

In Defense of Radicalism

Jeff Shantz

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In the present period few terms or ideas have been as slandered, distorted, diminished, or degraded as radical or radicalism. This is perhaps not too surprising given that this is a period of expanding struggles against state and capital, oppression and exploitation, in numerous global contexts. In such contexts, the issue of radicalism, of effective means to overcome power (or stifle resistance) become pressing. The stakes are high, possibilities for real alternatives being posed and opposed. In such contexts activists and academics must not only adequately understand radicalism, but defend (and advance) radical approaches to social change and social justice.

The first known use of the term radical is in the 14th century, 1350–1400; Middle English coming from Late Latin *rādicālis*, having roots. It is also defined as being very different from the usual or traditional. The term radical simply means of or going to the roots or origin. Thoroughgoing. Straightforwardly, it means getting to the root of a problem.

Radicalism is a perspective, an orientation in the world. It is not, as is often mistakenly claimed, a strategy. To be radical is to dig beneath the surface of taken for granted assumptions, too easy explanations, unsatisfactory answers, and panaceas that pose as solutions to problems. Radicalism challenges and opposes status quo definitions-it refuses the self-serving justifications offered up by authority and power.

Rather than a set of ideas or actions, this is a crucial approach to life. As the existential Marxist analyst Erich Fromm has suggested in an earlier context of struggle:

To begin with this approach can be characterized by the motto: *de omnibus dubitandum*; everything must be doubted, particularly the ideological concepts which are virtually shared by everybody and have consequently assumed the role of indubitable common-sensical axioms...Radical doubt is a process; a process of liberation from idolatrous thinking; a widening of awareness, of imaginative, creative vision of our possibilities and options. The radical approach does not occur in a vacuum. It does not start from nothing, but it starts from the roots. (1971, vii)

As is true for much of views and practices in class divided capitalist society, there are two distinct perspectives on radicalism, two meanings of radicalism. From the first perspective of radicalism as a getting to the roots-going to the source of problems-the nature of capital must be understood, addressed, confronted-overcome. Ending capital's violence can only be achieved by ending the processes essential to its existence: exploitation, expropriation, dispossession, profit, extraction, possession of the commons, of nature. And how can this be accomplished? Capital and states know-they understand. Thus, the identification of those acts outlined above-identified, precisely, as radical.

Radicalism, from below, is sociological (and should be criminological, though criminology has sometimes lagged). It expresses that orientation to the world espoused by C Wright Mills as the sociological imagination (1959). Radicalism in its first sense connects history, economy, politics, geography, culture, seeking to move beyond the easy answers rigidified unreflexively as "common sense" (which is often neither common nor sensible). It digs beneath convention and the status quo. For Fromm:

To "doubt" in this sense does not imply a psychological state of inability to arrive at decisions or convictions, as is the case in obsessional doubt, but the readiness and capacity for critical questioning of all assumptions and institutions which have

become idols under the name of common sense, logic, and what is supposed to be “natural.” (1971, viii)

More than that, radicalism does not seek nor take comfort in the constructed moralism peddled by power-by state and capital. A radical orientation does not accept the false moralism that defines the acceptability of actions by their acceptability to powerholders or elites (law and order, rights of states, property rights, and so on). As Fromm has stated it:

This radical questioning is possible only if one does not take the concepts of one’s own society or even of an entire historical period-like Western culture since the Renaissance-for granted, and furthermore if one enlarges the scope of one’s awareness and penetrates into the unconscious aspects of one’s thinking. Radical doubt is an act of uncovering and discovering; it is the dawning of the awareness that the Emperor is naked, and that his splendid garments are nothing but the product of one’s phantasy. (1971, viii)

Breaking the law (of states, property) can be straightforwardly just and reasonable. As upholding the law can be (is, by definition) an act of acceptance of systems of injustice and violence. The hungry do not need to justify their efforts to feed themselves. The dispossessed do not need to explain their attempts to house themselves. The brutalized do not need to seek permission to stop brutality. If their efforts are radical-as they know it to mean-real solutions to real problems-then, so be it.

On other hand is the hegemonic definition asserted by capital (and its state servants). In this view, distorted through power’s prism, radicalism is a word for extremism (chaos, disorder, violence, irrationality). Working class resistance, social movements, indigenous struggles, peasant uprisings, direct actions, and insurrections in urban centers-all opposition that challenges (or even calls into question) property relations, systems of command and control, exploitation of labor, theft of common resources by private interests-are defined by state and capital as radicalism, by which they mean extremism, or increasingly, terrorism.

All means of state authority control are thrown at containing or stamping out this radicalism-it is a large part of why modern police, criminal justice systems, and prisons, as well as the modern military, were created, developed, and expanded. In addition, and less remarked upon, are the “soft” practices of state and capital such as the psy industries which have long included rebelliousness as among the maladies requiring diagnosis and treatment.¹ As radical pedagogical theorist Ivan Illich suggests: “True testimony of profound nonconformity arouses the fiercest violence against it” (1971, 16). Such is the case in the current context of social struggles, and the repression deployed by state and capital to stamp out meaningful resistance (and frighten off soft support).

Yet the views and practices targeted in this construction of radicalism are really simply those that challenge and contest states and capital and offer alternative social relations. Even where these movements pose little or no harm to anyone, even where they are explicitly non-violent (as in workplace occupations, strikes, indigenous land reclamations), power poses these activities as radical and extreme (and by association violent). This is really because such activities raise the specter of the first understanding of radicalism-that which comes from below-that which speaks

¹ For more analysis on this, see Heidi Rimke’s on-going work (2011, 2003)

to the perspectives of the oppressed and exploited. That definition is, in fact, true to the roots of the word and consistent with its meaning.

The charge of radicalism by powerholders, the question of radicalism itself, always becomes more prominent in periods of growing struggle. It is in those periods in which state capital has something to be concerned about. No longer are attempts to get to the roots consigned to the margins of social discourse, but that is what power seeks-to stuff it back into a place of control and regulation. In periods of low struggle the issue of radicalism is less often posed. That says something about the nature of the debates over radicalism.

Radicalism of the first meaning is not a kneejerk reaction to social conditions. For Illich, one must learn to distinguish “between destructive fury and the demand for radically new forms” (1971, 122). Where it takes apart, it takes apart in order to build. There is a need to “distinguish between the alienated mob and profound protest” (1971, 122–123). In Fromm’s perspective:

Radical doubt means to question; it does not necessarily mean to negate. It is easy to negate by simply positing the opposite of what exists; radical doubt is dialectical inasmuch as it comprehends the unfolding of oppositions and aims at a new synthesis which negates *and* affirms. (1971, viii)

As the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin has suggested, the passion to destroy is also a creative passion.

Issues of extremism, introduced by powerholders to serve their power, are a diversion, a red herring so to speak. Supposedly extreme or outrageous acts are not necessarily radical, as is suggested in mass media that often treat them as synonymous. Extreme acts (and more needs to be said about this misleading term) that fail to get to the roots of state capital relations, such as misguided acts of violence against civilians, are not radical. They do not get to the root of capitalist exploitation (even if frustration over exploitation gives rise to them). Acts that only serve to reinforce relations of repression or legitimize state initiatives are not radical.

At the same time, some extreme acts are radical. These acts should be judged on their real impact on state capitalist power, on institutions of exploitation and oppression.

Within the state capitalist context extremism is rendered devoid of meaning. In a system founded on, and subsisting on mass murder, genocide, and ecocide as the everyday reality of its existence, notions of extremism become irrelevant, nonsensical. Particularly when used trivially, flippantly, to describe minor acts of opposition or resistance, even desperation. In this context, too, the issue of violence (in a society founded on, underpinned by everyday acts of extreme violence) or non-violence is something of a phony construction (one favorable to power which legitimizes its own violence or poses violent acts like exploitation as non-violent), a rigged game.

Power never admits its own extremism, its own violence, its own chaos, destruction, disorder. The disorder of inequality, the chaos of dispossession, the destruction of traditional or indigenous communities and relationships-the extermination of survival, of the planet itself. These are real extremist behaviors. They are, in fact endemic to the exercise of power within state capitalist societies.

The destruction of entire ecosystems for the profit of a few is a ferociously “rational” act (against the irrationality of radical approaches to stop such devastation). The extinguishing of entire communities-the genocide of peoples-to secure land and resources is an unspeakably extreme action, in ecological and human terms. Yet power never identifies this as at all radical-it

is always simply a fact of life, a cost of doing business, a side effect of necessary progress, an unfortunate outcome of history (with no one responsible).

And these are not even the extremes, not even rare outliers of capitalism-these are the foundational acts of capital's being-they are the nature of capital. Colonial conquest, for example, is not an unfortunate side effect or excess of capitalism-it is its very possibility, its essence.

Activists who fail to get to the root of social or ecological problems-who fail to understand what radicalism from below means for resistance-can be, and generally are, too readily enlisted by state capital in the hegemonic chorus that assails and condemns, that slanders and besmirches radicalism. We see this in the context of alternative globalization movements in which some activists, claiming non-violent civil disobedience (NVCD) ahistorically, without context, as if it is some sort of fetish object, who then join the police, politicians, corporations, and mass media in condemning direct action, blockades, street occupations, barricades, or, of course, property damage, as being too radical-as acts of violence. The voices of anti-radical activists becomes a part of the delegitimation of resistance itself, a key aspect in the maintenance of power and inequality.

Such public disavowals of resistance serve to justify, excuse, and maintain the very real violence that *is* capital. Perspectives, including those of activists, that condemn resistance, including, for example, armed resistance, are simply enabling apologizing for, justifying the continued and expanded (it always expands in the absence of real opposition) violence of state capital.

Survival is not a crime. Survival is *never* radical. Exploitation is *always* a crime (or should be). Exploitation is *only ever* the norm of capitalist social relations.

Powerholders will always seek to discredit or delegitimize resistance to their privilege and deployment of loaded (misconstructed and misconstrued by powerholders) terms like radicalism will be a tactic in this. One can follow the reconstruction of the term "terror" to see an example of such processes. The term 'terror' was initially used to designate state violence deployed against anyone deemed to be a threat to instituted authority, to the state. (Badiou 2011, 17) Only later-as an outcome of hegemonic struggle-did terror come (for state powerholders) to designate actions of civilians-even actions *against* the state.

And it often works. Certainly, it has played a part in the dampening or softening of potentialities for alternative globalization movements, as has been the case in previous periods of struggle. In this such anti-radical activists inevitably bolster state capitalist power and authority and reinforce injustice.

Yet we need to be optimistic as well. The charge of radicalism from above (assertive on the surface) is also a cry for help on behalf of power. It is a plea by power to the non-committal sectors, the soft middle, to tilt away from the resisting sectors and side with power (states and capital) in re-asserting the status quo (or extending relations and practices they find beneficial, a new status quo of privilege)-the conditions of conquest and exploitation.

Radicalism (or extremism, or terrorism) is the charge used by power to quell unrest by drawing support toward the ruling interests. In that sense it suggests a certain desperation on behalf of the powerful-one that should be seized upon, not played into or alleviated.

In periods of rising mass struggles, the issue of radicalism is inevitably posed. It is in these times that a radical orientation breaks through the confines of hegemonic legitimation-posing new questions, better answers, and real alternatives. To oppose radicalism is to oppose thought itself. To oppose radicalism is to accept the terms set out by power, to limit oneself to that which power will allow.

Anti-radicalism is inherently elitist and anti-democratic. It assumes that everyone, regardless of status, has access to channels of political and economic decision-making, and can participate in meaningful ways to address personal or collective needs. It overlooks the exclusion of vast segments of the population from decisions that most impact their lives and the unequal access to social resources that necessitate, that impel, radical changes.

Activists, as well as sociologists and criminologists, must defend radicalism from below as the necessary orientation to struggle against injustice, exploitation, and oppression and for alternative social relations. Actions should be assessed not according to a legal moral framework provided by and reinforced by state capital (for their own benefit). Assessment should be made on real impacts in ending (or hastening the end of) injustice, exploitation, and oppression, on the weakening of state capital. As Martin Luther King suggested, a riot is simply the language of the unheard.

Self-righteous moralizing and reference to legal authority, parroting the voices of state capital, is an abdication of social responsibility for activists. For sociologists and criminologists it is an abandonment of the sociological imagination which in its emphasis on getting to the roots of issues has always been radical (in the non-hegemonic sense). Critical thinkers and actors of all stripes must defend this radicalism. They must become radicals themselves.

Debates should focus on the effectiveness of perspectives and practices in getting to the roots of social problems, of uprooting power. They should not center on fidelity to the law or bourgeois morality. They should not be constrained by the lack of imagination of participants or by the sense that the best of all worlds is the world that power has proposed.

Again, radicalism is not a tactic, an act, an event. It is not a matter of extremes, in a world that takes horrifying extremes for granted. It is an orientation to the world. The features of radicalism are determined by, and in, specific contexts. This is the case now in the context of mass mobilizations, even popular uprisings against statist austerity offensives in the service of neoliberal capitalism. Radicalism always threatens to overflow attempts to contain it. It is because it advances understanding-poses social injustice in stark relief-that it is by nature re/productive. It is, in current terms, viral.

Jeff Shantz, Salt Spring Island, Summer 2013

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