, 1989). Left democratic theorists typically want, in effect, to use democratic politics to reshape or restructure background social and economic arrangements so as to enhance the integrity of democratic politics and to expand the substance of political equality.

At the same time, Rawlsian liberal egalitarians and civic republicans alike increasingly argue that attaining justice must require very substantial alterations to the fundamental principles of contemporary capitalism (Dagger, 2006; Elkin, 2006; Freeman, 2007). But mainstream Rawlsian political theory to date has provided very few resources for thinking through how to achieve such alterations or build a movement to advocate for them. The historic debates on the Left about leadership and social change are an instructive, though as I will also argue, not fully adequate guide to the problem of transformational political leadership in the 21st century.

Left debates about how to advance radical change have historically revolved around four fundamental questions. The first is whether such radical change should be conceived of a historic inevitability driven by the internal logic of capitalism or whether such change is unpredictable and contingent on the exercise of specific political agency by specific political actors in specific circumstances. The second concerns the relationship between prerevolutionary political movements and the nature of the postrevolutionary power structure. The third question concerns whether change must be revolutionary in nature or whether it might be (in some sense) evolutionary. The fourth question is to what extent ordinary people are capable of organizing and leading movements for radical change on their own behalf and to what extent leadership is necessary to shape those movements.

Before taking up those questions, one other logical possibility should be mentioned. Jean-Jacques Rousseau (trans. 1968) tried to avoid this set of problems by envisioning the following scenario: A single person writes a constitution for a new society, and then retires from political life and any attempt to assume a position of power under the new regime. Unfortunately, that scenario is neither realistic nor helpful in considering real-world instances of regime change in which the typical pattern is (minimally) that prominent members of the revolutionary class (such as James Madison) write rules that affect their own interests, or (maximally) there is a continuity between prerevolutionary leadership and governance of the new, postrevolutionary society (Fidel Castro in Cuba is an obvious example).

## The Scientific Versus Utopian Socialism Debate

Putting *deus ex machina* scenarios aside, a good place to start is by considering the Marxist tradition's distinction between scientific and utopian socialism. Not even the most doctrinaire form of Marxism held that history is a literally foreordained and that human agency is not necessary to bring about revolutionary change. Indeed, Marx explicitly (and famously) stated that "men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past" (Marx, 1852/1978, p. 595). But the Marxist view

did contend that the path that revolutionary change must follow was in effect determined by the nature of industrial capitalism. In particular, the industrial working class would necessarily be the agents of communist revolution. As G. A. Cohen (2000, p. 107) usefully puts it,

The communist impression of the working class was that its members

1. constituted the majority of society;
2. produced the wealth of society;
3. were the exploited people in society; and
4. were the needy people in society. . . .

[M]oreover, . . . the workers were *so* needy that they

5. would have nothing to lose from revolution, whatever its upshot might be;

and, because of 1, 2, and 5, it was within the capacity (1, 2) and in the interest (5) of the working class to change society, so that it

6. could and would transform society.

As Cohen points out, 1 through 4 above are each empirically highly questionable in contemporary capitalism, and propositions 5 and 6 can be safely regarded (at least in advanced industrial nations) as outright false. The economic underpinnings of Marx's analysis—the claim that capitalism would exhibit a long-run tendency toward lower profits and, hence, be ever more prone to more and more severe crises—has also been questioned both on theoretical grounds and because of the relative stability and prosperity achieved by social democratic forms of capitalism (Wright, 2010). But in the mid-19th and early 20th centuries, as capitalism lurched from crisis to crisis and Europe became embroiled in a cataclysmic world war, this train of thought struck many radicals as highly plausible. Particularly striking is the thought that because industrial workers were the engine that made capitalism go, they had the power to bring that machine to its knees through collective action.

Marx and Friedrich Engels sharply distinguished scientific socialism anchored in historical materialism from what they derisively termed *utopian socialism*: voluntary initiatives aimed at directly creating new forms of cooperative enterprise. Robert Owen, Henri St. Simon, Charles Fourier, and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon were the foremost representatives of this tradition. Voluntary forms of egalitarian social cooperation could illustrate that dominant forms of industrial capitalism based on extreme inequalities of income and power were not the only plausible way to organize emerging industrial societies, while also providing immediate, tangible benefits to its participants. From the Marxist point of view, however, such schemes had little do with actually effecting a socialist revolution both because they did not directly challenge control of the means of production by capitalists and because they were founded as projects of middle-class reformers, not as initiatives of the industrial working class.

As Engels put it, any attempt to found a society directly on principles of reason and justice, instead of on the basis of the class interests of the proletariat, was doomed to fail; all of preceding history had shown that ideal to be impossible. And indeed, the logic of the Marxist critique makes sense if one also believes that if only industrial workers were sufficiently organized, it would be but a short hop and a jump to a socialist revolution and complete transformation of the relations of production. Engel's famous critique of utopian socialism uses Owen's own biography to deliver the decisive blow: Writing admiringly of Owen's accomplishments in building a more humane form of capitalist production at New Lanark, Scotland, Engels points out that once Owen realized this was not enough and began advocating for socialism and worker control of industrial property, his reputation transformed from that of a well-regarded philanthropist to a dangerous radical. Engels does not disparage Owen's life work, but he contends it lacked a real understanding of the forces of history and the necessary path that revolutionary change must follow. Engels (ed. 1978) contended that "the Socialism of earlier days certainly criticized the existing capitalistic mode of production and its consequences. But it could not explain them, and, therefore, could not get the mastery of them" (p. 700). The materialist conception of history (as laid out by Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto*) and the theory of surplus value (as laid out by Marx in *Capital*) provided an understanding of how and why capitalism originated, how it worked in practice, and how and why it would eventually fail.

Well into the late-20th century, "serious" thinkers in the Marxist tradition often assumed that Marx's critique of utopian socialism was decisive. An important counterargument, however, was provided in mid-20th century by Jewish philosopher Martin Buber (1950) in his book *Paths in Utopia*. Buber argues that, contra Engels, Owen's core conception of socialism as the regeneration of society and the ultimate replacement of the state by society was well grounded. The key point is "that the transformation of society must be accomplished in each of its cells: only a just ordering of each of the individual units can establish a just order in the totality" (p. 23). Further, Buber provides close readings of Marx himself to argue that Marx in fact often voiced a similar conception of socialism as the complete regeneration of society and that his critique of utopian socialism rested more on practical political judgment (that the real action lays with the industrial workers) than principled objection. From Buber's perspective, it is the notion that political revolution in the name of socialism can magically transform all social relations in a society that should be regarded as utopian (in the pejorative sense). Genuine socialism by definition must be rooted in local transformations of social relations, exemplified by just the kinds of social experiments in cooperative ownership Owen and other utopian socialists championed.

Buber's arguments benefit, of course, from the historical perspective of having witnessed the Soviet revolution and the destruction of the Soviets as organs of democratic

participation under Vladimir Lenin, followed by the emergence of Stalinism. As early as 1902, Lenin argued that "no revolutionary movement can endure without a stable organization of leaders maintaining continuity," that these leaders should be professional revolutionaries, and that this leadership class would only grow in importance as the movement became more broad based so as it to keep it from being sidetracked by demagogues (1902/1969, p. 121). The subsequent Soviet experience laid bare the inherent dangers of a revolutionary leadership class acting to remake society. Instead of acting to develop and empower institutions (i.e., the Soviets themselves), which could act as decentralized, democratically organized spaces for workers to exercise control over their own lives, Lenin moved to consolidate his own power. As several scholars (including Buber) have argued, those decisions were deliberate political choices; these scholars argue that the October 1917 revolution did have a genuine claim to represent the interests of the working class and that there was potential for the revolution to be structured on cooperative principles and genuine workers' control though the Soviets rather than through the use of the local institutions as instruments of centralized state control, and eventual totalitarianism (Buber, 1950; Farber, 1990; Smith, 2002).

Few persons outside the sectarian far left today are heavily invested in debates about the origins and early development of the Soviet revolution, but the example speaks to a broader issue facing any theory of socially transformative change: how to keep the architects of the revolution (assuming there are in fact strategists, leaders, intellectuals, even generals who are directing revolutionary organizations or forces) from creating a new system of oppression that benefits themselves. As George Orwell (1946) might have put it, is it possible for the animals to take over the farm in a revolution led by pigs without letting the pigs establish a new system of domination? Orwell's pointed critique directly targeted Lenin's theory of a revolution led by a vanguard of high-consciousness intellectuals.

The most attractive answer to Orwell's question from within the revolutionary socialist tradition in fact closely mirrors Buber's endorsement of utopian socialism. That answer is, simply put, that revolutionary movements must establish social relations based on nondomination within the movement before taking power. The Councilist tradition within Marxism, thus, argued that revolutionary organizations should prefigure the social relations of the envisioned new society rather than hoping that a dictatorship of the proletariat will willingly establish a new political apparatus based on nondomination after the revolution (Albert & Hahnel, 1978; Dorrien, 2008; West, 1982).

## Politics Between Reform and Revolution

This answer is attractive, although the actual influence of Councilist politics (as opposed to theory) within the revolutionary Marxist tradition is weak, leading some

sympathetic commentators to point instead to the more influential guild socialist tradition, which also aimed to form social relations prefiguring the presumed ideal social relations of a good society (Dorrien, 2008). Noam Chomsky's brand of anarchist politics, deeply supportive of voluntary efforts to create nonhierarchical forms of social organization, also fits within this category of radical politics, so too do the varieties of utopian socialism celebrated by Buber. The key ethical criteria separating these forms of radical politics and more authoritarian left traditions is the insistence that there be no contradiction between the kinds of social forms developed in the process of effecting radical social change and the long-term vision of a democratic egalitarian society.

But this train of thought raises a third critical question: If achieving genuine, nondominating transformation of the social order requires that we first build the cells of a new society and then transform the state, in what sense is it meaningful to continue to talk of revolution at all, understood in the conventional sense of a direct overthrow of the organs of state power and the creation of a new regime aimed at advancing the interests of a revolutionary class?

Most contemporary left theorists, and practically all substantial left social movements, do not in fact aim today at the revolutionary overthrow of existing states. Even if such a goal were desirable for its own sake, attempting to do so in wealthy, well-established countries could only lead to quick repression and violent backlash against the purportedly revolutionary actors, with devastating effects on civil liberties more generally. Instead, contemporary left thinkers generally assume that change must be effected within the parameters of the existing constitutional regimes. Consequently, such change must be evolutionary.

Evolutionary change does not necessarily mean that changes take place at a slow pace. Some radical social theorists have, thus, tried to transcend the traditional opposition between reform and revolution by speaking of structural reforms (Alperovitz, 2004; Gorz, 1967). Structural reforms do not consist of mere changes in policies, nor do they aim to replace the entire political-economic system all at once. Rather, the aims of structural reforms are both to advance an important substantive aim and to establish a new, more favorable framework for subsequent political and economic struggles. In this sense, the current battle in the United States over changing the rules for certification of labor unions could be seen as a very modest example of structural reform; such a change would be both an immediate gain for labor unions and would remake the balance of power between labor and capital in politically important ways. A more far-reaching proposal for structural reform involves movement toward reduced workweeks, with the aims of relieving stress on working families, freeing up more time for civic and political activism, or simply providing individuals more freedom in their lives (Gorz, 1994).

Accepting an evolutionary strategy for achieving long-term social transformation also carries important implications for the fourth leadership dilemma facing the left—the question of to what extent left social movements should rely on the initiatives and decision making of ordinary people, as opposed to that of a class of leaders with special insight. Two observations are in order. First, there is an obvious intrinsic connection between the aspirations of revolutionary socialism and pressures to form a vanguard of elite leaders empowered, like generals in a war, to make strategic decisions aimed at capturing, securing, and reinforcing power, especially in those historical moments in which existing regimes are vulnerable. Evolutionary approaches have no similar urgent need for that kind of quasi-military leadership; rather than aiming to seize power at the first available opportunity, the object of struggle for the nonrevolutionary Left is to win over the support of the people for initiatives, policies, and structural reforms that contribute to the democratic reshaping of society.

Second, actually existing social movements in the United States have a large degree of elite influence and are rarely for long purely bottom-up endeavors. Foundations, governments, universities, wealthy patrons, and other powerful persons all have both lent support to and tried to influence (for better and worse) social movement organizations. This does not necessarily mean that such organizations are or should be elite controlled; the point is rather to avoid drawing an unrealistically sharp dividing line between popular-controlled initiatives and elite influence.

Given these remarks, the question of what role leaders should play in advancing a substantially more democratic society is a complex one, especially given the background inequalities of (for instance) the contemporary United States and the deep challenges this poses to efforts to build meaningful cross-class and cross-racial solidarity (Putnam, 2007; Schwartz, 2008). On the one hand, our democratic tradition and populist sensibilities lend special respect to authentic, homegrown leaders rising directly from the grass roots. On the other hand, many prominent community organizers—Ella Baker, Van Jones, Barack Obama—were and are elite educated (Jones, 2008; Obama, 1995; Ransby, 2005). Put another way, any large-scale social movement in the United States or anywhere else necessarily will involve a rich cross-pollination of persons from different social, educational, and economic backgrounds.

Nonetheless, some left theorists remain drawn to the idea of a centrally directed movement informed by the strategic thinking of top leaders, drawing in particular on the work of the Italian Communist Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci was an astute student of Machiavelli, and admired Machiavelli's recognition that new political formations need to be called into existence by energetic individuals (i.e., a prince) and his conceptualization of politics as a distinct sphere of human activity in which

strategic decisions may play a decisive role. Gramsci's reflections on the problem of achieving revolutionary change in early 20th-century Italy led him to (at least) two conceptual breakthroughs that have had enormous impact on subsequent radical thought. The first was the conception of hegemony, namely the way in which ruling groups obtain consent for their rule using not only ideological but also cultural resources. Oppressed or subordinate groups, or majorities thereof, may not always identify their political self-interest in ways that threaten the status quo. Those who seek revolutionary change must, thus, engage simultaneously in a cultural, ideological, and political project. The second was the idea of a long-term war of position between the dominant classes or forces in a given society and those who oppose them. Revolutions are rarely to be won in one swoop; instead, there are ongoing battles and confrontations between contending parties, the results of which may shape the next battle in more or less favorable ways. The long-term task of a revolutionary movement must be to build a counterhegemony—that is, an alternative understanding of social possibilities for social life that lays the basis for a transition away from capitalism.

Some contemporary left thinkers such as John Sanbonmatsu (2004) have attempted to rehabilitate Gramscian politics, seeing in his embrace of Machiavellian political science a welcome antidote to the refusal of thinkers such as Michel Foucault and postmodernism generally to engage in strategic questions or practical politics. Yet as Stephen Bronner (1999) has warned, Gramsci in effect favored a variant of Leninism, termed *democratic centralism*, in which leadership flows top-down from a party elite. Famously, Gramsci claimed that good “generals” are more important than having a well-mobilized mass, for where the generals are unified and know what they are doing, mass support will soon follow (Gramsci, ed. 1971). To this we may add that his political aim, revolutionary overthrow of a national government, is quite different from the aims articulated by most contemporary social movements or even by quite radical thinkers interested in achieving fundamental changes in the nature of capitalism (i.e., Alperovitz, 2004; Wright, 2010). Contemporary radical thinkers generally accept that any serious project to alter capitalist political economies in fundamental ways must be a long-term project that works within existing flawed institutions.

Even within single social movements, there are ongoing tensions between the need for creative strategic leadership (Ganz, 2009) and the desire to increase opportunities for participation and empower ordinary people; the most successful social movements generally have both, but achieving the proper balance can be difficult. In the context of the United States and other contemporary democratic societies, most activists would be skeptical of, if not hostile toward, the idea of a movement focused around a single political party led by a committee of general-like leaders. Social movements and activism in the United States can, depending

on one's perspective, alternatively be termed as decentralized or fragmented. Yet even if we reject the baggage of democratic centralism and the puerile fantasy of a small group of generals engineering a comprehensive social revolution, Gramsci's notion of engaging in counterhegemonic politics that engages both economics and culture remains useful. If future social movements in the United States are ever to create a political climate favorable to radical policy changes and to beginning to build alternative political-economic arrangements, there must be widespread consciousness of the desirability and plausibility of fundamental change. This will be unachievable without concerted efforts to challenge the limits of existing political discourse and to communicate radical diagnoses of the political-economic status quo as well as plausible alternatives to a mass public, in a vernacular that can be easily grasped and understood. This is a particular challenge in the United States due to a variety of factors, including cultural and ethnic pluralism, corporate domination of the media, generally low levels of political engagement and consciousness, and widespread skepticism about the possibility of serious change.<sup>1</sup>

### Three Key Leadership Functions for 21st-Century Social Justice Advocates

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How then can leaders—often ordinary citizens who have become transformed through political mobilization and action—help advance social justice in the context of the 21st century and, in particular, forward the goal of building a fundamentally different political-economic system grounded in core human values such as democracy, community, equality, freedom, and sustainability rather than on profit imperatives? I take for granted the judgment that revolution in any literal sense is simply off the table. Given this context, three functions in particular—two of them intellectual, the third practical—await the emergence of better and more effective leadership, broadly understood.

The first is the articulation of a compelling social vision of a more just and democratic society, one that is positive and aspirational in scope and capable of being widely understood and endorsed. The accident of overlapping interests alone is not sufficient glue to hold together large-scale, interlocking social movements; shared values and aspirations are needed as well. Those values and aspirations in turn need to translate into at least a rough conception of what a desirable political-economic alternative—one in which wealth and control of capital is much more widely distributed—would look like (Alperovitz, 2004; Williamson, 2009; Wright, 2010).

The second is the articulation of specific actions—immediate, near term, medium term, long term—which might be taken in support of such vision, in a variety of arenas, and importantly, at a variety of scales (neighborhood level, municipal level, metropolitan level, state level,

regional level, national level). Ideas for using public resource flows to leverage the creation of new, democratically organized economic enterprises would be a good example of the kind of intermediate step creative leaders might advance (Alperovitz, 2004; Wright, 2010). Such proposals will be most useful when they appear not as isolated demands or ideas, but as part of a broader social vision. In democratic societies, concrete ideas and practical proposals are the coin of the realm in inspiring concrete actions and organizing that is proactive, not merely defensive and reactive in nature.

The third is the building of more structures of cooperation (formal and informal) across geographic, race, and class lines, as well as across issue areas. Just as Madison predicted, progressive movements in the contemporary United States are generally splintered. Creative coalitions that overcome traditional divides (such as the Blue Green Alliance coalition uniting environmentalists and trade unionists on action to tackle global warming and provide green jobs) are an urgent imperative if the United States is to address its most serious problems and build the much stronger culture of social solidarity that is a precondition of serious movement toward a more egalitarian political economy and political culture (Schwartz, 2008).

Although I have described these leadership challenges with reference to the project of the Left (and drawn out some basic contrasts with the more authoritarian leadership conceptions present in the revolutionary tradition in particular), these remarks are equally applicable to liberal egalitarian and civic republican theorists who recognize the ways in which existing political-economic institutions systematically produce and reproduce inequality.

So, too, is this slightly cautionary note: Liberal egalitarians and civic republicans will perform a useful service if they help dissuade their more radical allies of the temptation to flirt with authoritarianism and to reject the priority of democracy. Even in quite mainstream discourse, during the 2000s, it became quite common for liberal activists to disparage the intelligence and political judgment of the U.S. people. Apathy and ignorance are widespread in the United States, but such formulations run the risk of redefining the problems of our shared political culture and political regime as a problem of those stupid, ill-educated people. Such redefinition is antithetical to building a politics of genuine social solidarity. Although commitment to democratic social justice by definition indicates a willingness to be critical of the status quo and of majority opinion, it should not entail an abandoning of the deep democratic commitment to accepting the judgment of the people and to accepting the possibility that one's conception of democratic social justice might be rejected (at least at times) by the majority.

Put another way, democratic political maturity requires abandoning the seductive Platonic fantasy that an enlightened leadership class (whether philosopher-kings or graduates of elite liberal arts colleges) can or does know better than the majority. To be sure, as constitutional theorists in

the civic republican tradition would remind us, we can and must organize our institutional regimes so as to minimize the possibility of elites manipulating the majority in their own interests, and as skeptics of democracy (Plato included) have warned, we should resist making a totem of current majority opinion. Further, as both Machiavelli and his student Gramsci recognized, the political agency of the masses is often malleable, at least to a degree, and the kinds of strategies and tactics deployed by political leaders tangibly impact the degree and manner in which the masses—those who are not full-time activists—become politically engaged.

At the same time, advocates for a greater degree of democratic social justice should judge their proposals for structural change against this test: Only those proposals whose enactment requires the active support of democratic majorities to be realized should be supported. Any proposal failing to meet this test—that is, a proposal that could be enacted only by some sort of administrative fiat, or by deception of the people, or by a suspension of democratic norms—should be rejected. To clarify, this does not mean that only proposals that now or in the near term would command majority support are worth exploring or advocating; rather, it means that such proposals should be capable (in time) of gaining such support.<sup>2</sup> Genuine leadership requires not bypassing the people but persuading and engaging people to support and help bring about needed social changes.

As noted in the preceding chapter, left political traditions face challenges common also to liberalism and republicanism. The Left in particular has much to learn from the civic republican insistence that talk of values lacks precise meaning unless or until connected to specific institutional practices. The earlier Marxist tradition often eschewed any attempt to specify what socialism or communism would actually look like and even posited that a socialist transformation would make politics superfluous and political conflict a relic of the past. The contemporary Left, in contrast, must show how its proposals to reorganize the political economy would function within recognizably democratic political constitutions with pluralistic politics and the likelihood of ongoing conflicts between competing interests. Liberal egalitarians and civic republicans who follow John Rawls's lead in advocating for some form of property-owning democracy must address the same issues. Plausible answers to those questions, in turn, must deal explicitly with the questions of how to keep leaders accountable and how to ensure that leaders are made to serve the common good, without relying to the dubious premise that all such leaders will be perfectly publicly minded. The challenge is no longer to turn Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel on his head, but rather Madison.

At the same time, liberal egalitarians and civic republicans must drop any pretense that their aspirations for a more just and more thoroughly democratic society can be achieved simply through reason, the force of the better

argument, and efforts to establish widespread social consensus. Rather, they must recognize that their cherished moral values must also be advanced through political struggle, including conflicts between directly competing interests. Those political conflicts may involve not only challenging entrenched interest or privileges, but also involve conflicts over ways of life and values. (The pressing demands of ecological sustainability seem highly likely to instigate cultural conflict of this kind in many places and in the United States in particular.) In this context, perhaps ironically, normative political traditions must be willing to enter the world of Machiavelli and Gramsci and recognize the importance of strategic thinking about how to advance contested ends in a political arena marked by conflict (Sanbonmatsu, 2004). Robust partisanship and vibrant political conflict are not the enemies but more often the vehicle for promoting a deeper realization of social justice (Muirhead & Rosenblum, 2006), provided such partisanship and conflict is kept within the bounds of a stable constitutional order.

## Summary

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To sum up, a primary task of any contemporary political tradition must be to specify the nature of a stable, constitutional regime capable of simultaneously facilitating and containing robust political conflict among contending parties who are at least partly self-interested. Within such regimes, leaders have important roles to play both in advancing particular political ideals and interests and in paying attention to the good of the whole. Keeping such leaders accountable while giving them sufficient power to act vigorously in pursuit of those goals requires careful attention to the design of our political institutions.

The preceding paragraph speaks to the general problem of political leadership. Contrary to a significant proportion of left political traditions, it is a central claim of this chapter that no plausible or desirable political theory can avoid dealing with that general problem. But liberal egalitarians, civic republicans, and the contemporary democratic left also want to deal with a more specific problem of political leadership: How to respond vigorously and effectively when one judges that the existing political-economic regime (including not just a written constitution but the overall organization of economic and political power) operates in practice to undermine social justice and democratic self-governance, empowering and benefiting a minority of citizens at the expense of everyone else. For thinkers and activists in these traditions, the question is how to heal, repair, or outright reconstruct flawed existing systems.

Answering that question requires specifying what a healthier, more successful constitution would look like. It also must involve thinking strategically about how to move in the direction of such reform given the starting point of existing institutional practices and existing public opinion and given the fact of organizational fragmentation and

cultural pluralism. It also must involve careful thought about how to vigorously challenge the status quo without acting in ways that undermine democracy or threaten future prospects for democratic contestation. And, finally, it must involve robust political action, building coalitions of the kind described above and the emergence of committed citizen leaders.

In practice, any democratic movement that does all these things is likely to be eclectic in orientation and to draw influence from a variety of public philosophies, including of course hugely influential streams of thought and practice not discussed in this chapter such as feminism, liberation theology, and the rich tradition of African American political thought. It will also have to address a major leadership challenge not discussed in this chapter, that of responding to the ecological crisis, particularly the urgent challenge of global climate change. Although the contributions formal political theory can make to this grand leadership project should not be overstated, neither are they unimportant. For example, after 200 years of political development and many instances—all the way up to 2009—in which freedom and democracy have been dramatically expanded, many Americans are naturally inclined, despite our many problems, to think that our existing constitutional regime works pretty well. Consequently, showing how a significantly reformed constitutional order might function and demonstrating that substantial changes in the nature of our political economy would enhance rather than threaten prospects for meaningful self-governance is not simply an intellectual exercise; it is a practical political imperative for all who are serious about deepening the practice of democracy.

## Notes

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1. Probably the best example in U.S. history of a mass movement that directly challenged political-economic fundamentals while undertaking the hard work of self-education and building a movement culture was the agrarian revolt—the Populist movement—of the 1880s and 1890s. For a detailed, sympathetic account, see Lawrence Goodwyn, 1976.

2. To be sure, some policies—such as comprehensive health care reform—could in theory be implemented by either democratic or nondemocratic means. The democratic principle I advocate suggests that activists should reject resorting to stratagems designed to do an end route around accepted democratic procedures in advocating for such reform. This does not mean that activists cannot support, endorse, or advocate for favored policies that fall within the authority of public officials to implement by administrative decision (rather than legislatively), although it is desirable from a democratic point of view to ensure that such policies are implemented in a transparent fashion with opportunity for comment and feedback by those affected by the policies. In the case of these sorts of policies (executive orders, administrative rulings, law enforcement priorities, etc.), it is assumed that the ultimate mechanism of accountability is the ballot box. Generally speaking, large order reform measures can be implemented only through legislation.



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