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A Creditable Left

Richard Sennett | July 11, 2011

When the financial system collapsed in 2008 I thought our moment had come. The streets would fill with protesters against the Capitalist Beast; governments would move to the left in response; people would rethink how they wanted to live. Yet while there have been some big protests in Wisconsin, and abroad in Spain and Greece, many more voters have instead moved to the right; the financial ancien régime has been restored. In a way this isn't surprising. When things go wrong, people both want change and cling for comfort to the familiar. But the left hasn't succeeded, either in America or across Europe, in making itself a credible voice for reform.

Since it controls the media as well as money, the Beast can, of course, protect itself. In this crisis, the authors of the Great Recession succeeded in blaming particular people or policies rather than admit to fundamental flaws in the system. Ruling classes don't invariably succeed; across North Africa and the Middle East, the oppressed are rising up against terrible odds. Nor, closer to home, would it be right to blame mass lethargy; people are full of political energy, even if it's directed at immigrants and foreigners.

The unpalatable fact is that we, the ardent left, count for less and less in the public's thinking about how to live together. And if that has long been true in the United States, where the left has occupied only a small corner of public discourse, the decay of the left now marks the old Western European homelands, as in Sweden or Britain. The word "progressive" seems no more arousing than "social democracy." Though progressive think tanks abound in America and Europe, and churn out worthy proposals for social justice, policy-wonkery seems to induce an eyes-glazed-over indifference among the larger public.

As an old lefty, I worry about all this; I'd be sorry if the future consisted just of different shades of capitalism. In the midst of doctors' appointments and funerals, I've wondered how the left could recover its standing in the eyes of the larger society even if the prospects for the left in power are dim. This is a problem, I've come to think, more social than ideological in character.

You become credible when others take you seriously even though they may not agree with you. To be taken seriously, you need to know when to keep silent and how to listen well; you are then extending respect and recognition to others. The philosopher Anne Phillips rightly insists on the importance of "presence" in politics, by which she means being someone an individual or group feels can conduct a discussion on equal terms. Presence is something an outsider has to earn by his or her behavior. Scoring points won't alone admit you into other people's lives; winning an argument over them will not include you in their thinking about how to live. Credibility, that is, lies more in the realm of receptiveness than assertiveness.

If this is correct, a certain kind of politics follows. It should concentrate more on civil society than electoral politics—particularly electoral politics at the national level. The community organizer or

grassroots activist needs to be honored in his or her own right rather than as a worker bee in the national political hive; he or she is likely to have developed the skills of good listening and discussion that breed respect. In America, Denmark, Finland and Britain the right has colonized effective grassroots politics, building viable and sustained communities even if its goals fail nationally. The right has pulled off a neat trick: though huge mountains of cash stand behind many of its efforts, on the ground right-wing organizers have behaved creditably as speaking in the name of ordinary people. I hope the left will take back this communal territory; but doing so requires a changed mindset on our part.

Political contests revolve around the proposition that if you have a problem, we have a solution. Proposing a solution for another person's problems—particularly if these have become knotty issues, like long-term unemployment—may not in itself earn presence and respect. Our solution may seem correct in the abstract, but it is just that—far away from the family traumas and demoralization, for instance, that afflict the long-term unemployed. A credible language of mutual engagement must, I think, transcend the discourse of problem-solving; it has to be more responsive to experiences of ambiguity, difficulty and defeat.

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I was put in mind of all this in reading a recent study by YouGov, a British polling organization. It surveys the public's attitudes toward progressive politics, and among progressives, in the United States, Britain, Germany and Sweden. The survey provided the background for a recent gathering in Oslo of European left luminaries, the politicians among them all menaced by right-wing trends at home. For Ed Miliband, the Labour leader in Britain; Jens Stoltenberg, prime minister of Norway; or John Podesta, president and CEO of the Center for American Progress, the study cannot have been comforting reading.

The YouGov research (available at policy-network.net ^[1]) paints a pessimistic picture of the public's faith in government to solve social problems. This faith is weak in all four countries, and the public especially doubts that simply throwing more taxpayer money around can do much. Progressives are, of course, more tax-friendly in principle, but they are nearly as doubtful that bigger government will in itself accomplish much in practice. This finding is hardly news, but the study came up with a surprising fact: a big slice of centrist voters say they are willing to pay higher taxes if the policies are credible—even 17 percent of American Republicans would do so. The credibility issue turns on the behavior of officials rather than the content of policy.

In all four countries, the general public has “a very low estimation of government's ability to stand up to vested interests.” The numbers here are striking: only 15 percent in the United States think politicians will stand up to powerful outside influence, as do 16 percent in Britain, 21 percent in Germany and 27 percent in the once gold-standard state of Sweden. Nor is the public complacent about those outside interests; all of these countries have massive worries that corporations “care only about profits” (85 percent in Britain think so, as do 83 percent in Germany, 69 percent in the United States and 60 percent in Sweden). President Obama's behavior in domestic affairs could serve as an emblem for this combination—his progressive rhetoric coupled with a disposition to appease powerful interests.

Lack of trust in the public sphere has been sharpened by arbitrary inequality in everyday life. The YouGov researchers found that a majority agree that “who you know is usually more important for getting on in life than hard work and playing by the rules” (even 46 percent of the US public subscribe to this view, despite our country's historic optimism about getting ahead). People apply the fear of arbitrary inequality to themselves and their children when they discuss the value of a university education; most think it has little long-term value (save the Swedes, who have a robust labor market). The larger frame of this fear is the contraction of middle-class fortunes throughout the West—the famously “shrinking” middle class. One consequence of that shrinkage is the desire to avoid risk, which calls for structural reform only seem to aggravate. Among left-leaning survey respondents, YouGov found that only 4

percent of the British, 10 percent of the Americans, 7 percent of the Swedish and 11 percent of the Germans say they would risk job security for the sake of “a greater voice in my employer’s decision-making.”

A corrupted state, an economic system indifferent to social goods, a society in which equal opportunity and educational achievement count for little, a pervasive worry about job loss: four beliefs that combine to produce feelings of dread—the most paralyzing and isolating of emotions. In Oslo, however, the political and academic luminaries had other things on their minds; they spoke of the social market economy, social democracy beyond the nation-state, green jobs and economic growth. Nothing was on the agenda about community organizing; nor were grassroots organizations invited. Indeed, no “unimportant” people spoke at the event.

There’s nothing new about arguing that we should pay more attention to a socially oriented, community-building politics in civil society. By the dawn of the twentieth century, the left had divided in two: a political left that focused on elections and dealings with government, and a social left involved with mutual support in settlement houses, cooperative banks and other voluntary associations. The two sides confronted each other in 1900 at the Paris Universal Exposition, in a set of rooms devoted to “The Social Question”; here, the political left displayed various manifestoes for government reform and the organization of unions, while the social left showed photographs of the streets and buildings where community organizers worked. Despite both sides’ agreement on the evils of capitalism, they talked past each other on how to respond: the political left, represented by German trade unions, accused its opponents of lacking the discipline and strength that should adhere in mass movements; the social left, spoken for by American settlement-house workers, argued that only face-to-face cooperation, no matter how informal or messy, could rescue immigrants and other people from isolation in cities. One side sought adherence to policy; the other saw politics as beginning with engagement, empathy and trust-building.

This conflict between top-down and bottom-up action has endured, and Chicago community organizer Saul Alinsky has been, I think, its sharpest analyst. In the 1960s and ’70s he contrasted the uncomfortable work of labor organizers, who insisted on defined goals and decision-making, with the local work he was doing whose character, in getting neighbors to cooperate together, was more fluid and informal. The difference lies in the very goal of radical effort. In the midst of the Great Society reforms of the time, Alinsky emphasized that getting people to participate with others unlike themselves was an inherently radical project all its own. He didn’t practice identity politics of the sort that depended on racial, class or ethnic solidarity; he wanted diverse groups of people to connect and interact—a messy and informal politics he imbibed in Chicago from the settlement-house leader Jane Addams, and one that has variously informed the Catholic Worker movement, founded by Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin; “associationists” in Britain; and A.D. Gordon in Israel.

In our time, the right has colonized and corrupted civil society work in two ways. As in Britain’s “big society” program, local and third-sector initiatives are used as a fig leaf for cuts in government spending; unpaid volunteers are meant to take the place of paid professionals in teaching, policing and caring for the elderly. Volunteers come and go; expertise does not accumulate. Worse, civic organizations are forced to compete for funds from private donors or government. Market economics thus invades the third sector and diminishes cooperation among groups.

The Dutch and the Swedes have rescued the third sector from both of these evils by giving communities secure and significant claims on the public purse and ensuring that “nonprofit” means just that. Christian, Jewish and Islamic charities, for instance, are encouraged to work together. Within the organizations, volunteers get real training and are asked to make long-term commitments. So the third sector can be made to work, but in America and Britain this seems a dim territory for action on the left, since the shadows of neoliberalism are so deep.

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Nonprofit activism is not a panacea for society's ills, as sociologist Nina Eliasoph's fine new book *Making Volunteers* makes clear. She traces the "uses and misuses of hope" in local empowerment projects—projects that founder, she thinks, on raising false hopes, often breeding demoralization among "plug-in" volunteers. She counsels organizations to set achievable, if modest, goals and to make all participants expert in some way. This is just good common sense, but she also understands, as did Addams and Alinsky before her, that "managing conflict is not the same as making it disappear." The viable grassroots organization needs to bond people together even if achievement lies beyond their grasp; it can do so by making the experience of cooperation an end in itself. Groups like Médecins Sans Frontières hold together over the long term, doing very frustrating work, in large part because the field-mission teams focus so carefully on maintaining esprit de corps. They do so, in my observation, by making receptiveness to others more important than assertiveness.

Some on the left have given up on the union movement, which is understandable but, I think, a great error. Though many unions have become sclerotic bureaucracies, obsessed with seniority privileges, not all are like this. The "new union movement" (which actually began in the 1880s) has sought to broaden the social agenda and mutual support provided by unions, combining direct engagement among diverse workers with mass action. The Service Employees International Union, for example, has succeeded in drawing in women and immigrant workers by not only engaging in the unending struggle of labor against capital but also providing social services to its members, encouraging informal socializing and even promoting the arts.

What I've been mulling over is a change in temperament on the left. Throughout the twentieth century the political left held sway over the social left, the political side seeming more potent in its solutions and policies. It scorned touchy-feely politics, politics as therapy, social engagement as an end in itself. That scorn has proved self-destructive; politicians on the left have proved more adept at arguing and explaining themselves than at connecting to other people. Perhaps solidarity is the nub of the divide. The desire for solidarity seeks to transcend differences; the mess that is ordinary life appears as an impediment to political action. Meanwhile, the social left, from the old "new unionists" to community organizers like Alinsky, has wanted to engage with ambiguity, difference and incompleteness. I don't believe such engagement can be reduced to touchy-feely good will. Engaging well with others requires skill, whether the skill be that of listening well or cooperating with those who differ.

A shift in temper doesn't mean rejecting politics—how could we? In principle, renewal of left civil society should restore faith in activism. The YouGov research cautions, however, that the public is skeptical of how politicians behave, whatever their programs. Regaining trust means, paradoxically, acknowledging the limits of political action and emphasizing the inherent worth of action within civil society. The right has colonized this territory; the left has to take it back. In practice this means putting more energy and cash into local issues than into national electoral politics. The Democratic Party has largely taken the votes of the left for granted; a more robust localism would put greater pressure on our national masters—just as has occurred on the right. For ourselves, though, I think it's a matter of putting the social back into socialism.

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[1] <http://policy-network.net>