

## Book reviews

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### **P@otest Inc.: The Corporatization of Activism**

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Peter Dauvergne and Genevieve LeBaron, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2014,  
206 pages, ISBN-1 3:978-0-7456-6949-6(pb), £15.99 (stg)/€18.80.

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'Where did it go?' *P@otest Inc.* offers some explanations for the decline of 1960s and 1970s radical activism. The major culprit is the corporatization of activism. This seeps in through many channels, including the funding of social change organizations by business corporations, partnerships with multinational corporations, and board members from that world. In addition, many formerly radical groups can survive only by transformation into organizations that look and act much like business corporations. Both large donors and government tax-exempt status require a hierarchical and business-like structure. Furthermore, many become huge multinational corporations themselves: 'the revenue and assets of Greenpeace, Amnesty [International] and W[orld] W[ildlife] F[und]... reach into the hundreds of millions of dollars' (p. 113). Partnerships of note include that of the Sierra Club with 'Chesapeake Energy, one of the world's largest gas drillers and a promoter of "fracking"' (p. 32); the Environmental Defense Fund with Shell, DuPont, and Dow; and the World Wildlife Fund with Coca-Cola (p. 2).

The authors find other causes of deradicalization in 'securitizing dissent', or the increased surveillance, infiltration, raids, and arrests with violence of protesters; and in the privatization of social life. These constraints are likewise corporate-based; the authors imply, but do not state directly, that 'government is the executive committee of the ruling class', so that policies such as militarizing the police or promoting suburbs and consumerism are derived from the political power of business. Although the authors are Canadian and British, they examine protest on a larger scale, including the USA, Western Europe, and the Middle East.

*P@otest Inc.* performs a valuable service by describing the traditional bases of radical activism, particularly politics based on pre-existing bonds of community, church, unions, and neighbourhood organizations. They also make cogent observations about the disincentives to radical activism: on the one hand, government repression, which includes not only the militarization of

the local police at protests, but also ordinances restricting protest areas and requirements that demonstrators provide insurance. On the other hand, suburbanization, car ownership, and indoor leisure activities, such as TV and computer, have softened up many potential radicals. Block parties are fading, but even where they exist, they no longer unite people of common employment and politics; consequently, talk of sports and weather is favoured.

Dauvergne and LeBaron see our increasingly individualistic society encouraging the equation of responsible consumerism and political action. Thus, movements for social change are replaced by 'compassionate consumption' of hybrid cars, fair trade products, pink ribbons, etc. They remind us of the importance of discovering what might be, in our era, incentives to sustained activism for change. We could also use more information about why the activists of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s were motivated, despite their access to TV, cars, and suburbs. There are generational and life-cycle factors in the ebb and flow of activism. Injustice, exploitation, violent senseless wars, and devastation of the earth are probably worse today; in any case, we are much more aware of what is happening. If the traditional media don't, the internet tells all. So, why so little action now?

Certainly, the 'corporatization' of activism is part of the explanation. However, another factor is that the causes that had some positive results, e.g. civil rights and the greening of local governments, were no threat to the elite. On the contrary, they benefitted from progress in these areas and supported moderate activist organizations. Those challenging imperialism, war, globalization, and corporate predation made little progress and understandably became discouraged.

The authors would have had a stronger case if they had distinguished among non-governmental organizations. Some were corporate affiliated and/or very moderate from the outset, e.g. the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, World Wildlife Fund, Environmental Defense Fund, Urban League, and CARE. Others were created or crucially supported by the national security apparatuses of capitalist nations.

The political territory throughout the world which is principally prized and sought by the C[entral] I[intelligence] A[gency] is what it usually calls the NCL (the Non-Communist Left). Its policy is to infiltrate—and, if possible, take over the leadership of—moderate reform movements to prevent them from moving further leftwards, and in this way to safeguard American interests—not excluding the economic ones. Hence its field of interest has a useful overlap with the catchment-area of foundations.

(Whitaker, 1974, 168)

Even today, [RootsAction \(18 May 2014\)](#), an internet-based protest organization, is challenging the inclusion on the board of Human Rights Watch

(HRW) of CIA personnel and NATO directors. However, HRW has always been an instrument of Western foreign policy, having evolved from the Helsinki Accords.

It is more important to discover the road to moderation of once radical organizations, those few survivors who had original goals challenging capitalism, imperialism, and war. One such is the North American Congress on Latin America, another, on a different scale, is the African National Congress, or many socialist parties of the world, for that matter.

Here what is pertinent, yet missing from *P@otest Inc.*, is the historical context of deradicalization and co-optation. In this, the philanthropic foundations have been seminal. The critical study of the large early 20th century foundations began in 1915 with a U.S. Congressional investigation, popularly called the Walsh Commission. Frank Walsh, the primary investigator, stated: 'Mr. Rockefeller could find no better insurance for his hundreds of millions than to invest one of them in subsidizing all agencies that make for social change and progress'. Two more recent critical works that bear on the authors' arguments are Robert Arno's (1980) anthology, *Philanthropy and Cultural Imperialism*, and *Foundations and Public Policy: The Mask of Pluralism* (Roelofs, 2003). Before business corporations created foundations to fund political NGOs, the philanthropic foundations, the 'soft cops' of the corporate world, created, steered, and/or financed protest organizations. Today both types of foundations are powerful members of coalitions that may include overt and covert government departments, U.N. agencies, EU committees, the NATO funding arm, universities, billionaires, celebrities, and non-governmental organizations. See, for example, the World Resources Institute, or PACT. All over the world people seeking change, who also need a salary and materials, can find many helpers, but they must pay the price of being reasonable, pragmatic, and non-threatening to the system.

Dauvergne and LeBaron have a strong argument that 'NGO fundraising and institutional needs have steadily channeled activist energies into supporting market "solutions", from cause marketing to for-profit certification. . . . Activism of this kind is legitimizing capitalism and delegitimizing alternatives . . .' (p. 138). On the other hand, they note, the reaction against institutionalizing, in the form of 'open space' organizing, decentralizing, localizing, and avoiding collective statements and actions (as at the World Social Forum) also weakens the possibility of making any serious social change.

On the larger issue, it is not clear what is to be done. Some suggest that the only feasible activity is the creation of 'counterculture' institutions, such as the communitarian societies of 19th century US. Most were socialist and pacifist, but they did not stop wars or retard robber baron capitalism. Can such communities be more than a safety valve, keeping idealists busy and employed?

On a less crucial matter, far more study of the nature and power of the ‘non-profit’ sector is required. The media look kindly on these organizations, although many are ‘fronts’. Few scholars dissect them; there are not funds for critical studies. Self-funded scholars incur the wrath of their philanthropized universities—even the public ones in the US are increasingly funded this way. There are many ‘think tanks’ that celebrate foundations and philanthropy. A few of the radical ones have occasional studies of these organizations, but there is no physical community of researchers with the particular mission of looking closely, from a left-wing perspective, at these increasingly powerful and unaccountable agents in local, national, and international politics.

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## International Community Organising: Taking Power, Making Change

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In the West, community organizing has attracted considerable attention since the election to the US Presidency of Barack Obama—famously a community organizer himself. In my own country, the UK, it has been embraced by both the coalition government and the leading opposition party, with the former funding a national programme to build an army of 5000 organizers. As an approach that is associated with conflict and challenge, this may be surprising, but perhaps its appeal to politicians lies in its proven ability to mobilize large