Blind Hierarchism and Radical Organizational Forms

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EXCHANGE

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Abstract   *This paper explores the challenge posed by current initiatives in anti-institutional theory and practice. It outlines these initiatives, and then proceeds to clarify the criticisms made against them, concentrating on their alleged ineffectiveness and undemocratic nature. When carefully analysed, however, such criticisms are seen to be more an expression of a particular organizational paradigm than the product of rational evaluation. By explicating the nature of this paradigm, here termed "hierarchism," the paper shows how radical organizational forms become occluded, with the result that the important advances they offer are missed.*

Nowadays, it seems, we must resign ourselves to our collective addictions: there will be no revolution, no let-up to our cruelty, no end to our self-destruction. With Marxism discredited, and critical theory tamed,[1] we face, unaided, the extraordinary suffering which characterizes the latest global bonanza. This exhaustion of utopian energy attests to the seemingly inescapable superiority of liberal democracy over all other political and economic arrangements, and to the absence of an addressee for emancipatory theory. Certainly, as our cultural and political elites serve up their thin gruel of third-way enlightened bureaucracy and institutional tinkering, we might be forgiven for wondering whether radical politics has, indeed, had its day.

Yet the triumphant hegemony of our political order cannot afford to be complacent. The political and economic world is rapidly changing, with inter-state conflict taking new forms, environmental pressures escalating and political activism experimenting with different ways of organizing resistance. This paper focuses on the last of these changes, this being the challenge offered by the wide range of populist, associational and anti-institutional initiatives in political organization currently taking place at the margins of radical theory and practice.[2] In particular, it explores the possibility that our easy dismissal, and generally negative evaluation of such developments, is unsafe.

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[1] D. Coole, "Wild Differences and Tamed Others: Postmodernism and Liberal Democracy," *Parallax* 2 (1996), pp. 23–36.

[2] See M. Canovan, "Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy," *Political Studies* 47 (1999), pp. 2–16; B. Frankel, "Confronting Neoliberal Regimes: The Post-Marxist Embrace of Populism and Realpolitik," *New Left Review* 226 (1997), pp. 57–92; J. Servaes, T. L. Jacobson and S. A. White, *Participatory Communication for Social Change* (London: Sage, 1996).

The central argument presented here is that our negative assessment of anti-institutional emancipatory initiatives may not be a product of reason and evidence, but can instead be explained by a systematic perceptual distortion.[3] The source of this distortion is then identified as a dominant organizational paradigm which is at once self-legitimating and immune to empirical falsification. It is this paradigm, here explicated under the term "hierarchism," that conditions our choice of organizational forms, prevents us from recognizing participants in anti-institutional initiatives as possible addressees for radical theory and encourages us to underestimate the threat they pose to existing structures of elite power.

Organizational Experimentation

Radical political thought has, if nothing else, learned from repeated failure, and become rather good at explaining why things do not change.[4] Nowadays, we can better describe the ways in which oppression is internalized[5] and we can show how the relations of power dominate not only the distribution of resources, but also questions of culture, knowledge, language and identity. In examining past attempts to organize for political transformation, we can even recognize some of the processes, such as vanguardism and centralization, by which the very means of fighting oppression themselves recreate what they set out to change.

We can also discern, bubbling away at the margins of both theory and practice, a growing interest in what might be termed an "anti-institutional" view of democratic politics. In the realm of radical theory, efforts to redefine the political and to extend it to areas of identity, culture and personal life all too often ignored by traditional political science, have resulted in carnivalesque and postmodern accounts of democratic deepening.[6] Here, participation is conceived along dramatic and expressive lines,[7] thus problematizing its capture in institutional forms. Such theoretical developments are oriented to the destabilization of our cultural representations, ways of seeing and conceptions of the self, rather than to the normal imperatives of power politics.[8] Nevertheless, they have been strongly admonished for abandoning attention to material questions,[9] for their

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[3] As such, this paper extends and represents the analysis offered in R. Blaug, "The Tyranny of the Visible: Problems in the Evaluation of Anti-Institutional Radicalism," *Organization* 6 (1998), pp. 33–56.

[4] Perhaps the clearest example of the gains wrung from disappointment is that of the Frankfurt School émigrés. See M. Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination* (Boston: Little Brown, 1973).

[5] See, as an example, N. Rose, "Government, Authority and Expertise in Advanced Liberalism," *Economy and Society* (August, 1993), pp. 283–299.

[6] A. Cohen, *Masquerade Politics* (Oxford: Berg, 1993); C. Mouffe, "Radical Democracy: Modern or Postmodern," in A. Ross (ed.), *Universal Abandon? The Politics of Postmodernism* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 1988), pp. 31–45.

[7] G. Parry and G. Moyser, *Political Participation and Democracy in Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 15.

[8] G. Katsiaficas, *The Subversion of Politics: European Autonomous Social Movements and the Decolonization of Everyday Life* (New Jersey, NJ: Humanities Press, 1997).

[9] N. Geras, "Ex-Marxism Without Substance: Being a Reply to Leclau and Mouffe," *New Left Review* 169 (1988), pp. 34–62.

lack of concrete organizational suggestions[10] and for their utopian view of citizen capacities.

In the realm of democratic practice, particularly in direct action groups[11] protesting around questions of identity[12] and the environment,[13] there is concerted experimentation with new ways of coordinating collective action and a widespread rejection of the vanguardist organizational forms which dominated the radical politics of the past. These experiments are characterized by a heightened suspicion of state-level institutions and of formal hierarchies within the associations of civil society. Once again, however, such activities have been heavily criticized and even ridiculed, here for their parochialism, idealism, and political irrelevance.

Contemporary rejections of institutional and centralized ways of organizing collective activity are not, of course, confined to radical democracy. They are also in evidence within extremist rightwing militias and in a wide range of groups using new technologies to coordinate their actions.[14] Indeed, evocations of a growing anarchy in international affairs and a general fragmentation of liberal, state-centred political forms are increasingly common, the more colourful of which highlight processes of social degeneration caused by mushrooming nationalism, tribalism and new criminal forces.[15] Finally, we must also acknowledge the growing interest in flattened hierarchies and the decentralization of decision-making currently in vogue within the world of corporate management.[16]

Available for our consideration, then, is a range of anti-institutional and studiously "disorganized" collective activity. Of course, any evaluation of such political forms must confront what amounts to their total rejection by mainstream political science, and, indeed, by many political actors. Just as these organizational experiments seem in many ways to resurrect an ancient conception of democracy, here as a way of life rather than as a set of institutions, so their current rejection repeats age-old accusations against direct democracy, the distrust of populism and the inevitability of elite rule.

The Charge of Utopianism

Usually, the assessment of anti-institutional experimentation concludes, rather rapidly, with an accusation of simple idealism, and a somewhat dangerous idealism at that. It is perhaps for this reason that they have attracted so little serious theoretical attention. Either ignored as pubescent (by statist political science), dismissed as irrelevant to real questions of power (by liberalism,

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[10] W. Kymlicka and W. Nelson, "Return of the Citizen: A Survey of Recent Work on Citizenship Theory," *Ethics* 104 (1994), pp. 352–381, here at p. 369, footnote 21.

[11] B. Epstein, "Radical Democracy and Cultural Politics: What about Class? What about Political Power?," in D. Trend (ed.), *Radical Democracy: Identity, Citizenship, and the State* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 127–139.

[12] See, for example, *Differences*, Special Issue, Vol. 6 (1994).

[13] As so ably documented in ongoing issues of *SchNEWS*, < http://www.schnews.org.uk > ; see also Merrick, *Battle for the Trees* (Leeds: Godhaven Ink, 1998).

[14] See C. Boggs, "Warrior Nightmares: American Reactionary Populism at the Millenium," *Socialist Register* (2000), pp. 243–256.

[15] R. D. Kaplan, "The Coming Anarchy," *Atlantic Monthly* (February, 1994).

[16] M. Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, Vol. 1 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

Marxism[17]), or hopelessly lost in a cacophony of textual analysis (postmodernism, post-structuralism), such initiatives are not seen as contributing to our theoretical understanding of organizational and strategic questions. Nor are the participants in such initiatives seen as possible addressees for emancipatory theory.

Accusations of idealism, however, do not fit comfortably with the ways in which practical anti-institutional initiatives such as DiY democracy and environmental protests have had to deal with direct physical attack by the police, aggressive surveillance by secret services and close scrutiny by a wide variety of disciplinary officials.[18] There is, it seems, a process of assessment at work here which somehow both dismisses *and* demonizes such activity. Anti-institutional forms are thus seen as adducing a strange combination of both the incapacity for effective action coordination, as well as a constant threat: that this "ineffective" form might suddenly degenerate into one *so* effective as to be positively dangerous. Such a complex and layered accusation, resulting as it does in the total rejection of anti-institutional initiatives, warrants closer inspection.

We might focus the various criticisms and pressures to which anti-institutionalism has been subjected by outlining a central charge of utopianism. Such a charge asserts that this form of activity is:

1. ineffective as an organizational mode and, therefore, irrelevant to questions of state and economic power;
2. dangerously idealistic in its assessment of civic motivations and capacities and, therefore, potentially anti-democratic in its nature.

The first argument turns on the assumption that anti-institutional forms are inherently ineffective and do not, thereby, warrant careful scrutiny. Addressing the problems of global capitalism and patriarchy, massive and powerful nation states, and highly complex and technocratic policy requirements would seem to require something more than a few body-pierced individuals reading French philosophy in a tunnel.[19] The parochialism of local action is here seen as precluding an effective and informed engagement with the sources of power we find operating in the modern world.[20] Precisely because they deny themselves the capacity to properly organize and coordinate their activities, anti-institutional initiatives seem doomed to lose any conflict they have with an organized opponent. These, then, are playful, rather than serious, challenges to power.

Of course, such an assertion might be true. It may be that local, decentralized and independent political action just is, empirically, ineffective. Certainly, this is what we are encouraged to think, and most of us, schooled in a history of institutions, now find it intuitively obvious that winning necessitates hierarchic

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[17] Since Lenin's " 'Left-Wing' Communism–An Infantile Disorder," in V. I. Lenin (ed.), *Selected Works*, Vol. 3 (Moscow: Progress, 1977), pp. 291–369.

[18] *SchNEWS* details the almost endless harassment to which such initiatives are subjected, often assisted by new provisions in the Criminal Justice Act and SLAPPs (Strategic Limitations on Political Participation).

[19] See M. Bookchin, *Social Anarchism and Lifestyle Anarchism: An Unbridgeable Chasm* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 1995).

[20] See the discussion of "democratic localism" in B. Palmer, "New Wine in Old Bottles: Southern Populism and the Dilemmas of Class," in J. Kling and P. Posner (eds), *The Dilemmas of Activism: Class, Community and the Politics of Local Mobilization* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990).

organization and leadership. Big kids *just are* stronger than little ones, and disciplined armies will, eventually, defeat partisan bands.

Yet the intuitive need for organization does not pertain so much to questions of size as it does to the method of action coordination being deployed. For example, mass assemblies of the people are seen as being unable to deliver effective rule, *and* smaller groups are subject to a similarly negative expectation. In both cases, the absence of a structure to streamline and simplify decision-making is seen to undermine the ability to make decisions at all. It is for this structural reason, rather than size, that we are quite sure: there is nothing so inefficient as direct democracy.[21] So obvious is the impracticality of actually ruling ourselves that it seldom receives adequate scrutiny.[22] Indeed, liberal democratic theory passes so quickly over this possibility that representation appears as a *fait accompli*, requiring no further justification.[23] Even quite radical and participatory democratic theorists accept that, in the last instance, our requirement of a central, institutionalized, and representative core is inescapable.[24]

However, contemporary social theory, if nothing else, teaches us that what is obvious, is by no means obvious. Indeed, history is replete with intuitive and "self-evident" assumptions (the world is flat, women are inferior to men) which have, subsequently, been thoroughly discredited. To be sure that the accusation of ineffectiveness levelled at anti-institutional political initiatives is correct, we need to be confident that we are accurately assessing the available empirical evidence. A stick in water *looks* bent, but we do not say it *is* bent, because we understand that in this case our perception is distorted. If it can be shown that the way we look, study and collect evidence in regard to the effectiveness of anti-institutionalism is open to question, then this will render the first component of the charge of utopianism unsafe. We need to eliminate this possibility if we are to be sure that anti-institutional political forms can be legitimately dismissed.

Questioning Our Perceptions

How, though, can we reveal that what we see is not what is the case? How can it be *shown* that we gaze upon an illusion, that our perceptions are distorted? The charge that we are currently blind is one that can only be evaluated retrospectively. While our perception of the object is occluded, the charge appears absurd. Only when the object is clearly revealed can we demonstrate that we were formerly blind. By this time, however, the charge is largely redundant, for now the object is there for all to see. In an effort to show that there may be something

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[21] W. H. Riker, *Liberalism Against Populism* (San Francisco: Freeman, 1982).

[22] But see R. Dahl and E. Tufte, *Size and Democracy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974), in which this usually unexplored assumption receives a delightfully banal algebraic and axiomatic demonstration.

[23] See, for example, D. Beetham, *Democracy and Human Rights* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), pp. 5, 8, 41.

[24] See, for example, P. Hirst, *Associative Democracy: New Forms of Economic and Social Governance* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994); J. S. Fishkin, *The Dialogue of Justice: Toward a Self-Reflective Society* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); B. R. Barber, *Strong Democracy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

wrong with the way we look at questions surrounding the choice and evaluation of organizational forms, theorists have adopted a number of manoeuvres.

One is suggested by the work of Deleuze and Guattari. Their inquiries into the techniques of the nomadic war machine disclose inventions such as chariots and cavalry, the credit for which has subsequently been claimed by more centralized and sedentary political forms.[25] They also describe the terrifying effectiveness of the guerrilla army, the riot, the fast flowing hordes of apparently disorganized barbarians. What emerges from their work is at once the reclamation of an alternative form of action coordination[26] and an account of how that form has been devalued, usurped, and rendered invisible.

According to Deleuze and Guattari, the way we understand questions of organization is systematically restricted and distorted. They argue that we tend to see organizational and political structures in terms of hierarchical arrangements, centralized control and vertical agglomerations of power. The image they use to capture this way of seeing is that of the tree, with its branches spreading upwards from a central trunk. Following their identification of the lack of such centralization in the nomadic war machine, they begin to explore an alternative form, here using the metaphor of crab-grass, with its matted horizontal connections and concealed matrix of rhizomes. What we might now call "rhizomatic" action coordination takes place along complex neural-like networks,[27] without identifiable nodes of power and across unstructured space. In fact, as Deleuze and Guattari try to show, these disorganized forms have continually and throughout history challenged the sedentary machine of the state, made significant innovations available to it and been variously absorbed and domesticated in what amounts to an ongoing struggle between two quite distinct forms of action coordination.

The accusation that the construction of history entails the appropriation of effectiveness by sedentary political forms is an important one, for it begins to introduce some of the ways in which the effectiveness of rhizomatic action has been systematically concealed. Deleuze and Guattari describe a process of over-coding,[28] in which a self-stabilizing deception is propagated by institutionalized power, resulting in a mythical history and an invisibility of rhizomatic forms. We find a related approach in the work of Sheldon Wolin, who, by challenging frequently made historical assertions, such as the alleged inability of revolutions to generate democracy, identifies a deep political paradox. Democracy, he argues, is evidenced in moments of participatory and disorganized upheaval, rather than in the more durable periods wherein it is institutionalized.[29] He sees democracy as inherently revolutionary, as challenging of existing institutions, as rhizomatic in its coordination. For this reason, he describes liberal

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[25] G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), pp. 351–423.

[26] Though Deleuze and Guattari would reject the language of action and its subsequent coordination.

[27] For an analysis of networks, see G. Thompson *et al.* (eds), *Markets, Hierarchies and Networks: The Coordination of Social Life* (London: Sage, 1996).

[28] T. May, *The Political Philosophy of Poststructuralist Anarchism* (Pennsylvania: Penn State Press, 1994), p. 95.

[29] S. Wolin, "Fugitive Democracy," *Constellations* 1 (1994), pp. 11–25; R. Blaug, "Outbreaks of Democracy," *Socialist Register* (2000), pp. 145–160.

democratic constitutional arrangements as vain attempts to capture and control such revolutionary moments. With constitutionalism appearing as the ultimate "domestication of politics,"[30] revolutions are revealed as the main source of democratic rights. Were this acknowledged in our historical constructions, he suggests, we would be better able to understand that democracy is something that most appropriately takes place *outside* institutions.

Such historical recoveries are efforts to illuminate different ways of evaluating political activity. They try to remind us of a lost history, one where anti-institutional forms were, in fact, often effective. In our constructed histories, they suggest, we do not see what really went on, and by extension, neither do we really see what is going on now. We are here invited to imagine that, in terms of organization and action coordination, we look with blinkered eyes. What explains our negative evaluation of anti-institutional forms here, then, is a distinct organizational paradigm which serves to occlude a whole range of activity and to thereby conclude that it alone is right.

A rather different approach, though one deployable toward a similar end, is James Scott's work on the "hidden transcript." By inspecting societies in which marked inequalities of power are institutionalized, such as slave and feudal cultures, Scott reveals "transcripts" of resistance which are carefully hidden, and which thereby allow elites to mistakenly evaluate the empirical activity they witness. Once beyond the surveillance of their masters, slaves grumble and ridicule, workers start rumours and carry out anonymous acts of vandalism, students complain about the irrelevance of their studies.[31] These are hidden cultures of resistance,[32] with their own ways of communicating, their own spaces where they can interact freely, beyond the eyes of elites. Once again, these are disorganized networks, horizontal and largely bereft of hierarchical structure, along which information passes with tremendous speed. Always simmering beneath the surface, they only occasionally billow up to visibly challenge their oppressors. Scott invites us to peer into this different world, acknowledging that it is a hard one to see.

One reason for its invisibility is that the hidden transcript is, according to Scott, quite purposefully concealed.[33] When faced with an overwhelming and vindictive power, it is important that subordinates use different forms of communication and action, and that they hide them. Only when this transcript becomes too vital and explosive for existing elites to contain does it become visible.[34] In such moments, the hidden transcript directly challenges its oppressor and truth is finally spoken to power.[35] These occasional eruptions tear freedoms, resources and rights from the hands of elites; though later, as the "public transcript" reasserts itself, these eruptions are glossed over, and we

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[30] Wolin, "Fugitive Democracy," p. 14.

[31] C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 133.

[32] See A. Mbembe, "The Banality of Power and the Aesthetics of Vulgarity in the Postcolony," *Public Culture* 4 (1992), pp. 1–30.

[33] Scott, *Domination*, pp. 4, 32, 40, 132.

[34] Scott, *Domination*, pp. 202–227.

[35] Scott himself remains profoundly ambivalent about this outcome, and a good deal of his work is directed against Marxist accounts of ideology. Tellingly, he at no point applies his analysis to neoliberal regimes.

(again) fashion histories of institutional reform in which freedoms are be-queathed from above.[36]

This was precisely Wolin's point, and Deleuze and Guattari's, and it leads us to conclude that our assertion that anti-institutional forms are ineffective may be unsafe. Certainly, one highly effective form of coordination remains hidden, that of rhizomatic action, and we can begin to outline some of the reasons this hidden transcript has evaded adequate investigation.

Yet the perceptual distortions at play in the evaluation of anti-institutional forms do not stop at those which are intended, either by elites or by subordinates. Another reason we look with blinkered eyes is simply that we lack the perceptual mechanisms needed to detect such forms. As Marx showed, some aspects of the social world seem to conceal themselves, to invite us to make perceptual mistakes. Specifically, capitalism deceives its participants, it mystifies and masquerades as objectivity. Marx tracked two particular kinds of deception, each generating their own form of false consciousness, each enabling capitalism to hide its true nature and to disable those who might, if they saw the truth, resist.

First, Marx was much troubled by the problem of limited perspective or partiality of view. At the micro-level, in people's work and daily lives, he argued, capitalism conceals the source of its profits and the nature of its exploitation.[37] Only at the macro-level, only in the system as a whole, is the essence of capitalism revealed.[38] Marx's conceptual instrumentation is designed to illuminate capitalism as a system, as a global process, as a huge wood. It is not, *as it appears*, a single tree, no matter how that tree might lie astride our path and dominate our lives.

Marx's first identification of perceptual failure, then, draws our attention to a chronic partiality of view, or parochialism, one which prevents us from seeing the big picture. In this way it operates to screen off the social costs of labour over-utilization,[39] of unemployment, of pollution and the economic devastation of developing countries; so allowing capitalism to *appear* efficient. It also debilitates local actors. For them, partiality is a form of blindness. It results in poor political judgement, divisive competition and the inability to effectively coordinate resistance. Yet this kind of deception *can* be overcome, if only by learning to see from a new perspective. This was Marx's hope, that local actors could pool their knowledge, overcome their partiality, and so cast off their chains.

The same cannot be said for the second kind of deception he detected. Here we confront social constructions which *appear* to be physical processes. As social and symbolic beings, as believing beings, our imaginings come, for us, to appear real. Marx called this our "religious reflex." In the opening chapter of *Capital*, he shows how the value of a commodity appears real while being, in fact, "a mysterious thing,"[40] concealing a particular set of social relations. Here, a "social

[36] E. P. Thompson illustrates just such a process in his reclamation of English Jacobinism in *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968). Indeed, there is a rich tradition within Marxism which explores the role of popular movements.

[37] R. P. Wolff, *Understanding Marx: A Reconstruction and Critique of Capital* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 129.

[38] K. Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1 (New York: International Publishers, 1867), p. 322.

[39] Marx, *Capital*, p. 270.

[40] Marx, *Capital*, p. 72.

product"[41] comes to appear as natural,[42] and no amount of evidence to the contrary,[43] nor change in perspective, can ever dispel its deceptive[44] appearance. Capitalism mystifies, it fetishizes, it reifies,[45] and in so doing, generates illusions which are durable and almost impossible to dispel. Marx used science, but he also played with language and narrative form in order to tease out such delusions, to encourage us to see differently.[46] He tried to show that the value category was a deception, that capitalism's inequalities only *appeared* natural and that its institutions were merely self-legitimizing.[47] But he knew that reification resists empirical falsification. He understood that this kind of illusion was almost inescapable. In cases such as this, it is almost as if the object of perception actively conditions the way we look, inviting us to make the perceptual mistake. We are thereby prevented from seeing behind the immediate evidence of appearance. As with the self-fulfilling prophecy, with paradigm blindness and with *pre*judice, we here confront a false world which is somehow self-confirming. No matter how hard we look, all we perceive is empirical data which supports our existing view.

Hierarchism and Effectiveness

There are good reasons, then, for us to mistrust our negative evaluation of anti-institutional forms, and these arise from both intentional and perceptual distortion. It may be that we gaze upon the product, not of the world, but of the way we look. We see this in the widely held belief that if you want to win any given power struggle, if you want to survive against the others, you must have organization. Yet when we inspect this assumption, we find the concept of organization being interpreted in a quite particular way. Here, we can gather our insights and identify the presence of a particular paradigm of evaluation, one which dominates our choice of organizational forms and accounts for our negative evaluation of anti-institutional experimentation. Let us call this organizational paradigm "hierarchism."[48]

Hierarchism holds that to act together successfully in the world necessarily entails a hierarchy of command, centralized control, and the institutionalization of roles of expertise and leadership. In this aspect, it emerges directly from the long history of sovereign/subject structures of power[49] and the organizational categories of elite rule. Yet hierarchism also encompasses modes of action

[41] Marx, *Capital*, p. 74.

[42] N. Geras, "Marx and the Critique of Political Economy," in R. Blackburn (ed.), *Ideology in the Social Sciences* (London: Pantheon Books, 1972), p. 288.

[43] G. Hodgson, "Critique of Wright. 1. Labor and Profits," in I. Steedman (ed.), *The Value Controversy* (London: Verso, 1981), pp. 75–99, here at p. 98.

[44] Marx uses the word "*veruchtheit*," "crackbrained," or "crazy."

[45] This was the form of deception subsequently worked out in G. Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness* (London: Merlin Press, 1971).

[46] R. P. Wolff, *Moneybags Must Be So Lucky: On the Literary Structure of Capital* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988).

[47] J. Roemer, "Reply," *Politics and Society* 11 (1982), p. 380.

[48] See Foucault's use of the word in his "Preface" to G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. xiii.

[49] For Foucault's account of this model of power, see *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977).

coordination more akin to bureaucratic structures, for it relies heavily on the division of labour, the systematization of tasks and the immunization of elite decision-makers against input from those defined as lacking expertise.[50] Finally, hierarchism deploys what Habermas would term (following Weber) "instrumental reason," for it stresses, in its orientation to success, the gaining of structural complexity and the systematic substitution of discursive judgement and deliberative argumentation by written rules and impartial, formalized, procedures.[51]

The suggestion here is that hierarchism constitutes the dominant way in which the problematic of organization is understsood.[52] The severity with which it limits the set of possible strategic and procedural solutions available to us attests to the degree to which it is ingrained into our political culture. When an army, government, political party, radical movement, trade union, voluntary group or departmental meeting faces organizational difficulties, it is likely to reach for solutions which strongly express this hierarchical orientation. Hierarchism is the paradigm within which we approach such difficulties.[53] It is the way we look, the way we study, the way we do our science.[54] And it strongly effects what we can see.

In the history of political thought, the crucial moment in the development of hierarchism is perhaps Hobbes's *Leviathan*, where what is natural is disorder, where disorder is framed solely in terms of its dangers, and where freedom and the coordination of action always require institutionalized force. Most of us shake our heads and smile at Hobbes's absolutism, but it is more difficult to free oneself from the hierarchism of his premises.[55] To do so entails seeing outside the paradigm, imagining that collective action can be coordinated by other means, and even moving away from the reflex equation of political order and freedom which is so entrenched in the liberal discourse we have inherited from the enlightenment.[56]

The accusation here, then, is that we have mistakenly institutionalized, and perhaps internalized, the view that non-hierarchical action is inefficient and irrelevant to the more important concerns of high politics. We might borrow Scott's concept of the "public transcript" in order to further our understanding of how a particular way of seeing becomes institutionalized. Scott defines the public transcript as that observable symbolic discourse which expresses and

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[50] H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), pp. 196–266.

[51] J. Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests* (Boston: Beacon, 1968), pp. 17–18; J. Keane, *Public Life and Late Capitalism: Towards a Socialist Theory of Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 119.

[52] A further clarification of the elements of hierarchism, and its application to mechanisms for small business representation in the European Union, is contained in C. Danreuther, "The Political Limits to Economic Goverrnance: A Study of Hierarchy," paper presented to European Association of Evolutionary Political Economy, Prague, 1999.

[53] See the discussion of the modernist "dream of order" in the introduction to Z. Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity* (London: Routledge, 1992).

[54] G. Burrell, *Pandemonium: Towards a Retro-Organization Theory* (London: Sage, 1997).

[55] T. Hobbes, *Leviathan* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1958), Chapters 13, 14. See also, for similar assumptions, S. Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (New York: Norton, 1961).

[56] Wolin inspects this equation in state of nature arguments, particularly in Locke, in "Fugitive Democracy," pp. 19–21.

confirms a political order's existing relations of dominance and subordination.[57] In such a discourse, which is backed up by force, it *looks like* slaves acquiesce to the demands of their masters, workers agree to sell their labour power, the electorate votes and students do their assigned reading. The public transcript strongly features some empirical data while at the same time occluding that which does not serve its ends. As a result, even radical political thought finds itself becoming ever more sophisticated in its articulation of hegemony and ever more convinced of the impossibility of emancipatory change.[58]

The effectiveness of the organizational forms chosen and constructed by hierarchism turn on the capacity of institutions to simplify information exchange. By structuring conduits for data collection and dissemination, by concentrating centralized nodes of decision-making power, processes of communication and command are *limited* in such a way as to enable the delivery of efficiency. In complete contrast to this, the effectiveness of rhizomatic action derives from its complexity. Information, here passing along a myriad of everyday passages: face-to-face discussion, non-verbal communication, and indeed, every available medium, travels exponentially through a concerted network of individuals.[59]

We can see this process at work in the movement of rumour. Georges Lefebvre draws our attention to the extraordinary capacity of flat rhizomatic networks to move information, fire-like, across the countryside.[60] Because it travels via the everyday communicative practices of individuals in their social and material interactions, the rumour moves with tremendous speed.[61] The complexity of this network derives precisely from its neural structure; it is far more effective than the binary institutionalized conduits we find sedimented for the exchange of information in hierarchical structures.[62] Similarly, rhizomatic decision-making, because it occurs in fragmented form, need not wait for the institution at the centre. Loosely connected units or bands are each free to initiate action, to deploy the local knowledge which is uniquely their own, and thereby to respond with both speed and creativity. This insight is currently of particular interest in the area of business innovation. Just as the communicative mechanism of price coordinates the fragmented actors in a market, so this "spontaneous order"[63] achieves effectiveness by virtue of an overarching mechanism. The difference here is that it is not a hidden hand which takes their individual action and makes something quite different of it,[64] it is the internalization of common collective concerns.[65]

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[57] Scott, *Domination*, p. 2.

[58] See the discussion of submissions to the neo-Foucauldian journal *Economy and Society*, in Frankel, "Confronting Neoliberal Regimes."

[59] Scott, *Domination*, p. 151.

[60] G. Lefebvre, *The Great Fear of 1789: Rural Panic in Revolutionary France* (New York: Pantheon, 1973).

[61] See P. Virilio, *Speed and Politics* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1991).

[62] This is also a characteristic of information dissemination on the internet.

[63] F. A. Heyek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty* (London: Routledge, 1976); F. A. Hayek, *Studies in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

[64] F. A. Heyek, "Dr. Bernard Mandeville," in *New Studies in Philosophy, Politics, Economics and the History of Ideas* (London: Routledge, 1978), pp. 249–266.

[65] Such concerns are what provide mutual trust within agents of a network. See Thompson *et al.* (eds), *Markets, Hierarchies and Networks*, p. 15.

It is just this capacity for effectiveness that makes rhizomatic action so opportunistic. When it does appear, it does so with extraordinary rapidity, mushrooming into the political spaces vacated by systemic breakdown, incompetent leadership and the loss of order. Such "eruptions"[66] are by no means uncommon, and examples abound in the history of religious struggles, agricultural uprisings, labour movements and secessionist rebellions. Marx had his own preferred examples, especially the June Days of 1848. "It is well known," he states, "how the workers, with unexampled bravery and ingenuity, without leaders, without a common plan, without means, and for the most part lacking weapons, held in check the army, the Mobile Guard, the Paris National Guard and the National Guard which streamed in from the provinces."[67] Garton-Ash stresses just this kind of unexpected effectiveness in his description of the formation of Solidarity,[68] and there are also accounts of the development of democracy on the American frontier which stress its ability to coordinate action in the absence of law. Others have identified such eruptions in October of 1917, May of 1968, and during the American resistance to the war in Vietnam.

Concealed from our gaze, then, is the extraordinary vitality of rhizomatic action, the richness of its various cultural forms and its occasional effectiveness. Further glimpses of such activity are afforded in the evident capacity of Danes in the face of Nazi power to collectively and overnight place a yellow star on an entire nation's coats, in striking miners' wives ability to agitate for, and support, their embattled communities, and in the mass mobilization of citizens which brought down the puppet regimes of Eastern Europe. There have also been great refusals, like the boycott of the Nike Corporation by black youth prompted by *Public Enemy*'s exposure of racist hiring practices, the resistance to Shell's dumping of the Brent Spa and the city of Liverpool's boycott of the *Sun* newspaper following its reporting of the Hillsborough disaster. These are glimpses of an alternative form of collective action of a quite different nature to that of hierarchism. These are rhizomatic activities, flat networks of communication, lacking centralized guidance yet somehow with the capacity to effectively coordinate collective action.

From within the bounded visibility of the public transcript of hierarchism, such activities are either completely invisible, or regarded as having nothing to do with politics, as marginal, ineffective, doomed to failure and inconsequential. This, of course, was precisely the reaction that greeted the first feminist CR groups and their insight that "the personal is political." Such "political" activity, far beneath the level of the state, remains to this day largely invisible to mainstream political science. One consequence is that when such rhizomatic forms do erupt, they catch us by complete surprise.

Hierarchism, as a public transcript, presents us with an account of history in which power structures operate with complete hegemony, then periodically, inexplicably, there are eruptions against such structures. It encourages us to imagine that, though there have been moments in history when the public

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[66] H. Lefebvre, *The Explosion: Marxism and the French Revolution* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1968).

[67] See K. Marx, "The Class Struggles in France: 1848–1850," in R. C. Tucker (ed.), *The Marx—Engles Reader* (London: Norton, 1978), pp. 586–593, here at p. 589.

[68] T. Garton-Ash, *The Polish Revolution: Solidarity* (London: Granta, 1991).

transcript was openly challenged on a massive scale, there will never be such an eruption again. This is because there appears, at present, no possible alternative to liberal democracy. So sure are we in our own triumph, so naive in our realism, that we unhesitatingly export our strongly hierarchic interpretation of democracy to other countries.

If, for a moment, we can peer into the hidden transcript, we can see that Western societies are rife with barely concealed resistance to the most desperate and ongoing inequalities, and that we live in what amounts to states of micro-civil war. The extraordinary suffering of excluded groups continues, as does the spoiling of our work and everyday lives, even when the news media have lost interest in a particular story. It requires a lot of money to maintain a privatized familial lifestyle which excludes this ongoing violence from view.

The negative assessment of anti-institutional political forms might, therefore, be due to a perceptual distortion, and this distortion can be related to the dominance of a particular organizational paradigm. Because of this, the first component of the charge of utopianism, that anti-institutional forms lack effectiveness, is open to question. It can be explained by an inability to accurately perceive the object it is attempting to evaluate. If we look more carefully, we see that anti-institutional action coordination is often effective, and sometimes frighteningly so.

Identifying Democratic Modes of Anti-institutionalism

As we saw earlier, however, the charge of utopianism has another component, for it also asserts that anti-institutionalism maintains an overly idealistic view of the motivations and capacities of citizens, and that, therefore, such eruptions are potentially dangerous. Indeed, we must note that the examples of rhizomatic action outlined above often had profoundly anti-democratic elements within them, and we could just as well have listed examples where groups and crowds seriously misbehaved, or where the effectiveness of anti-institutional forms was cruelly brought to bear on innocent parties.

Here, then, we begin to focus on how it is that anti-institutionalism is both ridiculed as ineffective and at the same time demonized as dangerous. Once again, however, we find our assessment seriously hampered by perceptual failure. The hidden transcript of rhizomatic action is, as we have suggested, occluded from our view. Consequently, when it does appear, forcing itself unexpectedly upon the public stage, it is experienced as a challenge to the public transcript of hierarchism, existing institutional arrangements and the power of entrenched elites. It is important to note that institutionalized elites *always* brand such eruptions as anti-democratic, as posing a serious threat to "democracy" and freedom and as being due to outside agitation.[69] Such assertions *never* arise from careful scrutiny of the eruption, and elites show little interest in ascertaining whether it is democratic or not. Instead, upon its appearance, the institutions of elite power suddenly switch from dismissal and ridicule to outright and violent repression. In such instances, hierarchism shows that its charge of ineffectiveness

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[69] See, for example, newspaper accounts of the June 18 protests in the City of London and the Battle for Seattle during the WTO Conference. As a corrective, see < http://www.urban75.com > .

towards such forms in fact masks a deep fear, a terror of disorganization, one which drives processes of "othering" and vindictive demonization. Democratic states thus reveal themselves to be more concerned to police the public transcript of hierarchism than they are with any genuine interest in assessing anti-institutional possibilities for democratic deepening.

For moderns, then, what threatens, what terrifies, is precisely ourselves, acting together, indulging in orgies of civil disorder. *This*, said Hobbes, is why we need government. We have always feared the unrestrained collective, the mobilized populace, the mob. Hierarchism therefore holds two contradictory positions. On the one hand it sees anti-institutionalism as ineffective, irrelevant, risible, and quite unable to coordinate collective human action. On the other, it fears its ability to mobilize and coordinate in a terrifyingly effective way. This contradiction haunts the history of democratic thought, where we see elite and hierarchical control endlessly justified by warnings against both the "bovine stupidity" of the people[70] and their dangerous fanaticism.[71]

We might, at this point, attempt to counter this accusation by cataloguing the evidence amassed by generations of participatory democrats which seeks to demonstrate that citizens are more than capable, with adequate support and opportunity, of significantly improving the quality of their judgements. From Pericles, through Machiavelli and Rousseau, to Pateman, Fishkin, and Barber, lies a long tradition which claims that citizens can be transformed into careful and creative decision-makers.[72] Here, however, we will not pursue this line of argument, for as we have seen, no amount of empirical evidence to the contrary can ever hope to dislodge the perceptual distortion and self-legitimating assessments of hierarchism. Instead, we should accept that not all rhizomatic action is democratic, and just like hierarchical forms, some examples evince both appalling judgement and abhorrent activities.

When considering an anti-institutional politics, one characterized by a high level of participation and the active interaction of a large number of citizens, we need to be able to distinguish between its democratic modes and those which are more authoritarian and plain nasty. To draw such a distinction, we are required to assess whether or not the internal workings of a given rhizomatic eruption are democratic or not. Such an assessment would require a theory of democratic legitimacy and a set of objective evaluative criteria. In short, we are here required to provide a philosophical justification for the claim that democracy is better than authoritarianism.

Clearly, any attempt to provide normative grounds for democratic legitimacy is fraught with difficulties, and the history of democratic theory is littered with

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[70] J. A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1966).
[71] See discussions of such negative views in S. Wolin, "Norm and Form: The Constitutionalizing of Democracy," in P. Euben, J. R. Wallach and J. Ober (eds), *Athenian Political Thought and the Reconstruction of American Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), pp. 29–58, here at pp. 31–32, 37–38, 47, 51; see also Thucydides, "The Civil War in Corcyra," in *The Peloponnesian War*, pp. 236–245, which Hobbes translated as his first publication.
[72] C. Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970); J. S. Fishkin, *Democracy and Deliberation: New Directions for Democratic Reform* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991); Barber, *Strong Democracy*; see also M. Warren, "Democratic Theory and Self-Transformation," *American Political Science Review* 86 (1992), pp. 8–23.

justifications which have subsequently been problematized.[73] Importantly, however, contemporary theorists who stress the normative centrality of deliberation for democratic legitimacy have developed our understanding of what constitutes the defining characteristics of democracy, and they have done so by concentrating on the *fairness of the debate* that precedes the making of a decision. Thus, some theorists have called, in an apparently unproblematic way, for deliberation to be maximized, for discussion to be as fair as possible, and have offered this as an objective test for whether or not a given decision-making process is democratic.[74]

Others have sought a more careful delineation of the kinds of coercion and manipulation that actually occur when people engage in discussion. Fishkin, for example, extending the insights of Bachrach and Baratz on "non-decisions" in agenda construction,[75] has distinguished between "explicit" and "structural" manipulation in an effort to capture the more subtle ways in which discourses are unfair.[76] Feminist writers have also contributed much to our understanding of the ways in which language and representation ensure the continued domination of discussion by existing power relations.[77] Yet these accounts do not overcome the problem of precisely how fairness of deliberation is to be normatively grounded. They do not, therefore, enable us to justify a determination that a given eruption of rhizomatic action is democratic or otherwise.

One particularly influential justification for democracy currently on offer is that provided by Jürgen Habermas. Habermas's work seeks to reconstruct an ideal standard of fair discussion from the very structure of communication itself. By analysing the assumptions we *must* make if we are to communicate at all,[78] Habermas has sought to derive a series of pragmatic rules which equalize the communicative chances of the participants.[79] This strong idealization of the conditions for democratic legitimacy offers a critical standard by which we can assess the democratic quality of a particular interaction and analyse the many ways in which real instances of deliberation are distorted by power. It asks, in Kantian fashion, not whether a given decision is legitimate, but whether that decision was achieved via a process of open and fair discussion.

There are, of course, many problems with such an approach,[80] not least the

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[73] Classically, these various efforts are now viewed (since Held's adoption of McPherson's distinction) along "protective" or "developmental" lines.

[74] Barber, *Strong Democracy*.

[75] P. Bachrach and M. S. Baratz, "Two Faces of Power," *American Political Science Review* (December, 1962).

[76] J. S. Fishkin, *The Dialogue of Justice: Toward a Self-Reflective Society* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 148–162.

[77] See, for example, D. Spender, *Man Made Language* (London: Routledge, 1980).

[78] J. Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990).

[79] Habermas, *Moral Consciousness*, p. 89; see also R. Alexy, "A Theory of Practical Discourse," in S. Benhabib and F. Dallmayr (eds), *The Communicative Ethics Controversy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), pp. 151–192.

[80] See D. M. Rasmussen, *Reading Habermas* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990); A. Ferrara, "Critical Theory and its Discontents: Wellmer's Critique of Habermas," *Praxis International* 9 (1989), pp. 305–320; S. Benhabib, *Situating the Self* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992): N. Fraser, *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity, 1989); T. Woodiwiss, "Critical Theory and the Capitalist State," *Economy and Society* 7 (1978), pp. 175–192.

fact that Habermas himself deploys his evaluative criteria to ground democracy at the level of the state,[81] and has continually expressed his fear that a mobilized populace might over-reach its limits.[82] Nevertheless, the sophistication of his normative argument does provide one of the few at least minimally defensible justifications for democracy, and can be therefore be used to distinguish between the different modes of rhizomatic action. Democratic forms of anti-institutional political activity would, following this approach, be characterized by a genuine attempt to allow for full, free and fair debate involving all those effected by decisions, or at least, as fair as circumstances permit.[83] Racism, for example, is indefensible in an open discussion involving all concerned, turning as it does on the exclusion and silencing of certain participants. An anti-institutional and activist group dedicated to such an ideology cannot, therefore, be described as democratic, and Habermas gives us the normative criteria to say exactly why.

The second component of the charge of utopianism levelled against anti-institutional forms: that they are dangerous and undemocratic, may be accurate in certain cases but by no means does it apply to all. Some rhizomatic action is democratic, some authoritarian, some more akin to gangsterism. If we are genuinely interested in their emancipatory potential, then we should at least attempt to delineate their democratic modes, and to do so with criteria somewhat better grounded and more discerning than blanket rejection, demonization and the selective use of evidence.

Overcoming the blindness of hierarchism, and thus recovering the functions and benefits of anti-institutional activity, does not remove the problems faced by a genuinely participatory politics.[84] Nor does it suggest that rhizomatic action coordination is a panacea for all our organizational deficiencies. But it does identify, as a possible addressee for radical theory, a large number of people from across the world who are deeply suspicious of what appear to be inherently undemocratic tendencies in institutions. And it further suggests that we view anti-institutionalism, not as an alternative blueprint for politics, but as a dynamic source of much needed organizational renewal. So conceived, emancipatory politics needs a greater understanding of such forms than contemporary

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[81] J. Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996).

[82] It is for this reason that he admonished German students in the 1960s–J. Habermas, *Towards a Rational Society: Student Protest, Science, and Politics* (London: Heinemann, 1971–and constantly warns against "the avenging force of the lifeworld," asserting that deliberative fora "do not govern," should be "self-limiting," and should not engage themselves inappropriately in controlling the economy. See particularly J. Habermas, "Further Reflections on the Public Sphere," in C. Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), pp. 421–461.

[83] Regarding the use of certain "unfair" practices where they have been agreed upon in open discussion, see R. Blaug, *Democracy, Real and Ideal: Discourse Ethics and Radical Politics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), pp. 115–117, 125, 143–145, 148. Anarchist thought has long argued that the rejection of hierarchy does not result in a "tyranny of structurelessness." See, for example, P. Marshall, "Pierre-Joseph Proudhon: The Philosopher of Poverty," in *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism* (London: Fontana, 1993), pp. 234–262.

[84] One of which is the question of whether anti-institutional movements can ever prevent themselves being transformed into hierarchical organizations, on which see L. Goodwyn, "Organizing Democracy: The Limits of Theory and Practice," *Democracy* 1 (1981); R. Blaug, "Engineering Democracy," forthcoming in *Political Studies*.

political science has bothered to provide. How to stimulate and nurture such experiments? How to reap the gains they offer? How can local activities be networked together in such a way as to overcome their partiality of view?[85] These are problems more likely to be addressed in the rush of practice[86] than by an academic discipline which, at last lumbering downward from the centralized state, stalls out at civil society, social capital and elite policy communities.

Conclusion

The age-old accusation of utopianism, levelled at rhizomatic action from within the confines of hierarchism, cannot be sustained by the charge that it cannot coordinate action. It is not this that explains the failure of political science to take anti-institutional initiatives seriously. Rather, at the heart of the accusation of utopianism is the charge that rhizomatic action is *too* effective, dangerously so, and thus prone to violent disorder. As such, it must be controlled and protected against. Otherwise, and here is the rub, it cannot provide the safety and stability required by elites to maintain their power, in other words, the state. Any radical politics that cannot run a state is thereby seen as deficient.[87] It is clearly true that rhizomatic action can coordinate. It can effectively provide both material and social needs. It can defeat hierarchic armies in the field, it can take over a whole area, culture, way of life, so fast it takes the breath away. For these reasons, elites ignore it at their peril. But it cannot run states.

We are subjects, ruled by alienated and arbitrary power, bereft of utopian alternatives. We face the continuation of suffering, the threat of infrastructural breakdown, possibly even market failure and environmental disaster. Anti-institutional experimentation affords insights into the failures of radical politics and the potential for future emancipation. In particular, it serves to illuminate the limits of our organizational understanding and to suggest alternative modes of coordinating democratic political action.

Hierarchism is a form of blindness that impairs both our social science and our political practice. To remain confined within such a public transcript is to screen off the very possibility of a politics which might be our own, legitimate yet also effective, disorganized yet coordinated. Regarding the emancipatory potential of anti-institutional initiatives, then, we should not underestimate their many difficulties, nor their potential for degeneration into authoritarian and institutionalized forms. Yet we must reject a blanket negative evaluation based on nothing more than self-serving perceptual distortion and immunity from empirical falsification.

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[85] H. F. Pitkin and S. M. Shumer, "On Participation," *Democracy* 2 (1982), pp. 43–54, here at p. 51; H. Wainwright, *Arguments for a New Left* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 150.

[86] See, for example, accounts of the international meetings of local protesters in *SchNEWS*, < http://www.schnews.org.uk > , especially 156, February 26, 1998.

[87] For an analysis of this assertion and its role in the history of socialism, see M. Salvadori, *Karl Kautsky and the Socialist Revolution, 1880–1938* (London: Verso, 1990), pp. 226–250.