

The Political Vocabulary of the Post-New Left: How Activists Articulate their Politics, and Why it Matters

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The rise of an anti-systemic social movement, when it happens, can seem quite sudden and almost effortless. But in point of fact this appearance of spontaneous generation masks a lot of very hard work, on the part of countless individuals, to produce the outpouring of creativity, cooperation and effective communication on which the movement depends for its existence. Social movements require the coordinated yet independent initiative of many thousands of people, operating in far-flung locales, and sustained over a period of years. People not previously active in public affairs have to step forth into practices of direct action, self-organization, and collective decision-making, which the dominant ideology has long encouraged them to leave to supposed experts, such as professional politicians or government officials.

The emergence of an authentic people's movement can only take place if a special kind of bridge has successfully been built and then defended: a bridge between (1) the ambitious agendas for far-reaching social change that, most of the time, attract a following only in relatively marginal activist enclaves, and (2) the kind of broad-based public sympathy and popular participation that can generate "people power" on a scale which would normally be utterly unavailable to activists. In short, a social movement emerges only when radical ideas gain a base of broad, enduring, and active public support. Marx put the point aptly: political radicalism, normally marginal and ineffective, "becomes a material force once it has gripped the masses" (Marx 1844).

Loss of Credibility for the New Left Political Vocabulary

Given the difficulty of building these bridges between activist enclaves and broad publics, and considering the predictable efforts by elites to thwart movement-building at every opportunity, how is the rapid emergence and expansion of social movements even possible? What did it take to launch the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s, the Anti-War Movement in the 1960s, or the Women's Liberation Movement in the 1970s?

We are not particularly well positioned to answer this question today. After all, if we knew how to build broad-based, militant, and enduringly effective social movements, many of us would be actively replicating in the present era the considerable successes of earlier generations. As it turns out, however, there have been very few sustained upsurges of popular protest and community organization in Canada or the United States since the 1970s, in spite of some important outbreaks and upsurges (see Harden 2013) like the Global Justice Movement, the Occupy Movement, the Quebec Student Strike, Idle No More, and Black Lives Matter. In spite of these bright lights and hopeful moments, however, we can see in hindsight that the movements of the 1960s-70s represent a relatively high

watermark of popular mobilization and organization, never quite replicated in the decades since (Sears 2014).

It might be tempting, then, to imagine that we could unlock the secrets of how to build movements by taking a close look at the organizing methods and styles of public engagement deployed by movement activists in the New Left era (roughly, from the early 1960s to the late 1970s). How did the Black Panther Party manage to build a large, powerful and inspiring organization of radical activists, with chapters in dozens of cities across the United States (Bloom and Martin 2013), in the course of only a few years? How did Students for a Democratic Society start out with a small group of a few dozen students in 1962, and turn itself into one of the most powerful organizations in the history of the North American student politics in about a five-year period (Sale 1973)? Unfortunately, this seemingly promising approach to finding a way forward for movement-building in our own time tends not to yield much insight. What we find when we look at the record of those movements is that, however nostalgic we might be for their historic achievements and their enviable dynamism and impact, we could never plausibly regard them as offering up models for us to emulate in our own time, at least not in any direct or straightforward way. The problem is that the activists of those years seem to have had ways of thinking and speaking about political activity that would be seen as manifestly unacceptable in our own time.

After all, what would happen if we tried to use a 1960s-70s style of activism as a model for political organizing today? Suppose, for instance, that a few of us were to go around to activist “spaces” in the contemporary context, acting and speaking in the manner typical of organizers from the heyday of the New Left, that is, in the style familiar from the Black Panther Party or Students for a Democratic Society. We might begin by confidently asserting the need to unite “the people” in a common struggle for “liberation,” proposing “alliances” based on “solidarity” and a shared commitment to promoting “the revolution” against “the system.” (This might sound like a cliché or a stereotype, but these terms really did infuse the discourse of the activist left in those years; indeed, at the time, these formulas were important departures from the “Old Left” vocabulary of “the bourgeoisie,” “dual power,” “dictatorship of the proletariat,” and “popular fronts.”) In any case, the response would be predictable. Far from this revivalist approach offering a way forward, setting the stage for a revitalization of left activism and a new impetus to broad-based movement building, we would, on the contrary, be met with either confusion or disdain, or both.

The problem would not be one of understanding, so much as credibility. The political vocabulary of the New Left era would be understood by activists today, at least in general terms. But it is unlikely that it would be taken seriously. The terms in which the New Left expressed its politics – “the people,” “liberation,” “alliances,” “the system” – would be viewed as (and indeed, would actually be) a throwback to an earlier era. The great majority of activists, below the age of 30, just don’t talk that way anymore. And it is worth stopping to think about why that is. This would not be simply because of superficial changes in terminology, but because these political formulas presuppose things about political activity and social change that would strike people today as fundamentally implausible. The result is a divide, an unmistakable chasm,

between the political vocabulary of the New Left of the 1960s-70s, and the political vocabulary of today's "post-New Left."

From the New Left to the Post-New Left: A Mutation in the Activist Political Vocabulary

But before analyzing the root causes and practical implications of this transformation, we need to get a feel for these two vocabularies, and how they differ. Consider the following table. In the left column, several keywords of the New Left era are listed, along with their definitions. In the right column, each word is paired with a keyword from today's activist Left, which has largely displaced the older term.

New Left Political Vocabulary (1960s-70s)	Post-New Left Political Vocabulary (1990s-now)
<p>"Oppression": a pattern of persistent and systematic disadvantage imposed on large groups of people, in many domains of social life, including employment, social status, treatment by the legal system, vulnerability to violence, and more; e.g, racial oppression, gender oppression, etc.</p>	<p>"Privilege": a set of unearned benefits that some individuals enjoy (and others are denied) in their everyday lives, by virtue of their place in a racial or gender or other 'identity'-hierarchy, e.g., male privilege, white privilege, cisgender privilege, etc.</p>
<p>"Exploitation": a feature of economic systems, including capitalism, in which unpaid labour is extracted from working people for the benefit of a relatively small number of exploiters, who comprise, in economic terms, a ruling class.</p>	<p>"Classism": an attitude of scorn, condescension, or disrespect toward persons of low income, similar to what once was called "snobbery" or class-based elitism."</p>
<p>"Alliances": the confluence in struggle of large-scale social forces (like social classes, or social movements), as part of a strategic orientation toward the coordinated pursuit of common aims.</p>	<p>"Allyship": a sincere commitment on the part of a privileged individual to offer ongoing support to individuals, groups or organizations that oppose that kind of privilege, and to take direction from them about the form that support should take.</p>
<p>"The People": a label for the totality or potential collectivity of those who are not members of the small, ruling elite; it is usually seen as including workers, the unemployed, small farmers, students, and almost all women, people of colour, and so on.</p>	<p>"Folks": a term that refers to groups of people, in the plural, without suggesting that they comprise a singular totality that could be united in one common struggle, which may be precluded by the difference of their experiences and degrees of privilege.</p>

<p>“Consciousness-raising”: a process of popular political education, in which learners are viewed as already having an implicit grasp of critical insights about injustice and social change, but invites them to participate in a collective learning process in order to become fully aware of these insights and their implications through dialogue with peers.</p>	<p>Calling Out”: an approach to challenging “folks” who show a lack of insight or concern about issues of privilege, in which they are confronted by peers and urged to “check” their privilege.</p>
<p>“Solidarity”: a stance, within and between social movements, of treating “injuries to one” as if they were “injuries to all,” and resisting them in common, as matters of shared priority, rather than as the concern only of those under attack. Example: The “I am Trayvon Martin” slogan used in anti-racist protests in 2013, which echoed the old labour-movement principle of solidarity (“An injury to one is an injury to all”; cf., “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”) (See http://iamtrayvonmartin.tumblr.com/.)</p>	<p>“Positionality”: a practice of acknowledging the specificity of one’s social position, especially one’s access to privilege, which may make one incapable of understanding or speaking authoritatively about the ways others are impacted adversely by the operation of privilege. Example: the “I am not Trayvon Martin” meme from 2013, which urged white people to refrain from identifying with African-American resistance, for reasons of positionality. (See http://wearenottrayvonmartin.tumblr.com/.)</p>
<p>“Liberation”: a term used to refer to ultimate victory in struggles against systems of oppression and/or exploitation, e.g., national liberation, women’s liberation, black liberation. Cf. “emancipation,” e.g., the emancipation of women, the emancipation of the working class.</p>	<p>“Safe(r) Space”: the attempt to create occasions or locations wherein the adverse effects of privilege on marginalized people are minimized in everyday interpersonal interactions, notably by encouraging “folks” in those spaces to “check their privilege” and by “calling out” any failures to embody “allyship.”</p>

Some immediate caveats and qualifications are necessary, to ward off misunderstanding.

First, the new vocabulary is used almost exclusively by the English-speaking Left in a few countries, especially Canada, the US, and (to a lesser extent) the UK. Elsewhere, such as in Latin America and southern Africa, the Left has its own distinctive vocabularies, which would have to be analyzed separately. This is important because it reminds us that the post-New Left vocabulary has not been shaped by some of the broad popular struggles that have happened elsewhere, and some of its features seem to be symptomatic of this fact. Second,

the older vocabulary is still in use today. Indeed, many people use both vocabularies, or at least draw from both, even if they have a primary vocabulary that dominates their speech and writing about activism. Even so, it seems clear that the first vocabulary has faded and continues to fade from use within today's activist subcultures, as the second one continues to gain ground. Third, it is possible to use one set of words to express the other set of meanings. That is, one can retain the words, "solidarity," "oppression," or "consciousness-raising," while using them in a way that is shaped by the new vocabulary, so that by "solidarity," you mean acknowledging positionality; by "oppression," you mean individual privilege; and by "consciousness-raising," you mean calling people out. Conversely, one can use the new terms, but give them the old meanings. For this reason, if one hears a contemporary activist use the word, "alliance," which would be a rare thing, it is worth stopping to ask, Do you mean the confluence in struggle of large social forces like classes or social movements, or do you mean privileged people being committed as individuals to offering support to those adversely impacted by privilege, and taking direction from them? Only in this way can you confirm which vocabulary is being used, strictly speaking. Fourth, my remarks refer to "ideal types" (Weber 1904), not the exact ways that every activist talks. In other words, although my account of the post-1990 activist vocabulary is intended to be recognizable by everyone familiar with contemporary activist subcultures, it is probably a bit more reflective of some "scenes" than others. For example, it will be immediately recognizable, I think, to anyone familiar with the work of Tim Wise, Peggy McIntosh, Melissa Harris-Perry, who Ta-Nehisi Coates (2014) described as the USA's foremost public intellectual, or many of today's most widely read 'social justice blogs,' such as *Everyday Feminism* (everydayfeminism.com) and *Black Girl Dangerous* (blackgirldangerous.org). Still, my core contrast (in the two columns) may appear overdrawn and exaggerated to people whose contact with activist subcultures occurs mainly through grassroots protest organizing. In organizing contexts, most activist speech is infused with a pragmatic focus on getting things done, so some of this jargon recedes into the background. Nevertheless, I would be surprised if anyone familiar with today's activist subcultures in English-speaking North America claimed not to recognize the terminology that I attribute to today's activists.

Reflecting on the gulf that divides these two styles of political speech, some (mostly, but by no means exclusively older) people—whether out of nostalgia or out of substantive reservations about the politics of this transformation, or both—will recoil from the vocabulary of today's activists. There is no shortage of critics who complain about the focus on "privilege" (Smith 2013; deBoer 2014) and "calling out" (Jones 2014) in the contemporary activist scene. But we should try not to be seduced by the broad-brushed dismissal with which the most incautious critics (like Fisher 2013) reject the politics that pervades today's activist subcultures. In many cases, the political sensibility of these critics has been shaped (for better and for worse) by the 1960s radicalization and its aftermath, and no doubt that perspective brings with it important insights. However, we should remain open to the possibility that some aspects of the new vocabulary may offer important insights as well, some of which may correct mistakes

embedded in the older vocabulary. We can retain an open mind, even if we remain reluctant to embrace the new jargon wholesale.

Conversely, some partisans of the post-New Left will insist that any resistance to the new vocabulary must be rooted in an attempt to cling to privileges which, allegedly, the new discourse threatens (Khan 2014). This dogmatic stance likewise reflects a narrow-minded sensibility that renounces the very possibility of learning from engagement with perspectives that contest one's own basic assumptions. It is this fundamentalist sensibility that has earned “the Twitter Left” and “the social justice blogging community” a sometimes well-deserved bad reputation (Stallings 2012), but those attitudes should not be allowed to insinuate themselves into our more thoughtful political conversations, especially as they unfold in real-world, offline organizing projects.

In fact, neither of the two political vocabularies considered here should be deemed to be either above reproach or beneath contempt. Both are ways of articulating the politics of people committed to the struggle for social justice, so they deserve, if not necessarily our endorsement, at least our willingness to listen and, where possible, to learn.

The Roots of the Vocabulary Change

Granted that this chasm separating the two vocabularies exists, why are they so different? What accounts for this mutation in the mode of speech typical of left political activists in recent decades? A close examination of the two systems of terminology reveals some underlying principles that are driving the transformation. In particular, one can discern the operation, just below the surface, of three fundamental shifts.

1. **A Shift in Priorities from Ultimate Victory to Challenging Everyday Impacts.** The older vocabulary looked at capitalism, racism, and sexism (for example) as social systems or institutions that could and probably would be defeated, once and for all, in the foreseeable future. Accordingly, activists of that era defined and described their movements as struggles for “socialism,” “black liberation,” or “women’s liberation.” By contrast, the new vocabulary tends to suspend judgment on (without denying) the prospects for ultimate victory, and to focus its attention on challenging everyday impacts of capitalism, racialization and gender, in the here and now. This prioritization of resistance to everyday impacts infuses, not only the way activists today talk, but also how they choose what to do. For example, what is happening in this meeting, today, is emphasized much more, because it is not seen merely in instrumental terms as a means to destroy systems of domination. The meeting itself is generating impacts that have to be challenged as they arise. Addressing problems of “process,” which once would have been seen as a “distraction” from an urgent liberation struggle, is now seen as part and parcel of what the left is for.
2. **A Shift of Focus from Analyzing System Dynamics to Analyzing Interpersonal Dynamics.** The old vocabulary assumed that political analysis should study large-scale, often transnational social systems and

structures, centuries in the making, e.g., systems of oppression and exploitation. In contrast, the new vocabulary assumes that race and gender and other forms of privilege are enacted in everyday, interpersonal interactions. This is key to the concept of “privilege.” It is likened to “an invisible knapsack” of advantages or monopolized benefits that some receive and others are denied (McIntosh 1988). Privileged persons gain these benefits whether or not they even know or acknowledge it. Thus, whereas activists in the late 1960s and 1970s were keen to use history and political economy to develop a sophisticated analysis of the historical process, centuries-long, that established European colonial domination of much of the world, the new vocabulary both reflects and encourages a change of focus, toward how racism (for example) is enacted or reproduced in the everyday interactions of white people with racialized people, as individuals or in groups. The analysis of the power dynamics of these everyday interpersonal interactions has tended to gain in prominence and sophistication, in parallel to the relative de-emphasis of the importance of political economy and critical sociology within the activist left.

3. A Shift in Emphasis from Commonality (Among Social Groups) to Specificity. The vocabulary of the former New Left grew out of and contributed in turn to the construction of broad-based popular movements, in which hundreds of thousands and sometimes millions of people participated. By contrast, the vocabulary of today’s Anglophone North American activists emerged in a completely different, and arguably much less favourable context. One symptom of this is a change in emphasis from the search for commonalities that could be the basis for building alliances and expanding the base of support for militant mass movements, to grappling with the barriers to joint organizing and common struggle. In brief, the old vocabulary emerged in a context where opportunities to encourage solidarity and collaboration were actively sought, whereas the new vocabulary emerged out of the frustration of failed efforts to bridge gaps between people and organizations that reflected real differences. There is a certain optimism in the idea of “consciousness-raising,” or the concept of “the people,” that seems naive and unconvincing to many of today’s activists. The shift from “consciousness-raising” to “calling out,” for instance, reflects (and encourages) a loss of confidence in the capacity of people to learn about, understand and oppose forms of inequality that do not adversely impact them as individuals. These doubts are, in turn, elaborated in terms of positionality and privilege.

Taken together, these three shifts go a long way toward explaining the transformation of the way activists talk, which has been noticeable at least since the 1990s.

Reflecting on this shift, and the politics implied by it, there seem to be both gains and losses, from the point of view of the fundamental challenge of movement building, which I noted at the outset. Arguably, the only justification

for even having a special vocabulary for articulating the politics of left activists is that such a vocabulary might help build bridges between the transformative aspirations that animate otherwise isolated radicals operating within activist enclaves and the broad public in the wider working class whose activation and mobilization is needed to make those aspirations a reality.

Gains and Losses Associated with the Vocabulary Change

Does the shift from the New Left vocabulary to the post-New Left vocabulary help or hinder such bridge-building efforts?

There are, to be sure, important advantages for movement-builders articulating their politics in the new way. After all, the vocabulary and the practice of the Left in the 1960s-70s had several serious problems, even if these defects are hard for some to see through the fog of nostalgia-clouded historical memory. It's true that the movements of the 1960s and '70s were vastly more potent, and drew in vastly more people from all walks of life, than any political organizing that happens on the left today in Canada or the US, with the possible exception of the Global Justice and Occupy movements during their peaks. And yet, many people entered and participated in the New Left in spite of serious concerns about the persistence, within movement activities, of sexist behaviours and attitudes, forms of machismo that were both misogynist and homophobic, and ways in which (in some organizations and struggles) college-educated, middle-income white people tended to dominate the proceedings and set the agendas (Morgan 1970; Combahee River Collective 1977). To the extent that it was plagued by problems of this kind, the New Left's practice belied the radicalism of the movement's official rhetoric, and made its universalistic claims about the "unity" of "the people" ring hollow. It seems clear that the attentiveness in today's Left activist subcultures to interpersonal dynamics within the movement reflects a genuine learning process. It is a step toward beginning to address problems that were, in effect, glossed over and even actively concealed by phrases like "the people" and a complacent view of the prospects for building genuine "solidarity" and "alliances." There are real barriers to solidarity, which have to be actively addressed, rather than assumed away at the level of vocabulary choice. To its credit, the post-New Left political vocabulary excels at frank acknowledgement of those barriers.

Related to this, the post-New Left vocabulary also makes it much harder for people to dismiss or vilify groups within larger movements that find it necessary to organize independently, in order to formulate demands or critical insights about failures of movement organizations to address their specific concerns. For instance, whereas the New Left vocabulary could encourage people to denounce as "divisive" women finding it helpful to set up a women's caucus in their union, the post-New Left vocabulary makes this move seem quite sensible: it doesn't divide the people and erode solidarity, but only enables folks to organize to create a safe space where the specific concerns of women can be addressed, without the distorting influence of male privilege always getting in the way. We might disagree about how to exactly to handle or describe this measure, but few of us today would want to surrender this insight, which seems to be an

important advance, precisely in helping to build movements that are inclusive and welcoming, in this case to women (although the point applies to other marginalized or dominated groups, too).

On the other hand, however, it is also true that the series of shifts from the old vocabulary to the new one has entailed certain losses. I will mention three.

First, the relative de-emphasizing of system-level causation, in favour of a new emphasis on the importance of individual action or inaction, tends to weaken the integration of everyday activist discourse with the theoretical analysis of systems like capitalism and colonialism. It is true that, in exchange, we have a vocabulary that better enables us to focus on class privilege and settler privilege, understood in terms of interpersonal dynamics. But if we are to defeat colonialism and capitalism, we cannot do so one person at a time, or one interaction or relationship at a time. The systems themselves have to be named, understood, attacked and overthrown. This issue is, obviously, closely connected to the loss of a focus on liberation. A liberation focus and a systems focus share a common understanding: that the purpose of the Left is to defeat systems of exploitation and oppression. Challenging immediate impacts is important, but not enough: it is necessary, but by no means sufficient. Moreover, the way we challenge everyday impacts should be informed by our understanding that they are not produced simply by individual actions, but by the operation of large-scale systems. The Left needs a vocabulary, and a self-understanding, that highlights and foregrounds the importance of constructing and expanding anti-systemic movements that aim to defeat systems of oppressive and exploitative power. It is hard not to think that the older vocabulary better expresses this insight, even as it obstructs our access to other critical insights that are also indispensable.

Second, the post-New Left political vocabulary sometimes seems to instill or foster a generalized pessimism about the very possibility of finding common ground, becoming in effect a “self-fulfilling prophecy,” in which activists are encouraged to forego even the attempt to build broad alliances (for instance, between Indigenous people and working-class settler communities, on the pretext that anything beyond individual efforts to “be an ally” are pointless and doomed to fail, since there is not sufficient commonality of interests or experiences to make cross-movement alliances (e.g., between Indigenous sovereignty organizing and the trade union movement) feasible. To the extent that the new vocabulary has embedded within it a strategic analysis which is systematically pessimistic about broad-based alliance-building, it is arguably a barrier to building powerful social movements and a deterrent to investing the long-term energy and time needed to cultivate those cross-movement relations of mutual defence, mutual trust, and mutual aid.

Finally, a third pitfall of the new vocabulary is that there is some danger, at least, that it may tend to reinforce the sense of marginality of the activist milieu, considered as a constellation of “scenes” and “subcultures.” If the impulse that animates the construction and deployment of a vocabulary and a style of speech is mainly the desire to consolidate the shared culture and sense of commonality of people whose leftist values leave them alienated from the wider society, then the predictable outcome will be to solidify and further entrench the sense of distance between left activists and the wider working-class public. In short, it can function as a barrier to the bridge-building that movements rely upon for their

very possibility. To some critics, the post-New Left political vocabulary shows signs of just this sort of retreat from the aspiration to break out of enclaves and subcultures to engage with wider society. These critics note, with an unmistakable skepticism, the perhaps symptomatic timing of the new vocabulary's emergence, in the wake of the Reagan/Thatcher era and the wave of defeats inflicted on the Left in those years (Carr 1999; Choonara & Prasad 2014). They worry that the manner in which activists articulate their politics today may have strayed in the direction of a de-fanged adaptation to defeat and political marginality (Reed 2001).

Conclusion

One could certainly say more about the gains and losses associated with adopting either of these two vocabularies. But perhaps it is enough to have sketched an approach to thinking about the question. Both vocabularies have been formed to address indispensably important concerns, so we should be reluctant to give up on either one. The most important thing, I would suggest, is to refuse to allow either of these two ways speaking, writing and thinking about Left activism to evade the challenge raised by its counterpart. Those who wish to retain an expression like “the people,” and who feel reluctant to take up the term “folks” in its place, are certainly entitled to do so. But one hopes that their use of the notion of “the people” will be disciplined by a certain amount of sensitivity to the motivation that has led some activists to drop that term from their vocabulary. On the other hand, those who embrace the newer way of articulating Left politics should, in the same way, remain (or become) attentive to the importance of highlighting issues of system dynamics, large-scale alliance-building, and ultimate liberation, rather than letting these urgently important matters disappear from view entirely.

I have argued here that movement-building involves, crucially, an attempt to build bridges that mediate between the transformative aims of radicals and broad publics that are normally indifferent to projects of far-reaching social change. (I explore this theme further in the closing pages of D'Arcy 2013.) The vocabularies that activists deploy, in order to understand themselves and to make themselves understood by others, can serve to construct such bridges. But they can also serve to erect barriers to the constructive work already done, notably by previous generations. It is worth paying attention, therefore, to the potential pitfalls of ill-considered elements of whatever political vocabulary one adopts.

There are limits to this, however. Notwithstanding the importance of how activists articulate their politics, we should resist any suggestion that vocabulary choice is the decisive variable determining the vitality and appeal of the Left. The weakness of the Left today is not primarily the fault of the way activists talk. What the Left lacks above all is the infusions of energy it can only receive from mass upsurges of popular struggle, of the kind that benefitted left-activism in generations past. The single most important difference between today's post-New Left and the New Left of the 1968 era isn't a difference of vocabulary. It is a difference in the scope and scale of popular rebellion, mobilization and organization. There were, quite simply, vastly more people flowing into anti-

systemic struggles in the 1960s than there are today. Since participation in social-movement struggles is basically the only setting (other than a few university courses and a few tiny and isolated leftist groups and collectives) where most people have the opportunity to learn about leftist ideas and strategies, the radical Left is trapped in a position of chronic marginality, lacking any clear path to “mainstream” relevance, i.e., any capacity to secure a meaningful role in shaping the ideas of large numbers of people or wielding any substantive influence. What the Left of today lacks, therefore, is the expansive pool of social antagonisms and conflicts upon which earlier generations of radicals could rely for periodic injections of enthusiasm, critical insights about the nature of the systems we oppose and how to defeat them, and what Rosa Luxemburg (1919) called “the forward-storming combative energy” of broad popular movements.

With this in mind, we can hopefully see that blaming the forms of speech and styles of self-interpretation of activists for the Left’s marginality is like blaming the dead fish when a pond dries up after years of catastrophic drought. The pathologies of the Left — chronic sectarianism, exaggerated levels of self-doubt about the utility of leftist politics, limited capacity to engage with a broad public outside of leftist subcultures, the all too common shift of focus from organizing against systemic racism and sexism to obsessing about racist or sexist utterances by celebrities or public figures as these are debated on social media, and so on — these are all symptoms, not underlying causes, of the fact that the levels of social struggle are so low today that much of the time the Left has no context, no “habitat” (so to speak) in which to operate on a healthy basis. Inevitably, it threatens to shrivel up and lose a lot of its former vitality and dynamism. It is cut off from the source that had once nourished its growth and vigour. While critical examination of how we understand and communicate our politics does matter, therefore, we should steer clear of the naïve hope for a tiny and isolated, yet healthy and dynamic activist Left. This is a deeply incoherent expectation.

The solution, of course, is for the activist Left to commit fully, and with a renewed sense of urgency, to breaking out of its longstanding isolation. What is needed is a reinvigorated determination to push past everything that stands between the radical aspirations of those who inhabit activist enclaves or leftist subcultures and the always formidable social power that lies dormant, but never loses its transformative potential, of the capacity of working class people to organize themselves for the defeat of systems of domination and exploitation.

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