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Notes on Radicalism

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Notes on Radicalism

Abstract

Questions frequently asked when introduced as a co-author of *Radical Sydney* (2010) are: "What is radicalism?"; "Is radicalism dead?"; and specifically with regard to Australia, "Where is radicalism today?". Often, it seems, the unstated, implied premise behind some of these questions is that radicalism once was, but is no more, a questioning underpinned by senses of defeat, confusion, with a hint of nostalgia thrown in.

Notes on Radicalism

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Questions frequently asked when introduced as a co-author of *Radical Sydney* (2010) are: “What is radicalism?”; “Is radicalism dead?”; and specifically with regard to Australia, “Where is radicalism today?”. Often, it seems, the unstated, implied premise behind some of these questions is that radicalism once was, but is no more, a questioning underpinned by senses of defeat, confusion, with a hint of nostalgia thrown in.¹

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Radicalism is contextual. It has many manifestations, ranging from political struggle, through to the expression of ideas and thoughts in any media form. What is regarded as radical in one time/place, is not necessarily radical in another time/place. So, for example, as Tony Moore points out in *Death or Liberty* (2010), the thousands of political prisoners transported to Australian prison colonies by British authorities between 1788–1868 in an attempt to quell, emasculate radicalism, were criminalized for advocating political rights and freedoms we now take for granted in Australia and Britain.²

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Radicalism has no template, and cannot be defined in terms of policies or positions set in stone. As Terry Irving and I have noted, with ‘left’ radicalism in mind: “People make history in a radical way whenever they pursue human dignity and social justice beyond the limits preferred, tolerated and prescribed by the systems imposed by the rulers of their societies, and in doing so variously draw upon the manifold tactics of dissent, protest, civil disobedience, and resistance”. The latter may

involve clandestinity, and insurgency.³

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John Brewer, writing about party ideology and politics during the time of George III, defined radicalism as “not what approximates to some notional political scheme, but any position which, if fulfilled, would undermine or overturn *existing* political authority. It has, in other words, to be defined contextually, and particularly with regard to the ideology and institutions that support prevailing authority”. Note Brewer’s italicised emphasis.⁴

The Michigan-based *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* defines radicalism loosely; radicals are those who seek “revolutionary alternatives to hegemonic social and political institutions, and who use violent or non-violent means to resist authority and to bring about change”.⁵

Importantly, radicalism can be defined as ‘left’ or ‘right’; historically it is a *politics* common across the political spectrum.

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Since the 1960s, a great deal of scholarship has been undertaken in Australia in the sub-discipline of labour history, a genre of ‘history from below’. One of the achievements of this research has been the documentation and resurrection of the submerged history of Australian working class and labour movement radicalism. However this should not invite the conclusion that radicalism is confined in Australia to one class, nor that it is the prerogative of one class—the working class, however defined.

So, for example, the radicalism and social protest movements that convulsed Australian society during the 1960s and early 1970s transcended class lines, involving middle and working class people and organisations in a wide range of issues and causes. In this process also, traditional and long standing distinctions and barriers regarding age, race, sexuality, gender, were variously, at times painfully and/or tentatively, confronted, with varying degrees of success, by participant activists.⁶

To conceptualise radicalism as a one-class phenomenon is to simplify and distort history and our understanding of social

processes. Ironically, and sadly, it also goes some way towards curtailing both the imagination of future radicalism, and the realisation in practice of radical possibilities.⁷

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When it comes to who or what is radical, history surprises. Consider, for example, Friedrich Engels (1820–1895). Certainly his philosophy and politics concerned the condition of the working class and its revolutionary potential, but as Tristram Hunt’s splendid biography of one of the nineteenth century’s most radical figures makes clear, he was a Manchester cotton millocrat, a champagne drinking, lobster-salad eating, fox-hunting, womanising gentleman. Minus his philosophical/political ideas and praxis, he would otherwise be missing in action so far as radicalism was concerned, yet another member of the Victorian upper-class, a frock-coated cog in the wheels of nineteenth century cotton capitalism.⁸

Consider also one of the most significant radical events of the 1960s/70s in Australia, what was arguably the world’s first Green Ban. The site involved was Kelly’s Bush, 4.9 hectares of bushland and decreed ‘open space’, in the upper-middle-class Sydney suburb of Hunters Hill; the key participants—a small committee of high-socio economic women representing a range of community organisations, and a militant trade union, the New South Wales Builders Labourers’ Federation (NSWBLF); the cause—to protect Kelly’s Bush from planned and imminent housing development; the context, a corrupt State government and a corrupted development culture; the wider political/cultural background, one of national social movement turbulence and activism.

To many people at the time, the black-ban (Green Ban) placed on the development of Kelly’s Bush by the NSWBLF was seemingly bizarre. However, it was successful and the small urban bushland area was saved from destruction. Beyond this, as Meredith and Verity Burgmann detailed in their study *Green Bans, Red Union* (1998), the Kelly’s Bush action eventually had inspirational, and radical political/environmental consequences and influences locally (Sydney), nationally, and internationally.⁹

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Radicalism is alive and well in today's world of globalisation. Not radicalism as a single phenomenon, but many radicalisms, variously described as radicalism of a particular political hue, or as representing some generality such as 'democracy', and/or more contextually as criminal, terrorist, fundamentalist, proscribed organisations. If these radicalisms have public faces, then they are likely to have a website or blog presence, and an internet search engine will eventually find them.

Radical people and organisations are not necessarily public people. Depending on their tactics and/or political contexts, they may face job loss, fines, imprisonment, torture, death, their families victimised, their property/assets confiscated. As a consequence, radicals may prefer clandestine modes of operation, and not hang out banners or signs advertising their presence, or identities. An example of this sort of modus operandi is the international underground eco-defence movement the Earth Liberation Front (ELF), a direct action outfit currently rated in the US by the US Justice Department and the Federal Bureau of Investigation as one of the nation's top domestic terrorist organisations, responsible globally for more than \$US150 million worth of targeted property damage, without harming anyone, in pursuit of its environmental concerns. The ELF operates via autonomous groups (cells), has a general web presence, a simple set of guidelines (including an emphasis on safeguarding human and animal life), maintains no membership databases, and has no central leadership.¹⁰

Cyber technologies have the possibility of greatly empowering radical individuals and organisations, globalising the range of targets available, and globalising possible sources of radicalism. This form of radicalism tends to be clandestine, and anonymous, with "leaderless resistance" a term/concept used in discussions of the phenomenon. However, as the [WikiLeaks](#) case amply demonstrates, the sustainability of a radical cyber project, and the safety of its participants, relies on the marriage of traditional radical/covert precautionary measures with sophistication, if not nerdishness, when it comes to cyber technologies and practice. Globally, authoritarian regimes have variously used the co-operation of service providers, a wide range of surveillance techniques, and mobilised volunteer 'vigilante' internet informers, to efficiently/

effectively track down and silence dissidents--and continue to do so.¹¹

Because radicalism by definition threatens established political order and attendant social/cultural hegemonies, it is more threatening in some contexts than in others, while it also tends to be underreported, misreported, unreported in most mainstream media outlets. A good starting point to explore contemporary radicalism is through the impressive array of resources available on the American based ZNet website.¹²

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A strength of Malcolm Chase's account of the nineteenth century radical Chartist movement, *Chartism: A New History* (2007), is his concentration on grassroots activists and what he termed the "lower tier" Chartist leaders, men and women who operated at local levels, away from the central limelight. Which, as he pointed out, is not to decry the high-profile national leadership, but to emphasise his point that Chartism endured and succeeded to the extent it did because of these local activists and "lower tier" people; they gave Chartism its enduring legacy and vitality.

Historians of Chartism have tended to concentrate on the dramatic, inspirational, often heroic, national leadership of the nineteenth century political movement. Chase's version of Chartism is a 'history from below', within a 'history from below'. In resurrecting his actors from history's submerged realms, Chase obviously had to work hard; in cases his subjects did not leave significant paper trails, and were not buoyed biographically by significant secondary sources.¹³

My reading of Chase led me to wonder whether or not people, scholarly or otherwise, interested in radicalism, pay too much attention to, look for, 'big picture' radicalism, macro-radicalism if you like—significant organisational structures, big events, prominent people, charisma, the theatrical, the dramatic. As Chase's study amply demonstrates, radicalism does not always work or look like this, nor is it necessarily always a feature of the metropolises; in which case the seeker of radicalism needs to be more subtle, both in seeking and in understanding radicalism.

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In *A Radical History of Britain* (2009), Edward Vallance produced a progressive/leftist account of how, over time, rebels and revolutionaries contributed to social and political change in Britain. His material is familiar to readers of historians like G. D. H. Cole, Christopher Hill, E. P. Thompson and the like, but to many readers it was, and is, new. Vallance wrote his account as a story/narrative, one intended for a wide and general readership; he was successful because he can write, having narrative skills as well as being an academic historian with specialist expertise.¹⁴

What Vallance set out to do was to write about “the enduring power of the idea of a (British) ‘radical tradition’”, variously reinvented, reworked, invoked by succeeding generations of radicals. His intention was to write history with the capacity to inspire readers to rise like “lions after slumber”, invoking Shelley, and take to the metaphoric streets. Whether or not he succeeded is a matter of opinion, but the important point is that he attempted to write activist history, history that both inspires action, and is written with activist intent.

Absent from Vallance’s account is any sense of defeatism, cynicism, nihilism, which can arise from leftist/progressive accounts of radical defeat and glorious failure. The origin of this sense of disappointment/failure are complex, having to do with the materialism of our times, widespread senses of alienation and escapism, the cultural reinforcement of political passivity. It also has to do with the nature of scholarly analysis of past oppressions and injustices which, when analysed through the prisms of “the construction of identity, the processes of representation, and the deconstruction of texts”, as Terry Irving put it, does not “grab an anxious person”, while theoretical analysis primarily intended for fellow academic specialists does not necessarily contribute to empowering or giving agency to the Shelley/Vallance ‘waking lions’.¹⁵

Which is not to argue or imply that such analysis and discourse is not important and necessary, but it is to suggest that scholars and journal/book editors who regard themselves as in some way being radical, committed, give more thought and expression in their contributions to clearly and forthrightly

indicating just how their scholarly contribution/s relate/s to wider radical projects and constituencies.¹⁶

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The role of rebels and radicals in history is complex, dialectical. Commenting on an aspect of the work of Australian historian Eric Fry, Terry Irving and I have noted that “the past and the present involve contradictory and conflicting social/historical forces; rebels and radicals are indispensable agents, helping shape the future by opposing and restricting society’s rulers, paving the way for social change, opening doors to reformers, giving birth to what, at the time, might appear ‘unthinkable’. And in the process, empowering themselves and others”.¹⁷

Notes

- 1 Terry Irving and Rowan Cahill, *Radical Sydney: Places, Portraits and Unruly Episodes*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2010.
- 2 Tony Moore, *Death or Liberty: Rebels and radicals transported to Australia, 1788–1868*, Murdoch Books, Milson’s Point, 2010.
- 3 See our introductory note to Joan Hume, “On Disability and History”, *Radical Sydney* blog, <http://radicalsydneyp.blogspot.com/p/on-disability-and-history.html>
- 4 John Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George 111*, Cambridge University Press, 1976, 1981, p. 19.
- 5 *Journal for the Study of Radicalism*, <http://msupress.msu.edu/journals/jsr>
- 6 For an overview of the period, see my Introduction to Beverley Symons and Rowan Cahill, *A Turbulent Decade: Social Protest Movements and the Labour Movement, 1965–1975*, Sydney Branch ASSLH, Sydney, 2005, pp. v-x (available online at <http://evatt.labor.net.au/publications/papers/147.html>).
- 7 For a recent Australian radical scholarly foray that breaks with the Australian labour history emphasis, see the essay by Ben Maddison, “Radical Commons Discourse and the Challenges of Colonialism”, in *Radical History Review*, Issue 108 (Fall 2010), pp. 29–48.
- 8 Tristram Hunt, *The Frock-Coated Communist: The Revolutionary Life of Friedrich Engels*, Allen Lane/Penguin, London, 2009.
- 9 Meredith Burgmann and Verity Burgmann, *Green Bans, Red*

Union: Environmental activism and the New South Wales Builders Labourers' Federation, UNSW Press, Sydney, 1998.

- 10 For an instructive and entertaining exposition of covert, radical 'organising', see Chapter 14, 'Code of the Eco-Warrior', in Edward Abbey, *Hayduke Lives!*, Little, Brown, 1990, pp. 107–116.
- 11 There is an extensive scholarly literature on the radical/terrorist use of cyberspace. Useful discussions are Kenneth Einar Himma (editor), *Internet Security: Hacking, Counterhacking, and Society*, Jones and Bartlett Publishers, Sudbury, Massachusetts, 2007; Gabriel Weimann, "Cyberterrorism: The Sum of All Fears?", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Volume 28, Issue 2, February 2005, pp. 129–149. The WikiLeaks site is at <http://wikileaks.org/>. For discussion of WikiLeaks, see Daniel Domscheit-Berg, *Inside WikiLeaks: My time with Julian Assange at the World's Most Dangerous Website*, Scribe Publications, Carlton North, 2011; David Leigh and Luke Harding, *Inside Julian Assange's War on Secrecy*, Public Affairs, New York, 2011. For the ongoing documentation, analysis and discussion of internet filtering and surveillance practices globally, see the OpenNet Initiative at <http://opennet.net/>
- 12 ZNet, www.zcommunications.org/znet
- 13 Malcolm Chase, *Chartism: A New History*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2007. For an Australian account of one of these "lower tier" leaders following his transportation to Australia as a political prisoner, and as an example of Australian radical history writing, see Mark Gregory, "William Cuffay in Tasmania", *Tasmanian Historical Research Association, Papers and Proceedings*, Volume 58, Number 1, April 2011, pp. 61–77.
- 14 Edward Vallance, *A Radical History of Britain: Visionaries, Rebels and Revolutionaries--The Men and Women Who Fought For Our Freedoms*, Little, Brown, 2009.
- 15 Terry Irving, "A Radical Book: How we came to write it, and why it is radical", *Illawarra Unity*, Volume 10, No. 1, 2010, pp. 58–65 (available online at <http://ro.uow.edu.au/unity/vol10/iss1/7>). See also Stuart Henderson, "Disappointment, Nihilism, and Engagement: Some Thoughts on Active History", *Left History*, Volume 15, No. 1 (Fall/Winter 2010–11).
- 16 There is a considerable body of literature relating to the sort of political/historiographical explicitness I envisage here. For me it comes down to favourites. Interviews conducted between 1976–82 with radical historians, edited by Henry Abelove et al. for the Radical Historians Association as *Visions of History*

(Manchester University Press, 1983), remain rich lodes of challenge and inspiration. Useful also is *Radical History Review*, Issue 79 (Winter 2001), comprising bracing and stimulating reflections on thirty years of radical history practice. A powerful, personal, revealing model of radical historiographical explicitness is Marcus Rediker's "The Poetics of History from Below", *Perspectives on History*, <http://www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/2010/1009/1009art1.cfm>. For a wide ranging discussion of political and intellectual activism, with particular relevance for radical historians, see Staughton Lynd and Andrej Grubaic, *Wobblies & Zapatistas: Conversations on Anarchism, Marxism and Radical History*, PM Press, Oakland, 2008.

- 17 Terry Irving and Rowan Cahill, op. cit., p. 2. See also Eric Fry's Introduction to Eric Fry (editor), *Rebels & Radicals*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1983, pp. x-xv.