



SYMPOSIUM: CORPORATE POWER AND LOCAL DEMOCRACY: CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES AND STRATEGIES

Building Dual Power for a Symbiotic Future

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Abstract

Radical democracy is a needed alternative to the formal representative democracy of Western societies where viable choices are constrained by the wealth and power of the ruling class. Dual power is a bottom-up strategy of building organic institutions of popular power within civil society instead of transient, disempowering electoral coalitions. These institutions of popular power can then come together, develop, and expand their own forms and spheres of governance to transcend the limits of neoliberalism and capitalism itself. It all starts where people live and work and with the alienation and everyday struggles of people everywhere.

.Keywords: Dual power; Popular institutions; Peoples' assemblies

¹ <https://www.symbiosis-revolution.org/research-collective/>.



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Radical democracy holds hope for our shared future.² The seemingly spontaneous rise of the Yellow Vest movement in France, its endurance and vitality, and its deep popular support, show that broad, leaderless, seismic social movements continue to emerge amid our present alienation and political vacuum. The Yellow Vests have clearly advanced European horizontalism, yet have so far been unable to put forward an alternative program or convene a national assembly of assemblies with truly broad participation.³ This contribution explores bottom-up, dual power strategies to harness the latent potential for radical egalitarian and ecological social change in four parts: the present setting, our conceptual approach, a view of urban organizing, and a coda. We write as members of Symbiosis, an organizing network that has developed a dual power strategy and has issued a call for a congress of North American radical democracy organizations in Detroit this September.⁴

The Present Moment

Across the world the powerless are cramped and squeezed more than ever as ecological and social disasters escalate. Despite some countries seeing recent renewed left-wing electoral movements, last century's social-democratic achievements have largely fractured, and neoliberalism has spawned authoritarian reactionary movements all around the world. Brexit in the UK, Trump in the United States, Orbán in Hungary, and the Yellow Vests are but a few recent reflections of the depth of popular discontent. Add Duterte in the Philippines and Bolsonaro in Brazil and a distinct impression of growing global authoritarian convergence emerges.⁵ The last 10 years are filled with disturbing resonances with the period leading up to World War II, with the apocalyptic backdrop of rising levels of greenhouse gases and biodiversity collapse.

This period of widespread rejection of conventional politics presents a potential opportunity for popular democracy. But the Left has so far been unable to mobilize people around an alternative

² We wish to thank Ben Manski and Jackie Smith, editors of JWSR, and Brian Tokar for their helpful comments and suggestions.

³ McAuley (2019) provides one of the best overviews of the origins of the *Gilets Jaunes* we've seen. It was not widely reported, but an assembly of assembly of local assemblies was held at Sorcy-Saint-Martin, near Commercy, on January 27 and 28, 2019 and issued a call (Reporterre, 2019) to action. One result of the call were nation-wide actions with the CGT (Mowat, 2019). Another assembly of assemblies has been called for April 4-6 in Saint Nazaire (Patinec, 2019).

⁴ Symbiosis presents its basic ideas regarding dual power in Colón, et al., (2017). The Symbiosis website is [symbiosis-revolution.org](https://www.symbiosis-revolution.org). A series of Symbiosis articles and related materials can be found at: <https://www.symbiosis-revolution.org/resources>. The call for the September Congress is at: <https://www.symbiosis-revolution.org/launch/>.

⁵ Riley (2018) provides a comprehensive contrast of Trump's authoritarianism to classical European fascism. See also the *Journal of World-Systems Research* Symposium on "[Populism in the World-System](https://www.jwsr.pitt.edu/ojs/index.php/jwsr/issue/view/73)" (Volume 24 (2)) <http://jwsr.pitt.edu/ojs/index.php/jwsr/issue/view/73>.

to exclusionary populism. Without a pre-existing infrastructure of grassroots institutions—neighborhood assemblies, workers councils, tenant unions—to absorb and channel popular anger in moments of spontaneous mass mobilization and weave it into the collective self-management of everyday life, such moments of crisis remain mere moments. We as the organized Left have failed to lay the groundwork that can seize on such junctures and fan them into revolutionary mass movements. Instead, we are left with the historical cooptations of social democratic strategies in most countries, or worse, authoritarian states that swallowed the revolutionary movements that brought them to power. As a result, the left has lost the confidence in revolutionary struggle of the people it seeks to empower.

Conceptual Approach

Symbiosis draws inspiration from many sources, including the horizontalist movements of the last 25 years, from the Zapatistas to Occupy (Sitrin and Azzellini, 2014); from popular self-organized responses to natural disasters;⁶ and from Kurdish society in revolutionary Rojava. These movements and many others show the possibility upon we wish to build. The Libertarian Socialist Caucus of the Democratic Socialists of America (LSC) is an allied group with a similar program and strategy.⁷

The ideas expressed here are inspired by the Symbiosis project but may not, in their particulars, represent the views of all Symbiosis members. This paper is informed by the philosophy of Social Ecology and, with it, a critical appreciation the work of its founding theoretician, Murray Bookchin.⁸ He used various terms to describe his anarchism, such as communalism and libertarian municipalism. Social Ecology fosters an understanding of the relationship between social hierarchy and ecological destruction. World-systems analysis offers a strongly complementary focus on the effects of global market forces and their social infrastructure.⁹

Dual power refers to a bifurcation of political authority between the democratic and self-directed institutions of the broad working class and the governing institutions of capitalist society, leading to a struggle for popular legitimacy. This challenge will arise directly from the power of

⁶ See Solnit (2009) and Out of the Woods Collective (2014).

⁷ The DSA Libertarian Socialist Caucus website is: <https://dsa-lsc.org/>.

⁸ Bookchin died in 2006. Critical assessments of his work include White (2008) and Marshall (2010).

⁹ It is interesting, in this respect, to note that Abdullah Öcalan, imprisoned PKK leader, and convert to Bookchinist ideas for organizing society, also considers Wallerstein as foundational to his thinking. See, for example, Peters (2017:8), “During his lengthy imprisonment Öcalan significantly changed his political position upon reading Murray Bookchin, Immanuel Wallerstein and Fernand Braudel.”

popular organizations as alternative governing institutions which can supplant the present system. In Bookchin's conception of dual power, its primary institutional form is decision-making by popular assemblies. These assemblies are intended to form vast federations and federations of federations, so as to hollow out and overthrow the capitalist state.¹⁰ This could take place through a revolutionary clash between the two or through the successful seizure of state power through elections—power that could then be devolved into our institutions of direct participatory democracy.¹¹ In either case, entrenched capitalist interests will fight back with all resources at their disposal. Only with a breadth and depth of popular support can the democratic authority of the 99% be elevated into the governance of our whole society.

In Symbiosis, our goal is to develop a connective tissue between local dual power initiatives all across the North American continent, to share resources and experiences, coordinate activities, and wield a common platform for maximum visibility that can seed new community organizations where they do not yet exist. At our September congress, we intend to co-create a permanent structure for this kind of organizing beyond the local, as an institutional nucleus for our wider movement.

In the coming years we face the monumental task of assembling this architecture of real democracy that can unite the 99% in a vibrant movement for our common humanity and dissolve the oppressions of racism, patriarchy, capitalism, and the destruction of our common home, while serving as an effective and active defense against reaction. Rather than pour support into national political parties, send money to issue organizations, and delegate political activity to others, we seek to foster a culture of active participation that can democratize all areas of everyday life.

The complexity of this process and the diversity of skills required will likely call forth new structures of popular organization. Organic civil society must have space for all. Building such institutions of real democracy can and must be the route toward cementing a coalition of the great majority.

The Urban Struggle

There is a clear progressive trend in U.S. urban politics. On the surface we see charismatic urban politicians articulating left-leaning visions, perhaps at the limits of what is considered politically acceptable, though at the same time cutting deals with local (and supralocal) power brokers that may compromise that vision (see, e.g. Gonzalez 2017). There is good reason to believe

¹⁰ These federations of federations might constitute or send representation to global worker institutions such as those envisioned by Amin (2018).

¹¹ Bookchin, it should be noted, was insistent that such an electoral strategy could only be viable at the municipal level. See, for example, Bookchin (1995) and Bookchin (2000).

that significant segments of the population are even more left than might be thought based on the rhetoric and programs of national and local urban progressive politicians. In contrast, cities themselves have become sites of global profit accumulation, through real estate and urban development, giving capitalists another local foothold to strangle representative democracy.

Organizing for local direct democracy, on the other hand, necessarily brings our communities into conflict with global capital. Ordinary people exercising direct collective control over their housing cannot be reconciled with the interests of landlords and developers. As we escalate the demand for our communal right to a clean environment, we escalate a broad-based class struggle, our democracy against the property rights of polluting industries. Local movements for the common good and for an expanded sphere of democratic self-governance cannot help but collide against the interests of capital.

Even where local movements have been able to wield local power in defense of our communities—such as in the birthplace of fracking, Denton, Texas, where residents successfully banned this destructive practice—we will find ourselves facing off with the power of the state. Texas overrode the will of the people of Denton by forbidding municipalities from instituting any form of local environmental protection beyond state law. The dialectical nature of our victories and capitalism's defensive response will scale these struggles upward. In Bookchin's idea of libertarian municipalism, this looks like the popular seizure of municipal governments through elections, the subsequent devolution of their powers into neighborhood assemblies, and the ultimate contestation for power between the resulting confederation of democratic cities and the nation-state. Other trajectories are also conceivable.¹²

Currently, steps toward dual power take place well below the visible surface in most cities. That will need to change. Electoral politics has long been understood by anarchists to be a trap.¹³ Only when movement organizations have institutionalized sufficient popular power outside of the state can they withstand the associated stresses. Important reforms such ranked choice voting and multimember districts can shift the terrain of electoral politics in our direction.¹⁴ However, electoral politics remains more a place to reflect the strength of dual power than to develop it.

¹² We must act where we see openings to build popular power. Creating space for and devolving authority to local democratic institutions is a priority for many progressive strategists and public policy institutions, see for example, Manski and Dolan (2009).

¹³ Going back at least to Proudhon in 1848 (Marshall 2010:244), Bakunin in 1880 (see Dolgoff (1972:221)), and Albert Parsons in the 1880s (1889:18).

¹⁴ Symbiosis is not opposed to participation in local political contests under the proper circumstances. The struggle in Jackson, Mississippi, recounted in Akuno (2017), provides an important example. In these contexts, electoral reforms can be very important.

Worker and tenant unions and neighborhood assemblies are the primary institutional forms we consider for mass-organizing. Community gardens, squats, time banks, community land trusts, and food and childcare coops are also related possibilities.¹⁵ Various methods, such as power mapping, are frequently advocated to locate organizing projects within the existing ecology of community organizations.¹⁶

This takes a stunningly diverse array of forms in different communities around North America. In Olympia, Washington, a regular citywide people's assembly (Olympia Assembly) has led to the creation of a mutual aid and direct-action program in defense of houseless people, along with a strategy for organizing tenants unions that can both resist landlord predation and serve as containers for face-to-face direct democracy at the apartment level. All of these activities have brought Olympia Assembly and its surrounding local movement ecosystem into direct conflict with the city's development interests and political elites.¹⁷ In Jackson, Mississippi, Cooperation Jackson is cultivating a local solidarity economy that can develop ecologically regenerative means of production in the hands of Mississippi's black working class, alongside a dual power rooted in people's movement assemblies (Acuno 2015). In Oaxaca, Mexico, *Asamblea de los Pueblos Indígenas del Istmo en Defensa de la Tierra y el Territorio* provides a living model of "disaster communism." The community is joining together to rebuild in the aftermath of the September 7 earthquake, while organizing indigenous resistance to the Mexican federal government's megaprojects in the region.¹⁸ In Detroit, Michigan, neighbors have carved out systems of mutual aid and community production across the city's vacant land, with time banks, community gardens, block club councils, and more filling in the gaps of social welfare under conditions of extreme austerity. Organized neighborhoods are fighting back against displacements by the "re-development" subsidized by their own tax dollars and experimenting with community control of land against the vulture capitalists trading bundles of Detroit properties in a global speculative marketplace.¹⁹ While conditions vary dramatically between local contexts, each of these member organizations of Symbiosis illustrate a politics of dual power in action. We are building the new

¹⁵ Further possibilities include approaches like the Human Rights Cities (Smith, 2017) movement to organize to get cities to adopt measures that formally embrace a broad vision of human rights and then to organize around that vision. Smith observes organizing in Pittsburgh.

¹⁶ See, for example, Move to Amend's online guide at <https://movetoamend.org/toolkit/guide-power-mapping>.

¹⁷ Goldman (2018); conversation of one of the authors with Reed Ingalls and Franz O'Carroll, organizers with Olympia Assembly. Franz O'Carroll is an elected member of the Symbiosis Coordinating Committee.

¹⁸ Conversation (interview) between the authors and Mario Castillo Quintero, an organizer and spokesperson for Asamblea, as well as an elected member of the Symbiosis Coordinating Committee.

¹⁹ Guilford (2013) and Brown University (2018).

world in the shell of the old so as to meet human needs in the present system while assembling the power to transform it.

As we build this architecture of a true democratic society from the neighborhood level, we need to be capable of waging a broad-based social struggle against capitalism and the state from beyond the local level. It is with this long-term scope and clarity of vision that Symbiosis is planning its congress in September 2019. We hope that this gathering of delegates from organizations across the movement can successfully launch a confederation capable of carrying this strategy beyond the local.

Conclusion

Symbiosis in biology refers to cooperative interactions between different species. Symbiosis is often a mutually beneficial interaction. In the social context, symbiosis can be understood as an expanded vision of mutual aid.²⁰ Symbiosis in the biological world is rare in comparison to intraspecies cooperation. In a world of alienation from one another and domination across many different axes of difference, symbiosis provides a much-needed model of nonhierarchical cooperation among people with diverse social identities.

Our world seems to be collapsing toward an unstable Orwellian equilibrium, where the powerful will ride out the chaos of their own making, kept safe by their unassailable fortresses, space colonies, and exterminationist fascisms. But within this trend exists a potentiality for radical and emancipatory transformation. We see that people are willing to suffer to make a statement of defiance; that people are willing to act together, to lift one another up, for a better world. Time and time again we have seen powerful and unexpected change. Dedicating ourselves to creating it is our only available choice.

The radical democracy movement today is small relative to its goals. But its method is to catalyze, not lead. Given the unparalleled means of communication currently available; given our improved understanding of what keeps us apart and how we might move closer together; given the increasingly broad diffusion of libertarian socialist values; given the consistent practice of mutual aid through known human history; given all this, and the world we must win, it cannot be folly to act on these deepest beliefs without calculating the odds of success. Failure to try is unimaginable.

²⁰ Kropotkin wrote *Mutual Aid* (1955) both as a biologist and an anarchist. Its survey of intra-species cooperation in the natural world was a direct rebuke to biologists, including Thomas A. Huxley, and social Darwinists, including Herbert Spencer, who claimed Darwin had revealed a world of unremitting individual struggle for survival. Its systematic survey of mutual aid in human history built on this natural history of cooperation and demonstrated a radical undervaluation of the importance of self-organization in human history, an undervaluation that, sadly, persists to this day. Kropotkin did not study symbiotic interactions.

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