

Harvey, Klein, Smith, Foster: Militant Particularism and Ecosocialism

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In “Militant Particularism and Global Ambition: The Conceptual Politics of Place, Space, and Environment in the Work of Raymond Williams” (1995), David Harvey discusses the challenges presented by moving from *place out across time*. In the midst of his involvement in a participatory research project within a high-stakes local struggle against the closure of an automotive plant, he was accused of being a “free-floating Marxist intellectual,” an outsider, and he was given the “evil eye” and asked to explain “where his loyalties lay.” (71) This is in an environment where people were losing jobs, and families and communities were being destroyed.

Harvey takes the accusation to heart and proceeds to explore the alienation inherent in the intellectual’s role and the responsibility of abstracting concepts from the lived experiences of local activism.

Harvey approaches this research with an eye to understanding the politics of community and “broader social forces” as a “parallel force to the politics of the workplace” in a context where working-class solidarities at the particular worksite were diminishing. But Harvey is reproached by his co-researchers for his allegiance to methodological distance and his perceived shift to “reactionary intellectualism” in his contextualizing the passion of struggle within the closure of political categories. In negotiating a broadening of the conceptual space of interpretation, he is “disloyal” to local union and community activism—the active, vivid, and unique lived experience of struggles for socialism in his midst. (70-73)

His preoccupation with larger theoretical and strategic concerns potentially undermines the “structures of feeling” that embolden the activists involved in the immediate struggle. His motivation comes from the desire to positively influence local militancy but also to extend its program toward broader socialist aims, to “break out of its local bonds and become a viable alternative to capitalism as a working mode of production and social relations.” (73) But what right does Harvey have to intervene and impose layers of “scientific” strategy to divert the energies of a group of people in a particular place toward a more universalist political project? He asks,

What might it mean to be loyal to abstractions rather than to actual people? ...What is it that constitutes a privileged claim to knowledge, and how can we judge, understand, adjudicate, and perhaps negotiate different knowledges constructed at very different levels of abstraction under radically different material conditions? (73-74)

Harvey confronts a paradox: In order to understand and contribute to the militant particularism of local struggles and not become a “spectator” abstracted from the local situation, he needs to

immerse himself in and identify with that struggle. In order to accurately account for scientific and analytical causalities and meaningfully appraise particularism and become strategic, he needs to maintain distance from the struggle. One threatens loss of subjectivity from approaching the object (embodiment), the other from receding (disembodiment).

Naomi Klein, John Bellamy Foster, Richard Smith

Harvey's idea is that a militant project begins in a place, and if it maintains its energy and gets properly strategic over time, it will translate into a more consequential movement. An "intellectual" parachuted into the midst of an incipient militant particularism would betray a sense of entitlement, privilege, and potentially reactionary energy by saying, "What you're doing is wrong." Rather, "traditional intellectuals" (working within studied social scientific rules) might more usefully ask, "How can we contextualize what is happening in relation to larger issues." This would occur in discussion and solidarity with what Gramsci calls "organic intellectuals," individuals usually within subaltern groups working within grass-roots language and practices.

In recent debates within the ecosocialist community, Richard Smith and John Bellamy Foster discuss similar themes of *moving from place out across time*. For ecosocialists, capitalism and the Anthropocene are the global signifiers upon which all worker and environmental movements must focus with urgency. The fate of humanity in the short term literally rests upon this universalist pursuit. Ecological alternatives are not possible within the framework of capitalism, so socialist demands must be articulated alongside transitional concrete ecological demands and reforms. In recent posts to climateandcapitalism.com, Smith and Foster (2017) brew over the subject of Naomi Klein and the ongoing tug-of-war to claim or disclaim her as an ecosocialist. At issue is her theoretical rigor and tendency to straddle the organic and traditional.

Ecosocialists can be quick to identify the dramatic irony in how the aims of environmental activism are consistently neutralized by activists themselves. Constrained by time and place, local activism is compelled by immediate circumstances to act on the self-evidential nature of particularist truths at the moment of apprehension. Capitalist culture is powerfully resilient for the very reason that it incorporates these contingent system threats into its own reproduction. If activism remains compartmentalized or reformist, it remains embedded in, and will not threaten the global power and inertia of, capital. If theory is neither precise nor rigorously explicit, it also evacuates revolutionary potential.

Klein positions herself within movements where people are already engaged in forms of making sense of the world while responding to immediate vital and existential needs. She is also, as are Foster and Smith, a "free-floating intellectual" maintaining methodological distance in order to infuse, widen, and contextualize conceptual abstraction and offer strategic direction. Her book, *This Changes Everything* (2014), is important for popularizing the critique of our whole socio-economic system and the geological time scales of climate science. As I have argued elsewhere, whether intentional or not, she appeals to wide audiences in part because of theoretical and strategic ambiguity, or "wobble room." (Hornick, 2015)

In Smith's writing, there is a potent sense of climate emergency and the desire to "keep the (strategic) eye on the ball." Read Smith's short book on *Green Capitalism: The God that Failed* (2015), which could have been subtitled *Ecosocialism: How to Be Loyal to Abstractions*. It is a series of smartly written polemics, but with a sober theoretical foundation. Smith's irreverent, in-your-face fury is infused with the will to *impose abstractions with different versions of scope and truth* upon the "impeccably respectable premises" (22) of conventional economics (and environmental activism).

Smith argues that Klein has "broken open the mainstream discourse, cataloguing the failures,

contradictions, and corruptions of so-called green capitalism,” and that she “nails climate change squarely on the door of capitalism with a withering indictment.” (72) But when Klein talks about capitalism, she does so in an equivocating sense, qualifying “capitalism” with adjectives such as “neoliberal,” “extractivist,” and so on, which also reconfigures strategic goals. Klein’s “Blockadia is not a strategy,” says Smith, and neither are her other “maddeningly confusing, contradictory, even incoherent” prescriptions. Klein is thus “an eloquent liberal-radical investigative journalist ... but she is no ecosocialist ... with no systematic analysis or critique of capitalism as a system whatsoever.” (73)

In Smith, you will not see pithy pronouncements like Klein’s “to change the world we need everyone.” You will read sharp, interrogative distinctions drawn between ostensibly “radical” economists and environmentalists and a forceful evocation of Marxist and political economic positions geared toward the contemporary ecological crisis. Warrior up on a rhetorical level!

Ruthlessly reveal mainstream environmentalist absurdities, deconstruct platitudes, call out euphemisms! Strike at the heart of false gods and zero in on the unequivocal message: shut the system down ... move beyond technological visions of “decoupling” and “dematerialization” ... depose the 1 percent, halt market and profit driven growth, bring on radical global industrial economic contraction that the ecological crisis demands.

By contrast, John Bellamy Foster responds that while he may not agree with everything Klein says, “her influence and her radicalism, at the left end of the climate movement, are beyond question,” that she “walks a fine line between social democracy and socialism/anarchism,” and is “openly anti-capitalist.” Foster argues that we don’t want so much a movement that is “limited to advanced ecosocialists” but a “broader movement that can actually be effective today.” Ecosocialists should “stay to the left of those like Klein and sharpen the critique within the movement but also support and work with them so as to not separate themselves from broader radicalism. ... If she does not always articulate this explicitly in terms of an ecosocialist strategy, it is because her strategy is rooted in the real movement as it exists today.” (Smith and Foster, 2017)

Foster is confident that he knows Klein as a comrade. He concludes the exchange with Smith with a personal story that is emblematic of the role of relationship and solidarity-building in action. Foster and Klein are together being chased by police in Johannesburg at a climate meeting in 2002. Outfitted in military gear, police throw percussion grenades, then kettle and point rifles in a stare-off with climate protestors. Foster claims Klein heroically “disregard[s] the danger.” He remembers prophetically “thinking at that time that she was the kind of leader that the movement needed—if she would once embrace the issue of capitalism versus the climate.” As it turns out, Klein later penned a book with that name, Foster’s uncanny prescience realized.

Foster’s and Klein’s shared “fuck-you-to-power” moment of anarchist rebelliousness is a powerful performative statement. The embodied moment concretely codifies political position vis-a-vis the state, capital, and ruling class as well as international, class, and gender solidarity. The moment is felt as something immediately trustworthy and an alternative to the certainties that abstract concepts promise but rarely deliver. The story illustrates that as much as conceptual clarity is important in moving goals forward, a sense of discernment about the metaphoric and affective dimension that initiates and builds associations and relationships requires cultivation.

To use Walter Benjamin’s vocabulary, the moment’s auratic quality imbues the relationship with profound symbolic density and meaning. A redemptive moment, it connects their present with history’s revolutionary acts and cements their personal pact. In these moments, Foster seizes on the dialectical image of revolutionary negation and exits the argument with Smith without further explanation. Foster wants to enable Klein as a comrade rather than diffusing the power of the

moment with theoretical dissimulation. Smith, in equally necessary moves, wants to embolden and equip comrades with revolutionary intellectual tools by asserting objective and logical necessity into vital and existential necessity.

Radicals are a tricky bunch. Anyone who has attempted to rouse significant numbers of Marxist intellectuals to action, or coalesce disparate groups of direct-action anarchists to a shared cause, knows it is like herding cats, and it is much easier to attract hoards of environmental nonprofit careerists, with their banal spectacle activism, with an ounce of foundation funding. This makes anti-(green)-capitalist and ecosocialist organizing that is directed to undermining the systemic logic of capitalism challenging. Yet, what inspires ecosocialist faith in their own relevance is the methodically reasoned account of a stable, identifiable *conceptual and affective fault-line of the entire social whole* that divides our present totality from the future, one that if we can name and permit ourselves to cross, and then recruit others, will open a new set of (non-catastrophically terminal) possibilities for the world.

Both Smith's and Foster's life work has done as much as anyone to point the world toward identifying and engaging with that fault-line, rather than pursuing much less ambitious or counterproductive goals. (The latter would include COP21-inspired, market-based adjustments such as carbon pricing, alone, as the holy grail of climate mitigation.) Climate scientists reach toward comprehensive and authoritative understanding of earth systems, which by now are sufficiently objectively definitive to be actionable. But if we believe that progress is even possible within the severe time limits that ecological crisis imposes, we also recognize that action at the level of wholesale change (for instance in terms of relations of production) is dormant in this deadly game of catch-up ... and the "procrastination penalty" to be paid for inaction is getting beyond reach.

Marx showed how history was materially transformed through a series of contradictions toward greater complexity, but held out the promise of one particular class representing the universal interests of humanity, if activated within objective conditions by political agency. The problem today is that cyclical and conjunctural crises that have propelled capitalism to hegemonic global reach and to the point of near absolute structural crisis have also eliminated resistance in the form of a consequential collective agent that would avert ecological collapse.

Harvey concludes the above episode referencing a kind of intellectual's *sovereign exceptionalism*, the notion of the intellectual's role being at once "inside" and at the same time "outside" of experience. (Agamben, 2005) The right to engage and impose interpretations follows from the need to fulfill obligations to comrades who are simultaneously political allies as well as obligations to the considered political saliency of the immediate and long-term objectives of a political act.

The former may lead toward a more arbitrary or instrumental relationship with immediate objects and objectives, the latter toward suspended intellectualism, abstract deconstruction of the immanent rationality of a particularism. Both are potential vehicles toward immobilization, or toward empowerment. In the meantime, our atmosphere is well over 490 parts per million CO2 equivalents. Welcome to our apocalyptic, or revolutionary, future.

Footnotes

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