

# Transformative Power: Political organisation in transition

Friday 16 November 2012, by [WAINWRIGHT Hilary](#) (Date first published: June 2012).

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In a context of uncertainty and flux, it helps to start from the specific. My starting point is the rise of Syriza, the radical left coalition rooted in the movements resisting austerity that has become the main opposition party in the Greek parliament. Syriza's ability to give a focused political voice to the anger and despair of millions has made a breakthrough from which we can learn.

This is a matter not only of its soaring electoral support, which rose from 4 per cent of the national vote in 2009 to 27 per cent in June 2012 on the basis of a refusal of the policies imposed by the IMF, the European Commission (EC) and the European Central Bank (ECB), but also of the fact that this electoral mandate is reinforced by organized movements and networks of solidarity that Syriza has been part of building.

This is not to imply that Syriza's success is stable or that its momentum will necessarily be maintained. One of its 71 MPs, the ex-Pasok member and trade union leader, Dimtris Tsoukalas, warns that 'votes can be like sand'. [1] Threatening winds will blow persistently from a hostile media determined to exploit any sign of division; from national and European elites creating an atmosphere of fear towards the left and from an aggressive fascist party exploiting xenophobic tendencies in Greek society with some success, having won 7 per cent in the polls.

Syriza does not provide a template to apply elsewhere; it is a new kind of political organization in the making. Reflection on its rise, however, which has taken place alongside the collapse of support for Pasok (from around 40 per cent of the vote in 2009 to no more than 13 per cent in 2012), throws the present quandary of the left, especially in Europe, into relief. Such reflection also stimulates fresh thoughts on forms of political organization that could help us find ways out.

## **Failure of social democratic parties**

The quandary is this. On the one hand, there is the inability of social democratic parties to stand up to, or even seriously to bargain over, austerity for the masses as a solution to the financial crisis. To varying degrees these parties are demonstrating their inability to rise to the challenge of a visibly discredited neoliberal project. The decay in party democracy and culture, moreover, combined with an entrenchment of market-driven mentalities, has meant that in social democratic parties the forces of renewal are negligible or very weak.

On the other hand, most political organizations of the radical left, with the notable exception of Syriza, are in weaker positions than they were before the financial crisis of 2008. In addition, the traditional forms of labour movement organization have been seriously weakened. There has been an impressive growth of resistance and alternatives of many kinds, many of them interconnected and many, like Occupy, besmirching the brand of an already dodgy-looking system. But through what strategic visions, forms of organization and means of political activism they can produce lasting forces of transformation is an open question under active and widespread discussion.

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In other words, while the right, in the form of neoliberalism, was ready for the collapse of the Soviet bloc in 1989, the left in the North, when faced with capitalism coming as near to collapse as it can – given its ability to call in state guarantees – has been unable to find appropriate ways of building a dynamic of change driven by its alternative values and directions for society.

Syriza in its current form has been forged in the intense heat of the most ruthless turning of the screw of austerity. Syriza is going to face many problems, both within its own organization as it changes from a coalition of parties and groups to becoming a party with its own direct membership, as well as in the face of new pressures that will come from its opponents both inside and outside Greece. However, after interviewing a wide range of activists and reading interviews and reports by others, I have a grounded belief that the long and difficult process of developing a framework of rethinking political organization beyond both Leninism and parliamentarism is producing qualitatively new results.

Many of the political resources that shaped Syriza’s response to the present extremities and led it to a position in which it is uniquely – but still conditionally – trusted by so many people in Greek society are the outcome of considerable learning from the trial and error of other radical parties across Europe and the experience of the European Social Forum.

This essay seeks to contribute towards continuing this dialectic of transnational political learning on the left. By generalizing from the distinctive features of Syriza, and also bearing in mind lessons from other experiences where parties with similar ambitions have been unable to sustain their transformative dynamic, I will suggest approaches to problems of political organization, further consideration of which might help to overcome the quandary of the left.

## **Transforming the state**

My discussion of these themes will focus on the problem of transforming the state. This is a major issue for Syriza as it campaigns and prepares for office in and against a notably corrupt and anti-

democratic state. One of four sections of the programme drawn up in 2009 by members of Synaspismos, the largest party in the Syriza coalition, is entitled 'Restructuring the state'.

My framework for approaching this fundamental issue sees sources of democratic transformative power autonomous from the state as decisive to the possibilities of change.

The economic dimension here is crucial. Political change is seriously hindered if it lacks a base in non-capitalist relations of production, including the production of services and culture, however partial and incomplete. At the same time, it must be said that a conflictual engagement in as well as against the state is a necessary condition for systemic change. Such an engagement has to be rooted in, and accountable to, forces for democratic change in society. Without a strategy of this kind to transform and, where necessary, break state power, transformative struggles will recurrently lapse into containable counter-cultures and their potential for the majority of people will be unrealized.

### **Drawing lessons from local democratisation**

To develop my argument, I draw particularly on the experience of the radical left of the Labour Party in governing London in 1982-86; and that of the Brazilian Workers' Party (PT) in opening up decisions about new municipal investment to a citywide process of popular participation in Porto Alegre from 1989 until 2004. Despite these cases being well known, their lessons for political organization have yet to be fully distilled.

For my argument, what is significant is that their achievements – each of the city experiments involved a redistribution of resources and, for a period, power and capacity, from the rich and powerful to the poor and marginalized – depended on opening up to and sharing resources with autonomous sources of democratic power in the cities concerned. In other words, they combined initiatives for change from within government structures with support for developing wider, more radical sources of power outside.

But it was very significant that not only had such a strategic orientation failed to change the Labour Party in the UK, it also turned out that neither did the PT in Brazil adopt such a dual strategy once it was elected at the national level, which partly explains the limits of the Lula government in fulfilling many expectations it had aroused for radical social change.

In the Greater London Council (GLC) and Porto Alegre experiments political parties used their electoral mandates to move beyond the constraints imposed by the existing system and instead to strengthen and spread challenges to that system. The spirit they embodied can also be seen in widespread campaigns by public service workers and users against privatization that involve effective strategies to change the way that public services are managed and public money administered, dragging political parties after them.

All these experiences have underlined the importance of struggling to create non-capitalist social relations in the present rather than defer them to 'after winning power'. Lessons from these local experiences, however, can help the rethinking that is necessary of what political organization needs to be like in a context of plural sources of transformative power.

In drawing these lessons, we need also to bear in mind that there are further distinct problems in changing state and quasi-state institutions on national and international levels. To understand the wider significance of the way these local political experiences combine a struggle as representatives within the local state with support for democratic movements and initiatives outside, we need to distinguish between two radically distinct meanings of power.

These are on the one hand power as transformative capacity and on the other hand power as domination – as involving an asymmetry between those with power and those over whom power is exercised. We could say that historically, mass social democratic parties have been built around a benevolent version of the second understanding. Their strategies have been based around winning the power to govern and using it paternalistically to meet what they identify as the needs of the people.

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Both the experiences of the GLC in the early 1980s and the PT in municipal government in the 1990s were attempts to change the state from being a means of domination and exclusion to becoming a resource for transformation by campaigning for electoral office in order then to decentralize and redistribute power. I would argue that in practice Syriza is attempting the same project at a national level.

### **Syriza and the dynamics of social change**

The most distinctive feature of Syriza, in contrast with traditional parties of the left, is that it sees itself as more than simply a means of political representation for movements, but as being involved practically in building the movements. Its political instincts make responsibility for contributing to the spread and strengthening of movements for social justice a high priority.

In the weeks following the election of 71 Syriza MPs in June 2012, its leaders stressed the importance of this as central to ‘changing people’s idea of what they can do, developing with them a sense of their capacity for power’, as Andreas Karitzis, one of its key political coordinators, put it. While the party believes state power is necessary, it is clear that, in Karitzis’s terms, ‘what is also decisive is what you are doing in movements and society before seizing power. Eighty per cent of social change cannot come through government.’ [2] This is not just talk.

This view of strategies for social change influences how Syriza is allocating the considerable state resources it is receiving as a result of its high level of parliamentary representation. The party will get €8 million (almost triple its present budget) and each MP is allocated by the parliament five members of staff.

The idea at the time of writing is that a high proportion of the new funds should go to solidarity networks in the neighbourhoods – for example, to employ people to extend initiatives such as social medical centres, to spread what approaches have succeeded, to link, online and face to face, people in the cities with producers of agricultural goods. Funds will also go to strengthening the capacity of the party in parliament, but a greater proportion will be directed towards Syriza’s work in building the extra-parliamentary organizations for social change.

Of the five staff allocated to MPs, two will work for the MP directly. One will work for policy committees that bring together MPs and civic experts and two will be employed by the party to work in the movements and neighbourhoods.

Behind these priorities is a learning process arising from the vulnerability shown by left parties in other European countries to letting parliamentary institutions, with all their resources and privileges, pull them away from the movements whose political voice they had intended to be.

## **Committed to movement building as much as party-building**

From its origins in 2004 at the height of the alter-globalization movements (which had a particularly strong impact in Greece), Syriza was at least as concerned with helping to build movements for change in society as with electoral success. There was also a learning process through the European Social Forum and then the Greek Social Forum.

This contributed to not only Syriza's clear strategic view of the limits of state power for social transformation, but also a self-conscious insistence on norms of pluralism, mutual respect and openness to the new ways in which people were expressing their discontent and alternatives.

Providing a constant reminder of the political methodology they were trying to avoid was the KKE, one of the last orthodox Communist parties in Europe, self-confident in its self-imposed isolation and wary of contamination with 'unorthodoxy'. Syriza activists, by contrast, were very much part of the open, plural, curious culture of mutual learning promoted by the European Social Forum, and it was explicitly one of their goals that their new political coalition be infused with it. The effects of this were clearly seen in how Syriza related to the youth revolt after the police shooting of Alexandros Grigoropoulos in 2008, not pushing a line or seeking to take control. And they acted in the same way when the protests gathered in Syntagma Square and beyond through 2011.

Syriza activists contributed their own principles – for example, not allowing any anti-immigrant slogans – and applied these with others, anarchists for example, to find practical solutions through the general discussions. The youth wing of Synaspismos had a workshop near the beginning of the Syntagma protests to explain and discuss this non-instrumental, principled approach.

Syriza is also shaped by the converging culture of the different generations and traditions that make up the coalition. The younger generation, now in their late twenties or early thirties, came to the left independently of any 'actually existing' alternative. The older leadership had been part of the resistance to the dictatorship in the late 1960s and 1970s. Many of them became the left Eurocommunists of the 1980s.

Both generations were active in the alter-globalization and social forum movement. This meant that the collective processes of knowledge and cultural production in the movements resisting neoliberal globalization, both inside Greece and internationally in the 1990s, were central to the personal political development of Syriza activists rather than being a sphere in which they 'intervened' to promote an alternative that had already been worked out elsewhere.

Syriza activists at all levels are emphatic about going beyond protest and of having alternatives that are convincing to people who are discontented with the corrupt Greek state and the 'troika' of the EC, the IMF and the ECB. This has led to an emphasis on support for initiatives that could make an immediate difference now rather than waiting for Syriza's election to government. For instance, as the cuts destroy the public health system, doctors and nurses in Syriza are involved with others in creating medical centres to meet urgent social needs and at the same time pushing for free treatment in public hospitals and campaigning to defend health services.

Syriza is also bringing together sympathetic frontline civil servants with teachers, experts and representatives of parents' organizations to prepare changes in the organization of the Ministry of Education to make it more responsive to the people and to release the stifled capacities of state employees who genuinely want to serve the public.

It is also mapping the social and cooperative economy in the country to identify how it can be supported politically now as well as to determine what kind of support it should have when the party

moves into government to realize Syriza's goal of an economy geared to social needs. The party's responsiveness to the steady rise in self-organized forms of solidarity economy amidst the crisis, recognizing its potential in terms of constructing an alternative direction for society, is reminiscent of what Andre Gorz's meant when, in outlining the strategic concept of non-reformist reforms in his *Strategy for Labor*, he stressed the importance of 'enabling working people to see socialism not as something in the transcendental beyond but as the visible goal of praxis in the present'. [3]

When Alexis Tsipras declared that the party was ready for government, based on an unequivocal rejection of the economic policy memorandum, it concentrated the minds and organizational discipline of Syriza activists. The movement style and culture of the organization gave way to a single-minded campaign in which loyalties to this or that group or tendency in the Syriza coalition weakened and a new closeness emerged.

But complaints also emerged about a certain opacity of when and where decisions were made and how to influence them, and fears expressed that the large parliamentary group could reinforce this if it becomes too autonomous. And there is recognition of the danger of Tsipras becoming a celebrity symbol on which the future of the party can end up becoming dependent, weakening internal party democracy and diluting debate – shades of Lula in Brazil, shades too of Andreas Papandreu in 1981. Although the coalition is united on the importance of its claim on government, much thought is being given to how to share leadership, maintain accountability to party and movement activists, how to sustain a critical politicized culture of debate, challenge and strategic militancy; to avoid in other words becoming 'another Pasok'.

### **Rethinking the franchise: from atomistic to social representation**

Syriza's experience gives a practical focus to recent discussions in the alter-globalization movement about whether, in liberal democracies, to engage in, as well as struggle against, the political system – and, more specifically, whether to seek political representation for more than propaganda purposes, and if so with what forms of organisation.

Syriza's self-conscious combination of organizing for government with spreading the capacity for change autonomously from the political system – through solidarity work in the community, agitating at the base of the unions, campaigning for social and political rights, as well as against racism and xenophobia and so on – raises anew the question of whether the vote is still a resource for social transformation or a perpetual source of disillusion and alienation.

***“Can representation in the existing institutions of parliamentary democracy, along with efforts to change these institutions, strengthen the wider struggle to bring somehow an end to capitalist power?”***

In other words, can representation in the existing institutions of parliamentary democracy, along with efforts to change these institutions, strengthen the wider struggle to bring somehow an end to capitalist power – the power of the financial markets, private banks and corporations, all intertwined with and guaranteed by state institutions? My answer is positive, albeit highly conditional.

In the broadest terms, the condition is based, organizationally and culturally, on an understanding of citizenship as social and situated. In today's societies, ridden as they are with inequalities, this implies an engagement with electoral politics while at the same time strongly challenging what has become of the universal franchise: an abstract, formal political equality in a society that is fundamentally unequal.



Many propertyless men and women and their allies who struggled for the vote imagined that exposing, challenging and overcoming unequal and exploitative relationships would be at the heart of parliamentary politics. For the Chartists and many suffragettes, the vote was the opening of a new phase in this political struggle, not a plateau on which to remain. Political representation meant for them a means of 'making present' in the political system struggles over social and economic inequality. [4]

The ability of the British establishment, often with the complicity, tacit and overt, of Labour's parliamentary and trade union leaderships, to contain this potential dynamic is only a well documented example of a phenomenon common in different forms to liberal democracies. [5]

The result is a narrow form of representation in which citizens are treated as individuals in an entirely abstract way rather than as part of embedded social, and at present unequal, relationships. It is a political process which consequently tends to disguise rather than expose inequalities, and protects rather than challenges private economic power.

### **Returning to radical democratic roots**

This tendency has regularly come under challenge by later generations. They have taken up the radical democratic goals of the pioneers by seeking to break the protective membrane of parliamentary politics and open politics up to the direct impact of struggles that are shifting the balance of power in society.

There is much to learn in this respect from two experiences, the radical Labour administration of the Greater London Council and the PT government of Porto Alegre. Both their political leaderships in practice built their strategy for implementing a radical electoral mandate on sharing power, resources and legitimacy with citizens organized autonomously around issues of social and economic equality.

These municipal politicians started from the recognition that the inequalities they were elected to tackle - of economic power, race, gender and more - needed sources of power and knowledge beyond those of the state alone.

In both cases, the mandate was for a politics that would learn from and not repeat the compromises, national as well as local, of the past. In the case of the GLC, the left leadership of the London Labour Party, influenced by a fierce controversy in the national party, was determined to avoid the failure of the 1974-79 Labour government to implement a radical electoral mandate.

This strong political will, along with a direct involvement in community, feminist, trade union and anti-racist movements, led the would-be GLC councillors to reach out to many organizations that broadly shared their aims and involve them in drawing up a detailed manifesto. This became the mandate of the new administration after Labour won the GLC elections in 1981. It was a key reference point in conflicts with public officials both in County Hall and across the river in Thatcher-led Westminster and Whitehall - a source of moral legitimacy for the radicalism of the GLC's policies.

In the case of Porto Alegre, the 'taken-for-granted' way of running the municipality had involved local party elites making mutually beneficial deals which reproduced a structural corruption and secrecy that ensured that the council effectively served, or at least did not upset, the economic interests of the 15 or so families who dominated the local economy as landowners and industrialists.

The PT's mission, as part of its commitment to redress the gross inequalities of the Brazilian polity and economy, was to put an end to this. Under the leadership of Olivio Dutra, it committed itself to working with neighbourhood associations and other grassroots democratic organisations to open up the council's budgetary, financial and contracting procedures.

In both cases, the strategies were effective in achieving many of their goals - so much so that in different ways the vested interests they challenged took action, equally effectively in their reactionary terms. These experiences and, in particular, the crucial relationships between autonomously organized citizens and the local state were the product of particular historical circumstances.

Both the British Labour Party and the Brazilian Workers' Party were the product of labour and social movements and progressive intellectuals but their divergent historical origins were based on differing understandings of democracy and hence of their strategies towards representative politics.

While the PT was created to give a radically democratic lead to the struggle against dictatorship, the Labour Party was founded to protect and extend workers' rights and social provision within a parliamentary democracy. The Labour Party began from an almost sacrosanct division between the industrial and the political, respectively the spheres of the unions and of the party. The rules governing the relationship have had a significant flexibility; otherwise this 'contentious alliance' would not have survived.

By the 1950s this division of labour had produced a profoundly institutionalized abdication of politics by the trade unions to the Labour Party, which increasingly saw legitimate politics as taking place only within narrowly parliamentary confines. The unions could lobby and as part of the Labour Party pass resolutions proposing what governments should do. But for them to take action directly on political issues, including broadly social ones, was out of bounds.

### **Greater London Council**

The London Labour Party of 1981 was of a very different character. It was the product of a powerful challenge to this moderating division of labour, which came perilously close (in the eyes of the British establishment) to breaking the barriers protecting the reactionary UK state against the rebellious spirit of what was at that time one of the best organized trade union movements in Europe.

The Labour Party of the early 1970s was in opposition and radicalizing in reaction to the political collapse and compromise of the 1964-70 Wilson government. The Labour Party at this time, especially outside the parliamentary leadership, opened its doors to the influence of social movements, including the base and some of the leadership of the trade unions.

A radical manifesto was drawn up in a relatively open and participatory manner that was not only about extending public ownership but also delegating power to trade union organisations in the workplace.

In government, however, and under the pressures of the City, strengthened by US moves towards financial deregulation, and the IMF, the doors were closed by the parliamentary leadership. The result was an unprecedented struggle throughout the labour movement, which escalated into a conflict not over this or that policy, but over the very nature of representation. This struggle has been well documented. [6]



By the mid-1980s, the left had lost the struggle to change the Labour Party and with it the nature of working-class political representation. In the meantime, the left had not only won and kept control of the party of the capital city in 1980, with the support of most of the trade unions, but with its victory at the elections for the GLC had gained control over a strategic authority with a budget greater than many nation-states. It had the opportunity, the will, the allies and some of the legislative powers – before the Thatcher government started to hack away at them – to implement radical policies.

Once ensconced in County Hall, Labour councillors, driven on by the struggles and organizations in which many of them were involved, and indeed had become councillors to pursue, led the GLC in ways that would transform the relationship between councillors, local government ‘officers’, autonomous citizens’ organizations (including the unions) and the majority of London citizens. [7]

### **Workers’ Party in Porto Alegre**

For a brief moment, this significant local Labour Party behaved in a way comparable to the Workers’ Party in Brazil 6,000 miles away. The distinctiveness of the PT, at least from its foundation in 1980 to the late 1990s (and its importance for our discussion of the conditions under which representative democracy might be a resource for social transformation), is a political practice based on the belief that the formal foundations of democracy – universal franchise, rights to free speech, freedom of assembly, a free press, political pluralism and the rule of law – had to be reinforced by effective institutions of popular, participatory democracy if the goals of democracy – political equality and popular control – were to be realized.

This was the lesson the party drew from not only the experience of bringing down a dictatorship but also the extreme inequalities of Brazilian society, which made even more of a mockery of purely legal claims to political equality than in most capitalist countries. The practical character of these radically democratic forms was drawn partly from the participatory forms developed in the movements from which the PT was founded, particularly militant trade unions and the landless movement.

These participatory forms were then developed through a self-conscious and collective process of trial and error in the formation of the participatory budget itself, in several major cities in addition to Porto Alegre. The culture and mentality of the party’s approach to popular participation was important too. This drew on the traditions of popular education which, most explicitly in the case of Paulo Freire, were effectively a form of political consciousness-raising based on the principle of enabling people to realize their capacities.

The result was a party that had committed itself to developing institutions of popular control through which it would try to share power and strengthen popular transformative capacities. There are many echoes of the PT in the character of Syriza, a reflection perhaps of their common history of struggle against a dictatorship. Returning then to the distinction between power in the sense of transformative capacity and power as domination, we can see how, in both cases, the radical political leaderships attempted to use state powers of domination – over finance and land in particular – as resources for the efficacy of popular transformative capacity.

Thus, in Porto Alegre and other Brazilian cities that developed processes of participatory budgeting, after winning the mayoral elections and gaining centralized control over the budget, the party effectively delegated power over new investment and priorities to the co-ordinated decentralization of the participatory budget.

At the same time, a group was set up to work with different neighbourhood organizations to

facilitate the decentralized process. This was the organization of the annual cycle of neighbourhood and regional meetings at which proposals for new spending were made; evaluated according to the agreed framework of technical and substantive criteria; discussed through an elaborate, but transparent and rule governed process of horizontal decision-making and negotiation; and then finalized through a committee composed of delegates from the different regions of the city and various thematic assemblies as well as representatives of the Mayor. Progress on the implementation of previous decisions was also monitored through this open process, backed up by the Mayor's budget office.

In the case of the GLC, there was a similar combination of council action that used its centralized power and resources to delegate power to citizens' organizations to strengthen the capacity of Londoners as workers or as citizens to determine the decisions shaping their lives.

The GLC, for example, used its power to purchase land to prevent property developers from destroying an inner city community and then delegated the management of that land to the local community alliance, which in the course of resisting the property developers had worked on its own plan for the area. It created a public enterprise board, which helped to save companies from closure on the condition that the trade unions in those companies had certain powers over how the resources were used. It set up a central office within the council with the authority to monitor other departments' implementation of the electoral mandate, including the commitment to popular participation.

In other words, the centralized power to tax, to control the use of land and so on, was combined with a decentralization and delegation so the power over how state resources were allocated and managed was shared with popular groups. As with any serious experiment, the problems must be reflected on as well as the aims and the successes.

### **Learning from failures and weaknesses**

These problems shed a harsh light on the tensions between the forms of political organization developed historically within liberal representative politics to gain and sustain office within the state and the forms of political organization needed to build popular control over the state. To a significant extent, the political innovations towards the second goal were, in both cases, developed through the momentum of the process building on neighbourhood, workplace and social movement organizations that had already formed. The pressures of the immediate often meant that difficult issues raised in the actual practice of relations between parties and autonomous initiatives and movements were not always publicly recognized and discussed.

In the case of the GLC, the emphasis on working with civic and trade union movements was strengthened by the limited nature of its own official powers for implementing Labour's radical manifesto commitments. Much of the practical and political process of the relationship between the council and these independent organizations was dependent, however, on the GLC-appointed officers (most of whom had a movement background) and committed councillors, rather than Labour Party organizations on the ground.

A continuing engagement with autonomous movements, beyond the institutional relation with the unions, had not become generally built into the political habits of local Labour Parties. This had begun to change in the late 1970s and early 1980s, reaching a peak with the support that local Labour Parties and unions organized with others in communities and workplaces across the country, including London, for the 1984-85 miners' strike. But this social movement struggle-oriented culture was not entrenched enough to withstand the defeats imposed by the Thatcher government, including

the abolition of the GLC itself as the elected government of London.

In Porto Alegre, where relations between the PT and social movements were very close, with much overlapping membership, a major problem was the extent to which leading activists in both were drawn into government positions, weakening both the party outside government and autonomous community and social movement organization. [8]

A second problem concerned the participatory budget process itself. Although all the evidence points to a significant increase in the active involvement and growth in self-confidence and organizing capacity, especially among the poor, women and blacks, a serious limit emerged to the extent to which participatory budgeting developed popular transformative capacities beyond the point of making and prioritizing pragmatic demands.

The source of this limit lay in the separation of the participatory budget process from strategic policymaking as, for example, on urban planning. As participation in budget decision-making grew numerically and participants gained in confidence and political awareness, activists, including in some of the poorest areas, pressed for information and involvement in planning policy. But this was never fully opened up.

Close observer-participants suggest several explanations. One is that the PT within the municipality was not able to exert sufficient centralized control over the behaviour of the different departments, to implement this desire of the participants in the participatory budget. Planning officials were particularly protective of their departmental interests. Sergio Baierle indicates that it also reflected the development of a 'governmental cadre' amongst the PT who became distant from, and paternalistic towards, the community activists. [9]

A third problem with the participatory budget process was an absence of publicly debated and agreed guidelines for agreements between City Hall and community organizations involved in the provision of services such as childcare and recycling. The absence of an insistence on certain standards of equality, democracy and public efficiency – quite a well-developed feature of the GLC's processes of grant giving – meant that the PT-led process of decentralization of resources to community organizations was vulnerable to the encroachment of the neoliberal path of community management, whose destination was usually some form of privatization. [10]

The problems encountered in London and Porto Alegre were not necessarily insurmountable. Both processes had developed a certain capacity to innovate through trial and error. But in both cases the rise of market-driven politics closed the space for further development of these experiences of democracy-driven rather than market-led reform.

In the case of the GLC, its abolition took place during the period when the neoliberal right was at its most triumphant. Moreover, some sections of the left, including those whose visions of socialism had been tied to the fortunes of the Soviet Union (or, like Tony Blair, had no vision of socialism whatsoever) became entirely defensive, turning into naïve new converts to the capitalist market as the source of efficiency and 'modernization'. As a result, they only weakly defended, and sometimes attacked, the innovations of the GLC. Certainly, they worked to delete its memory rather than to learn from it.

In the case of Porto Alegre, the defeat of the PT in 2004 was a result of many factors, including a certain loss of direction in the local PT and disappointment with the early years of the Lula government as it succumbed to the pressures of the IMF.

It is significant that the full development of both experiments was curtailed by the impact on parties

of labour of the global momentum of neoliberalism, for their importance is that they illustrated in practice a direct answer to market-driven politics. This politics did so in the way it began to develop a non-market alternative that responded to severe democratic failings in public administration, while still recognizing the importance of the state in the redistribution of wealth and the provision of essential services and infrastructure. Whereas the conversion of social democracy to the neoliberal paradigm involved unleashing the capitalist market as if it could be the source of new energy needed to reform routinized and unresponsive state bodies, the early PT and the radical left in London (and elsewhere) looked to forms of democracy that released the creativity lying dormant among the mass of people as the source of new energy for the management of public resources for the public good.

***“Whereas the conversion of social democracy to the neoliberal paradigm involved unleashing the capitalist market as if it could be the source of new energy needed to reform routinized and unresponsive state bodies, the early PT and the radical left in London (and elsewhere) looked to forms of democracy that released the creativity lying dormant among the mass of people.”***

The attempted obliteration of this option, through the pervasive ideological imposition of the dichotomy of an old statist left versus the dynamism and entrepreneurialism of the capitalist market, was in effect a continuation of cold war mentalities into the twenty-first century. Left alternatives are underdeveloped precisely because of the successes of this obliteration.

But when we look for the sources from which a transformative politics can now grow, it is important to recall that the transformative alternative did not entirely disappear. This was seen in Brazil, if not in the PT itself, then through highly politicized movements and networks such as the *Movimento Sans Terre*. While even in the UK it survived in spirit in various campaigns, from the one that defeated Thatcher’s poll tax to the more recent ones of, for example, UK Uncut against corporate tax evasion, combining creative forms of direct action with the research of committed academics, journalists and trade union whistle-blowers, followed up by supportive MPs.

## **Struggles to transform the state**

Here, I want to reflect especially on the many movements and initiatives that undertook struggles against privatization since the mid-1990s. Many of these were also struggles to transform the state. There are enough examples from across the world to suggest that these indicate a significant development among public sector unions and wider alliances, especially at a local level but with national and international support. [\[11\]](#)

These experiences indicate a positive response to the breakdown of the division of labour characteristic of social democratic labour movements, as noted earlier, between trade unionism as concerned with industrial relations and the employment contract and parties taking responsibility for wider political issues, including the welfare state.

Here, in the refusal of trade unions to accept the commodification of public services and utilities, and at the same time voice the reassertion and renewal of the goal of maximizing public benefit rather than profit, unions are directly taking responsibility as citizens for what was the sphere of representative politics.

In a sense, they are defending the earlier use of the state to redistribute and to decommodify; but they are also opening up a dynamic of renewal and transformation of those non-market relationships. What is it that makes these struggles transformative, going beyond defending existing relationships and initiating a new dynamic that releases the creative capacities and powers of

working people?

The key development here is that trade union organizations grounded in specific workplaces, and cooperating with associations of users and communities, have begun to struggle around the use values produced by their members, rather than simply replicating the relations of commodity production and bargaining over the price and conditions of labour.

Indeed, to win the struggle for public services they have turned their organization from being a means of representation and mobilization to also being a way of democratically socializing the knowledge that workers – and users – already have in fragmented form of the service they deliver or use, and gaining a full view of how the service could be developed and improved. They are in effect making overcoming of the alienated nature of labour a part of their struggle to defend but also realize the full potential of the public sphere of non-commodified provision.

### **Political organisation in transition**

The examples in this essay all illustrate a transition from socialist change as centred around the state to an understanding of transformative power organized in society. Government – in these cases, local government – remained important, not as the prime driver of change but as exercising specific powers – of redistribution and socialization of land and finance, and the defence of public services.

These are powers that can support the capacities of self-organized citizens to resist and transform, both in ways that they can be used against capital and in ways that can facilitate self-organization and support democratic and decentralized management of public resources, including as ‘commons’. What can we conclude about the implications of this transition for the nature of political organization?

We have had a glimpse through these examples of the GLC, Porto Alegre and transformative resistance to privatization, of the multiplicity of forms of political organization and initiative, in which the objective of political representation and/or government office is only one part of the process of change.

The concept of the ‘political’ has, over the past four decades or so, gained the broader meaning of concern with transforming power relations throughout society. Many of the initiatives which are, in this sense, political more often than not focus on a particular site of social relations but do so with a wider vision and cluster of values in mind.

An aspect of this broader interpretation of politics is the way that these activities are increasingly creating alternatives in the present which not only illustrate the future they are working for but also seek to open up a further dynamic of change. In this respect we made a comparison with the innovative strategic thinking of Andre Gorz in the mid-1960s; but in thinking now about political organization, a contrast will help to identify a further feature of the present transition. The organizational dimension of the struggle has changed considerably since Gorz’s time.

For many reasons, involving both the political defeats of traditional organizations of labour, the socially devastating impact of neoliberal economics and also radical changes in technology and the organization of production, we face extreme forms of fragmentation and dispersion.

In effect, the problem of creating prefigurative change in the present with a dynamic towards future change is as much about ourselves creating new forms of self-organization in the present as about

reforms through the state. We can see the practice of this through campaigns around resistance and alternatives to privatization.

We have described how these campaigns aim to achieve changes in the present which also illustrate an alternative future, defending or recovering public provision from takeover by the market, but also making them genuinely public in their organization, not merely their ownership. These campaigns could not rely on the existing organizations of the labour movement. Considerable organizational innovation has been required involving links with communities in which the union is one actor amongst many, and the traditional labour parties have had only a minimum presence. Such campaigns have highlighted the need for the conversion of the union from a means of defensive bargaining to a means of gathering workers' knowledge and taking militant action to transform services in response to users' needs.

### **New forms of communication and understandings of knowledge**

This hybrid of old and new organizational forms, developed and combined for a common purpose, is a widespread pattern producing new organizational forms. [12] Any useful mapping of distinctive features of the transition in organizational forms should include two further features of this multiplicity of political organization.

The first concerns the importance of the means of communication. Organization is always in good part about communication, as well as about decision-making and discipline. The new communication technologies now enable a qualitatively greater variety of means of collaboration. They facilitate means of networked coordination based on common goals and shared values but recognizing a plurality of tactics and organizational forms and therefore not requiring a single centre. [13] Such networked approaches to transformative politics preexisted the new technology but there has been an escalation of possibilities which have in turn expanded our organizational imaginations, as well as producing new problems.

The second related feature concerns knowledge. The spread of dispersed yet often connected and collaborative forms of organization also creates favourable conditions for realizing the political potential of the plural understandings of knowledge developed in practice by movements in the 1970s, especially the women's movement and radical trade union organizations and also, from different origins, in the traditions of popular education and grassroots political organizing in many parts of the South.

The shift from a state-centred understanding of change to one focused on developing transformative power in society is associated with these radical changes in our understandings of knowledge. The movements of the 1970s asserted in their practice the creative, knowing capacity of so-called 'ordinary' people, against both the 'scientific management' of the Fordist factory and the centralized, exclusively professional knowledge of the Fabian social democratic state. Their understandings of the importance of experiential as well as theoretical knowledge, tacit as well as codified, underpinned the first phase of thinking about participatory democracy in these earlier decades of rebellion and a so-called 'excess of democracy'.

This also alters the whole context of political programmes, leading to a far wider, more participatory process of the development of ideas than traditionally has taken place within political parties, emphasizing alternatives in practice as well as, indeed often as the basis for, reforms required from the state.

In many ways, the functions associated with a political party are now carried out by many



autonomous actors sharing common values. To think through the implications of this complexity for political organization it is important to distinguish different kinds or levels of political activity. For example, the focused kind of unity required for an election campaign is not what is required for helping to build a network of social centres or alliances of community groups and trade unions, where spreading information and facilitating diversity according to local circumstances will be more appropriate. It makes sense for the question of organizational form to be related to the purpose of the activity.

## **New forms of politics and organisation**

Moreover, there is no necessity for different activities and organizations that share common values be part of a single political framework. There is a wide variety of ways in which common values can be communicated and shared.

There remain, however, many unresolved issues. One is the problem with which we began: that of representation within the political system, to redistribute public resources and redeploy state power. This is a purpose which again requires distinctive organizational forms. To develop these, we need to return to our theoretical sketch of a critical approach to representation based on citizens not as atomistic individuals with a formal, abstract political equality, but as citizens embedded in concrete, and at present, unequal social relationships, as workers, as dispossessed in numerous different ways, as women, as ethnic minorities, disabled and so on. What strategies and organizational forms best 'make present' and gain political resources for the struggles to overcome these inequalities and sources of exploitation?

We noted how actually existing parliamentary democracy effectively tends to occlude and reinforce inequalities of wealth and power unless directly challenged. This is a process intensified by conceding key decisions to opaque and unaccountable national and international bodies; and, as a consequence, a depoliticization of most of the central decisions affecting the future of society.

This trend is often associated with neoliberal globalization, but it is only a continuation of a process endemic in liberal democracy: leaving key issues concerning the future of the poor in the hands of the capitalist market; as we saw in the past history of Porto Alegre, the future of the residents of the favelas in the hands of the elite of landowning families; of inner city London communities in the hands of speculative property developers; and of public services in the hands of predatory corporations.

The common feature of the counter strategies attempted in London and Porto Alegre was one based on municipal collaboration with those struggling directly against these inequalities: the organizations of the poor in the favelas through the participatory budget, the inner city of communities in London through direct involvement in formulating and implementing the council planning process and support for their proposals against the pressures of landowners and property developers, respectively.

Organizationally, they entailed a form of political representation based on an electoral mandate and accountable for its implementation to those citizens with specific sources of power, knowledge and organization necessary - but without sufficient politic support - to carry through the change.

I have argued that political representation in such contexts involves a clash between two entirely different understandings and forms of organization of political power. Organizational forms are needed, therefore, for the purpose of making present in the political system struggles in society. These struggles reinforce the electoral mandate by actively claiming and elaborating the

commitments made. Such forms of political representation are up against entrenched institutions which take as given and as beyond their responsibility the inequalities and problems against which these struggles and the electoral mandate are directed.

The kind of organization whose purpose it is to carry through this social, unavoidably conflictual, form of representation has to be organized to serve the struggles and movements whose demands and needs it is pursuing through the political process. This is much more complex and harder than being 'a voice'. If parties are understood as those organizations seeking political representation and government office, then we are talking here about a political party. But it is a party - or parties - of a very distinctive kind (of which we have experienced so very few).

For a start it would, as should be clear from our previous evoking of the multiplicity of forms of political organizations for radical social change, be part of a constellation of organizations, outside of political institutions sharing more or less explicitly common values and goals.

Secondly, these new kinds of parties would effectively be serving within the framework of a commitment set out by the electoral mandate, developed through the participation of this wider network or constellation. Forms of accountability and transparency for the work of representatives in implementing this commitment would be central to the organizational character of the party.

Thirdly, the party organization would necessarily be double-sided with its 2013 members, including those involved in the work of representation, involved in building these extra-parliamentary organizations of transformative power. As we saw with Syriza and others, they would be involved not especially as leaders but as fellow activists, contributing to and sharing their particular sources of power and knowledge. Such a new kind of party would require specific organizational forms to counter the pressures drawing representatives into the flytrap of parliamentary politics, with all its tendencies towards a separate political class.

We saw in both London and the GLC and Brazil and the PT, that the inability of the two parties to continue to build up the presence of social movements, and open up state resources for social struggles, lay in the weakness (in the case of the Labour Party) or weakening (in the case of the PT) of the parties' organized links with society. There are lessons here that Syriza could well bear in mind. Political parties are shaped in part by movements that were decisive in their origins: for the PT, the movements for democracy and equality against dictatorship and oligarchic rule; and for the London Labour Party of the early 1980s, by the maturation of the movements of the late 1960s and 1970s.

Parties are also constrained by the system they are working in. With Syriza, perhaps, we have one of the first parties to be shaped predominantly, though not exclusively, by the movements that have developed to resist neoliberal capitalism in the face of a political class completely disconnected from the mass of people. One of the 29 women MPs that make up a third of Syriza's parliamentary group, Theano Fotiou, described the overriding purpose that the structure of the new party must fulfil: 'It must be a structure for the people to always be connected to the party, even if they are not members of the party, to be criticizing the party, bringing new experience to the party'. [\[14\]](#)

They created a coalition to which nearly two million people felt connected in spite of - maybe partly because of - a determined attempt to whip up fear. Syriza arrived at this through much learning both from fellow Greeks and from political experiences across Europe. It is clear that as we strengthen our continent-wide capacities to refuse austerity and organize behind the non-reformist reform of a democratic and equal Europe, we will learn a lot from them.

My thanks to Roy Bhaskar, Vishwas Satgar, Jane Shallice and Steve Platt for helpful discussions and

suggestions on earlier drafts, to Red Pepper and Transnational Institute companions for their constantly stimulating collaboration, and to Marco Berlinguer for many discussions in the process of writing a joint book that includes among many themes, those of this essay.

## Hilary Wainwright

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### P.S.

\* From the Socialist Register 2013 (Merlin, London 2012), pp. 137-158. Posted online by the TNI: <http://www.tni.org/paper/transformative-power-political-organisation-transition>

\* Hilary Wainwright is a leading researcher and writer on the emergence of new forms of democratic accountability within parties, movements and the state. She is the driving force and editor behind Red Pepper, a popular British new left magazine, and has documented countless examples of resurgent democratic movements from Brazil to Britain and the lessons they provide for progressive politics.

As well as TNI fellow, she is also Senior Research Associate at the International Centre for Participation Studies at the Department for Peace Studies, University of Bradford, UK and Senior Research Associate at International Centre for Participation Studies', Bradford University. She has also been a visiting Professor and Scholar at the University of California, Los Angeles; Havens Center, University of Wisconsin, Madison and Todai University, Tokyo. Her books include Reclaim the State: Experiments in Popular Democracy (Verso/TNI, 2003) and Arguments for a New Left: Answering the Free Market Right (Blackwell, 1993).

Wainwright founded the Popular Planning Unit of the Greater London Council during the Thatcher years, and was convenor of the new economics working group of the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly from 1989 to 1994.

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## Footnotes

[1] Personal interview, Athens, 9 July 2012.

[2] Personal interview, Athens, 9 July 2012

[3] André Gorz, Strategy for Labor: A Radical Proposal, Boston: Beacon Press, 1964, p. 7. Gorz explains non-reformist or 'structural' reforms as reforms conceived 'not in terms of what is possible within the framework of a given system and administration, but in view of what should be made possible in terms of human needs and demands'

[4] For this analysis of the radical potential of political representation as 'making present' see Raymond Williams, Resources of Hope, London: Verso, 1989.

[5] See, for example, Peter Gowan, 'The Origins of the Administrative Elite', New Left Review, 167(March/April), 1987, pp. 4-34. And on the role of Labour's leadership: Ralph Miliband, Parliamentary Socialism, London: Merlin, 1961.

[6] Leo Panitch and Colin Leys, *The End of Parliamentary Socialism: From New Left to New Labour*, London: Verso, 1997.

[7] Public managers are known as 'officers', in line with the original military model of public service.

[8] In the early years of the PT government about 10 per cent of the local membership of the PT came to be employed by the Municipality. The city of Porto Alegre has 600 government appointed positions, a common pattern in Brazilian local government and something the PT presumably did not challenge because it strengthened their control over the state apparatus. But it does produce its own problems. See Sérgio Baierle, 'The Porto Alegre Thermidor? Brazil's "Participatory Budget" at the Crossroad', *The Socialist Register* 2003, London: Merlin Press, 2002.

[9] Baierle, 'The Porto Alegre Thermidor'. Also see Hilary Wainwright, *Reclaim the State: Experiments in Popular Democracy*, Updated Edition, London: Seagull Books, 2009, pp. 140-50.

[10] See Evelina Dagnino, 'Citizenship in Latin America: An Introduction', *Latin American Perspectives*, 30(2), 2003, pp. 211-25. She refers here to the 'perverse confluence' between, on the one hand, 'the participatory project constructed around the extension of citizenship and the deepening of democracy and, on the other hand, the project of a minimal state, which requires the shrinking of its social responsibilities and the gradual abandonment of its role as guarantor of rights'.

[11] See D. Hall, E. Lobina and R. de La Motte, 'Public Resistance to Privatization in Water and Electricity', in D. Chavez, ed., *Beyond the Market: The Future of Public Services*, Amsterdam: Transnational Institute, 2005, pp. 187-95; M. Novelli, 'Globalisations, social movement unionism and new internationalisms: The role of strategic learning in the transformation of the municipal workers union of EMCALI', *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 2(2), 2004, 161-90; S. Van Niekerk, 'Privatization: A Working Alternative', *South Africa Labour Bulletin*, 22(5), 1998, pp. 24-7; H. Wainwright, 'Transformative Resistance: The Role of Labour and Trade Union Alternatives to Privatisation', in David A. Macdonald and Greg Ruiters, eds., *Alternatives to Privatisation: Public Options for Essential Services*, London: Routledge, 2012; H. Wainwright and M. Little, *Public Service Reform... But Not As We Know It*, Brighton: Picnic Publishers, 2009.

[12] We have seen it in campaigns in the UK against tax evasion. We have also seen it with Syriza in its campaign against the troika's Memorandum, as they combine work to build the movement of the squares with organizing for government. The successful campaign against water privatization in Italy was again a hybrid of local campaigners for the commons organized through autonomous groups converging for a common campaign with trade unions, especially locally, municipal political representatives and so on. It is evident, too, in some of the most effective transnational networks such as 'Our World is not for Sale', which played a central part in the campaigns to expose and block the workings of the World Trade Organization. It is made up of a hybrid of trade unions, social movement, organizations of workers in the 'informal economy' and radical research and campaigning organizations from across the world. The global, continental and national convergences of movements and smaller organizations and initiatives through the World Social Forum processes spread and further cross-fertilized this hybrid political networking.

[13] For a useful and empirically grounded analysis of recent examples see: Marianne Maeckelbergh, 'Horizontal Democracy Now: from alterglobalization to occupation', *Interface*, 4(1), 2012, pp. 207-34. 14 Personal interview, Athens, 3 July 2012.

[14] Personal interview, Athens, 3 July 2012.