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Troublemaker: an Exploration of Praxis in Leftist Political Theory

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Troublemaker: An Exploration of Praxis in Leftist Political Theory

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Introduction

In February 1919, workers across nearly all sectors in Seattle, Washington went on a

general strike.[1] The strike lasted for five days, and in that time, the workers ran the city. They

negotiated with city officials to keep the municipal light plant running, organized trash pick-up,

determined milk drop-off, and worked with pharmacists to make sure people got their medicines.

The workers served the city on their own terms.

The general strike was led primarily by leftist organizers who held membership in both

the International Workers of the World and their labor union,[2] and it is a phenomenal example

of an action that changed Seattle's economic and political landscape. The goal of the Seattle

strikers was to meaningfully change the economic circumstances and quality of life for the

working class. Today, many leftists work to not only toward that goal, but also towards the

destruction of all systems of oppression, such as racism, ableism, homophobia, and more. This

work must be undertaken simultaneously because systems of oppression are intrinsically linked

to and are reinforced by capitalism. However, the path towards dismantling capitalism and

oppression is unclear; it raises questions about how to grow a movement, which tactics to use,

and what to do with power once earned. Lenin summed up this question when he asked, "what is

to be done?"[3] My answer to Lenin's question is that in order to build a better world, leftists must

create an intersectional mass movement via political education, mutual aid, and a variety of

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[1] Kathy Ferguson, "Creating a City to Resist the State: The Seattle General Strike of 1919," in *Theory & Event* 22, no. 4 (October2019): 911.

[2] Ferguson, 913.

[3] Vladimir Lenin, "What Is to Be Done?" in *Selected Works,* trans. Joe Fineberg and George Hanna (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961), 347.

organizing tactics. These elements are interconnected: it is through the political education and mutual aid efforts that build the foundation so that all other tactics are able to be successful.

In this introduction, I will briefly discuss class and class consciousness, and offer a discussion of Gramsci's war of position and war of maneuver. I will then use Gramsci's war of position and war of maneuver to contextualize the other tactics examined in this paper. First, class. As Georg Lukács wrote in *History and Class Consciousness,* Marx never provided a definition for class.[4] Perhaps he came closest in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,* where he wrote that "millions of families live under economic conditions of existence that divide their mode of life, their interests and their culture from those of other classes and put them in hostile contrast to the latter . ."[5] But Marx's definition was unfortunately reductive: he did not address the ways other systems of oppression, such as colonialism, racism, sexism, homophobia, and more, are entwinned with and uphold capitalism and change an individual's experience of class.

Therefore, class consciousness must reflect this understanding. In *Marxism and Intersectionality,* Ashley J. Bohrer described the work undertaken by a number of black women who were describing theirs and others' oppression through a lens of gender, race and class decades before Kimberlé Crenshaw developed the theory of intersectionality[6]. Included in Bohrer's work was Louise Thompson, a black woman who belonged to the Communist Party

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[4] Georg Luckács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone. (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1971), 46.

[5] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker. (New York: Norton, 1972), 608.

[6] Ashley Bohrer, *Marxism and Intersectionality: Race, Gender, Class and Sexuality Under Contemporary Capitalism.* (New York City, NY: Columbia University Press, 2020), 32.

and contributed to the party's journal[7]. In April of 1936, Thompson wrote an analysis of domestic labor, showing the similarities of her work in 1936 to pre-Emancipation slavery. Bohrer wrote that Thompson captured the exploitation she faced as a worker, a woman, and as a black person.[8]

Another example of fully realized class consciousness is shown in a letter Huey P Newton published in a 1970 issue of *The Black Panther*, arguing for the recognition of the women's and gay liberation movements[9]. In doing so, he recognized both groups were experiencing oppression in connection with capitalism. By recognizing shared oppression, organizers are able to illustrate the ways that marginalized groups sometimes face similar struggles and can support one another.

Lastly, in this paper, I am framing my argument with Antonio Gramsci's ideas of war of position and war of maneuver. War of position, as Gramsci described in *The Prison Notebooks*, involves action that engage in a cultural struggle, which serve to strengthen leftist movements, and prepare them for more intense actions.[10] Gramsci wrote that boycotts are an example war of position. Next, a war of maneuver is a more direct and confrontational approach to gain power. Armed struggles against the state would be included in a war of maneuver, as would strikes.[11]

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[7] Bohrer, *Marxism and Intersectionality,* 46.

[8] Bohrer, *Marxism and Intersectionality,* 47.

[9] Huey Newton, "A Letter from Huey to the Revolutionary Brothers and Sisters About the Women's Liberation and Gay Liberation Movements" *The Black Panther.* 1970.

[10] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks.* (London: ElecBook 1999). 481.

[11] Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks,* 481.

Political Education

In this section of my work, I will provide various theorists' discussions of class consciousness raising efforts, viewing this tactic as a war of position. If undertaken seriously, political education has the power to awaken a community, so community members understand their own oppression and role within society. This education also serves as a way to fuel their desire to change their circumstances. Multiple theorists provided ideas about how to undertake this work, including Antonio Gramsci, Vladimir Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg, and Romand Coles.

Antonio Gramsci provided some practical suggestions for raising consciousness in *Prison Notebooks*, a collection of essays he wrote while jailed by the Italian fascist regime in the 1920s and 1930s. His first suggestion was simple: leftists should repeat their arguments consistently until those arguments are accepted and understood.[12] His second suggestion was to develop the intellectual level of the populace by producing intellectuals from the proletariat class.[13] Gramsci believed this to be the more important step, as he argued that an individual who was able to develop their own intellectual capacity would also raise the capacity of their communities. Both of these practices would increase class consciousness: repetition allows individuals to grow in their understanding of theory and in their own place within systems. The development of the organic intellectual is certainly more complicated, but also more valuable. As a community member, the organic intellectual is familiar with how to best communicate with those around them and can provide location or experience-specific examples of systematic oppression and exploitation. Just as Gramsci stated, this allows the intellectual to raise the levels of their entire community and pushes against the idea that knowledge is only for the few.

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[12] Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks,* 334.

[13] Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks,* 342.

Vladimir Lenin proposed a different solution in *What is to be Done?* In the 1902 pamphlet, Lenin argued for the creation of one national newspaper that professional, well-trained revolutionaries would use to discuss a variety of local issues.[14] Discussing these issues and learning about the appropriate tactical responses to them would allow organizers across the nation to become more educated. Furthermore, the newspaper would document the material that was often lost when it was in the form of an agitational pamphlet. Lenin did not see the newspaper as a permeant solution, but thought it was critical until a national party was created, local groups could communicate easily, and there were systems for recruiting and training revolutionaries in place.[15] Lenin's national newspaper is likely outdated, as people no longer tend to read newspapers, but the idea of spreading inexpensive and understandable leftist content is always relevant. Done correctly, such a source could educate organizers and non-organizers alike about the struggles many different communities were facing, act as agitating source, and provide information on organizing tactics. In my own experience, learning that there were concrete ways to fight against oppressive systems and that people were already engaging in that work was critical for motivation and lessening feelings of powerlessness. Because it strengthens the work of organizers and continues to push back about existing ideology, the creation and consumption of content about organizing can be considered part of the war of position.

In some ways, Lenin and Gramsci's conceptualizations are compatible. By producing easily consumable content, the same messaging can be repeated, and the content could easily increase the reach of the work of the organic intellectual. However, there is a point of conflict

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[14] Lenin, "What Is to Be Done?" 449.

[15] Lenin, "What Is to Be Done?" 451.

because when Lenin wrote about the national newspaper, he conceptualized it as the work of professionalized revolutionaries. He argued this was necessary because there were only a few people in Russia who had the ability "to write really well and interestingly about municipal affairs."[16] Lenin did not describe the process of becoming a professionalized revolutionary, so it is possible it fostered the natural development of the organic intellectual. However, on the basis of the hierarchical and centralized nature of Lenin's plan, it seems far more likely that the work of the organic intellectual would be ignored, while that of the trained organizer within Lenin's organizing hub would be utilized. The solution here seems simple: the organic intellectuals should produce easily understandable and consumable content for their own communities, and ignore Lenin's notion of the centralized structure.

Other organizers did not believe education could be delivered by media, but solely through lived experience: Rosa Luxemburg, in her 1906 work "The Mass Strike," wrote that

> "the proletariat requires a high degree of political education, of class-consciousness and organization. All these conditions cannot be filled by pamphlets and leaflets, but only by the living political school, by the fight and in the fight, in the continuous course of the revolution".[17]

Here, she took a position separate from both Lenin and Gramsci by arguing that the only real way to gain a political education was to participate in organizing and political actions. However, Luxemburg lacked specificity in her response. Certainly, it is only though organizing that individuals can make real change, but without conversations, outreach, or some form of recruitment, how are people going to join the revolutionary efforts? For this reason, while the

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[16] Lenin, "What Is to Be Done?" 442.

[17] Rosa Luxemburg, *The Mass Strike,* trans. Patrick Lavin. (Detroit: Marxist Educational Society of Detroit, 1925.) 22.

notion of political education is part of the war of position, Luxemburg leaves readers without much to work on.

Now, turning to a modern writer, Romand Coles offered a different way to think about consciousness in "The Neuropolitical Habitus of Resonant Receptive Democracy." He began by introducing his project, which suggested that research on resonance and mirror neurons can provide information about how to create a radically democratic society[18]. Coles did not define "radically democratic" within this work, but Chantal Mouffe, author of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards A Radical Democratic Politics",* described it as a "a radicalization of liberal democracy. . . If we accept that the ethical political principles of liberal democracy are liberty and equality for all, it is clear that there is no need to look for more radical principles."[19] Coles wanted democracy to become freer and more equal, and argued that resonance could impact society. His description of resonance is as follows.

> Resonance often operates beneath and between explicit articulations by means of images, music, tone of voice, facial expression, bodily posture and gesture, tempo, types of aesthetic objects, modalities of genuflection and collective performances of hostility. In this type of machine, resonant relationships happen as our bodies move through and experience the myriad institutions, practices, energetic flows and representations that mobilize and intensify one another through operative relationships of visceral similitude.[20]

Coles noted that electronic media, ranging from Twitter, to blogs, to radio were themselves mediums of resonance, meaning that that they intensified this energy or intensity. Coles stated he was building off of William Connolly's work, as Connolly had described the way

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[18] Romand Coles, "The Neuropolitical Habitus of Resonant Receptive Democracy," *Ethics & Global Politics,* 4 no 4 (2011): 273-274.

[19] Allan Hansen and Andre Sonnichsen, "Radical Democracy and the Limits of Pluralism: An Interview with Chantel Mouffe" *Distinktion: Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory,* 13 no. 3 (2014). 285.

[20] Coles, "Neuropolitical Habitus," 275.

the right has been able to utilize these mediums as an "evangelical-capitalist resonance machine."[21] This machine led to the creation of an empowered, activated right-wing base. Coles explained that although the left has not been able utilize resonance as a base-builder the way the right has, his goal is not for this to be the case, but for resonance to be reshaped and re-understand as something that must be transformed in order for radical democracy to thrive.[22]

Coles' question then became how to understand this work with regards to human-related resonance, and so turned to mirror neurons. Mirror neurons, developed through interactions where babies or young children imitate the facial expressions of the people around them, or have their own expressions reflected in the faces of the adults in their life, are crucial in the development of non-verbal communication. Mirror neurons, then, are innately tied to resonance, as the "the resonant receptive capacities of mirror neurons born in such interactions further to perceive and understand others in a circular biocultural development in which the mirror neuron system is largely shaped by imitative between self and other."[23] All of this is to say that resonance and mirror neurons inform our understanding of the world, but are also incredibly changeable: when contexts, actions, or uses changes, so can the possibilities.

What does this have to do with politics, or capitalism? A central issue within our capitalist system is that humans have grown weak capacities for receptive resonance and democratic engagement. This is because we are often overwhelmed by the resonances of corporate entities, and other existing "resonance machines," which Connolly noted could include cultural, religious or political institutions. The impact, Coles said, was that our ability to resonate

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[21] Coles, "Neuropolitical Habitus," 274.

[22] Coles, "Neuropolitical Habitus," 276.

[23] Coles, "Neuropolitical Habitus," 279.

with others is weakened, and so our political vision is also limited.[24] He noted that this was especially true in situations where individuals held very different beliefs or life experiences from one another. He argued that the first step in changing politics or democracy must be to understand all people as "intentional beings."[25] We also need to better develop resonance, which we can do by engaging with others to question current systems or by organizing in networks to advance possible alternatives. As we develop the mirror neurons and our receptivity through these practices, Coles argued, "our bodily being is in turn likely more receptively drawn to engage. . . the edges of radically unusual possibilities."[26]

Coles' work introduces a new element of class consciousnesses-raising work. It complicates the war of position, by making the cultural battle also a neurobiological fight. Viewed through the lens of war of position, it is easy to imagine a leftist resonance machine as a new tool in the political struggle. It amplifies the argument Lenin made for consumable cheap media: much of that media has moved online and already carries resonance. Furthermore, the average American spends much of their time online. Most do not have connections to anything resembling a political organizing education, further pushing the necessity of a resonant online presence. For these reasons, it is critical to develop media by leftists in ways that are accessible and easy to understand. While Coles' concerns about resonance "machines" should not go ignored, there is too much at stake to not have some leftist counter-resonance.

Coles' other applicable idea, that engaging with those who are unlike us allows for radical imagination to grow, fits well within the framework of the other scholars. It aligns with

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[24] Coles, "Neuropolitical Habitus," 282.

[25] Coles, "Neuropolitical Habitus," 284.

[26] Coles, "Neuropolitical Habitus," 287.

Gramsci's own work, as the organic intellectual raised consciousness partly due to the conversations with other people. It also fits into the long-held organizing belief that it is only through conversation that actual change can be made. Similarly, Luxemburg's call for the in-personal political school directly draws from the power of collaboration. In whole, I believe all points of political education have value. People respond positively differently to different forms of contact, and while many might prefer in-person organizing conversations, others may check out online sources before they have any interest or ability to engage in-person. Therefore, leftists must try to educate using all methods.

In whole, there are a variety of ways to raise consciousness. Gramsci offered repetition and argued for the development of organic intellectual. Lenin talked about the importance of a newspaper, and Luxemburg offered an argument for the political school. Lastly, Coles described the impact of resonance and the importance of conversations to widen collective imagination.

Mutual Aid

Mutual aid work is the "voluntary reciprocal exchange of resources".[27] Essentially, community members take care of other community members how and when they can, and they receive care when and in the form they need. It may not be a tactic that dramatically seizes power from the ruling class, but it does empower working class communities, and resists engaging with oppressive governmental systems. Because of this, it can be categorized within Gramsci's war of position, which is often understood as a longer, complex, more clandestine period of struggle that aims to change the culture or beliefs of a community. Furthermore,

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[27] Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018), 35.

finding and utilizing the skills of community members to create a network can empower all members of the community.

Mutual aid is a topic many leftist political theorists have written about extensively. Perhaps the most influential was *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* by Peter Kropotkin.[28] Kropotkin laid out an argument that despite Darwin's claims, the survival of species occurs when members of that species work together to give and receive aid as necessary.[29] In the text, Kropotkin mapped out ways both animals and humans have engaged in mutual aid practices throughout time. His examples ranged from colonies of ants and bees, each performing their own small tasks in order for the colony to survive, to humans that lend tools and go on strikes together. Furthermore, Kropotkin established that the State breeds individualism, largely due to the creation of social welfare programs. These programs make it so that the State is responsible for providing for vulnerable people in society, and individuals no longer feel it is the communities' job to care for members. [30] In some cases, the State actively harms existing mutual aid work, by seizing communal land or property.[31] However, Kropotkin still found examples of mutual aid work, including ploughshares and sympathy strikes by laborers in America, and wrote that "neither the crushing powers of the centralized State nor the teachings of mutual hatred. . .

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[28] It should be noted that while this text is critical in conversations about mutual aid, it is also evident that Kropotkin was a white European. The text is racist. It offers descriptions of non-Europeans as savages and barbarians, and describes them as less developed than their European counterparts. Their practice of mutual aid was described closer to that of animals than Europeans.

[29] Peter Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*, trans. Jhon Duran (California: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017), 12.

[30] Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid,* 113.

[31] Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid,* 112.

could weed out the feeling of human solidarity, deeply lodged in men's understanding and heart, because it has been nurtured by all our preceding evolution."[32]

Furthermore, mutual aid is beneficial in building solidarity, and not just because community members are getting their needs met. Emma Goldman argued that each person's individuality is strengthened by cooperating with other people.[33] Here, Goldman was not referring to individualism, which she argued was the attempt to defeat the individual through "legal trickery, spiritual debasement and systematic indoctrination. . . which process is known as 'education.'"[34] Instead, individuality is akin to class consciousness: Goldman described as an awareness of who one is and how they live. By interacting with others in solidarity, and participating in mutual aid, understanding of oneself grows.[35] Once a strong sense of the individual is formed, a person is able to engage with community and the State differently, with, Goldman said, an understanding that the "interests of the State and those of the individual differ fundamentally."[36] Additionally, Goldman believed that mutual aid work prepared workers for life after a revolution. She felt that it was critical for individuals to practice helping one another, training people to take initiative, and simultaneously be self-reliant and willing to give and accept help when necessary. This, she felt, would ready a worker to "assume his place in society as an intelligent, conscious being and useful producer, once capitalism is abolished.[37]

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[32] Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid,* 138.

[33] Emma Goldman, *The Individual, Society and the State.* (California: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014), 2.

[34] Goldman, *Individual, Society and the State*, 3.

[35] Goldman, *Individual, Society and the State*, 3.

[36] Goldman, *Individual, Society and the State*, 6.

[37] Goldman, *Individual, Society and the State*, 4.

Today, especially due to Covid-19, mutual aid groups are everywhere: there are networks
of people willing to give money, deliver food, and buy groceries for community members they
have never met. While mutual aid has no exact categories, different projects require different
amounts of resources and time. The first "type" of project to consider is a short-term project that
invites or serves all people in a geographic area. Frequently, disaster relief can provide an
opportunity for this sort of mutual aid projects. In "Power to the People" Sarah Jaffe highlighted
the mutual aid projects that sprung up in the wake of Hurricane Sandy, noting that "There's a
particular opportunity for mutual aid in the void in the aftermath of disaster, particularly in a
neoliberal state whose safety net has been shredded, where the state simply isn't there and people
step up to take care of each other. . ."[38] Portland is organizing in this way in the spring of 2020:
Portland COVID 19 Mutual Aid organizers created a Facebook page, posted fundraising links
online, and provided detailed forms for those seeking aid and those who offered help. The
volunteers running the program worked to match the volunteers with those seeking service; some
volunteers can seek reimbursement if they are struggling financially. The group has partnered
with the Oregon Food Bank, along with other food distribution groups, and they say they have
provided over 600 deliveries to folks who need aid thus far. Other short-term, high-intensity, but
non-emergency related organizing projects include labor exchange systems in Nepal, where
villagers will ask for help from others on agricultural or building projects. This work cannot be
paid in money, only paid back in labor when the other villager needs help on a similar project.[39]

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[38] Sarah Jaffe, "Power to the People," *Jacobin*, November 3, 2012,
https://jacobinmag.com/2012/11/power-to-the-people/

[39] Keshav Kumar Shrestha, "Labor Practices and Arrangement in the Rajbanshi Society"
Himalayan Journal of Sociology and Anthropology 4 (2011): 92,
https://doi.org/10.3126/hjsa.v4i0.4670.

Another type of mutual aid organizing works to meet a need for people in a geographic area consistently over a period of time. For example, Food Not Bombs provides vegetarian and vegan meals for members of the public[40]. The group has autonomous chapters in over 60 countries, and their flagship chapter has been distributing food since 1980. Similar long-term community efforts included the free breakfast program established by the Black Panthers. The program was intended for children, but was willing to feed other hungry community members.[41]

Mutual aid groups sometimes struggle to gain the material resources needed to run their projects. While there is often a sense of urgency during and in the aftermath of a disaster, that urgency is not always present for other projects. Even so, organizers are often very aware of how to take advantage of what material goods they have, and are creative in their approaches when they need more. Both the Black Panthers, and later, Food Not Bombs, partnered with local supermarkets for the supplies. The Black Panthers also organized actions to picket and publicly shamed the businesses that refused to help, a method that usually worked. I am not trying to suggest that mutual aid projects never die because they do not have the material resources to keep working, only to say that most of the organizers I know are incredibly resourceful individuals. When asked, fellow organizers are willing to donate what they have, loan space, give in the ways they can to overcome the material issues of organizing. The challenge that I see as harder to overcome is the struggle of lacking the human capacity to continue working, which I will explain further in this paper.

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[40] "Foodnotbombs.net," Food Not Bombs, accessed June 7, 2020, http://foodnotbombs.net/new_site/.

[41]Joshua Bloom and Waldo E Martin, Jr. *Black Against Empire*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 142. doi.org/10.1080/07393148.2016.1153191

The form of mutual aid work that strikes me as the hardest, but the most interesting, is the long-term, high-effort, mutual aid work provided by care webs. This type of organizing was outlined in *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* by Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha. The care web described in *Care Web* were formed entirely by those affected by an issue—in this case, disabled queer and trans people of color. That group stayed together for a year, meeting on average, twice a week. It split apart for many of the reasons I have seen other organizing projects dissolve: some member's needs were not getting met, some members felt they were doing all the work, and there were plenty of interpersonal conflicts. [42] I have yet to find a written account of another care web, or mutual aid provided in this this style, but reading Piepzna-Samarasinha's work helped me to recognize ways that various projects neglect the emotional health of the participating organizers. Here, then, finally is my question: if mutual aid is a long-standing, valuable practice, how can organizers make it easier for themselves and others to work on these organizing projects?

In "Micropolitics and Collective Liberation: Mind/Body Practice and Left Social Movements" author James Rowe asks a similar question, and in order to answer it, he conducted a series of interviews. Many organizers Rowe talked to emphasized how helpful their practices of mindfulness and yoga were to avoid burnout and increasing their own awareness of their needs and emotional states.[43] However, Rowe also cautions readers from using mindfulness techniques as a way to increase productivity—he argues it must be part of a cultural change within organizing communities. One example of what this change could look like was

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[42] Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work,* 46.

[43] James Rowe, "Micropolitics and Collective Liberation: Mind/Body Practice and Social Movements" *New Political Science,* 38, (2016): 209.

exemplified by a program created for rank-and-file leaders of a labor union. That program

included mindful and somatic practices, and they explained their approach to self-care, which

was "about possessing the concrete skills of setting limits and boundaries, of being able to trust

oneself thus to trust others, and of have more ways to respond to pressures than automatic

reactions."[44] The organizers who experienced the training found that they were better able to "set

priorities, avoid over-commitment and better achieve balance in their lives."[45] Furthermore,

mind/body practices give organizers a space to notice and reflect on their own biases, critical to

not re-creating systems of oppression.

Concerns for maintaining mental and behavioral health is largely missing in the

organizing I see being done around me. I mostly see organizers lauded for their tireless work,

even by those who know that the organizer is working past their capacity. I see many organizers

who are not realistic about how much they can take on, or those who see work going undone and

decide that they can add it onto their own plate. I have been one of these organizers, to my own

detriment. Teaching emotional regulation and boundary setting skills could allow organizers to

participate in this work in a healthier way, likely prompting longer involvement in projects that

they care about. However, in order to allow organizers to actively engage in these practices,

organizing structures must be changed. A system that allows for healthier boundaries could

include a recognition that often, many different people will step into and out of roles over the

course of a long-term organizing project. Clear definition of roles, and a common understanding

of workflow, could make this process of change easier. Actively searching for the right person to

step into the position left unfilled can also be a helpful strategy; a fellow organizer once told me

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[44] Rowe, "Micropolitics and Collective Liberation", 215-216.

[45] Rowe, "Micropolitics and Collective Liberation", 216.

that everyone who fills role should always be training someone else to take it over. In less structed formats, this may not prove feasible, but even a casual understanding of how the work is currently done and who is willing to take on each piece would be useful.

In whole, mutual aid is a powerful tactic that can build self-reliance and a sense of community for those participating in, all while changing the beliefs about needing the government to provide services to people, and so can be categorized among war of position. There is a wide variety of mutual aid projects, from those that emerge in cases of disaster, to those that are long-term projects to serve a community's basic needs. More complex projects include care webs, and other mutual aid projects that are created and serve a small group of individuals faced with similar challenges. However, despite the exact project, many mutual aid groups struggle to survive because organizers struggle to create boundaries around their work, or the distribution of the work was not fair. One solution to this issue is incorporating mindfulness and somatic practices, which allow organizers to better understand their emotional states and their capacities. In order to allow organizers to functionally participate in this practice, however, groups likely need to make changes to their organizational systems to promote different organizers stepping in and out of roles and the amount of work they take on.

Electoral Work

Next, I want to turn to a discussion of participation in electoral work. I argue that electoral work is a matter of war of position, since campaigns can be used to build movements, raise class consciousness, and change the political discourse. However, it also engages within an existing system, which can effectively block leftist candidates, and so is relatively non-threatening to existing power structures. Throughout the history of leftist political thought, participation within existing electoral systems, via running campaigns and holding office, has

been hotly debated. Perspectives vary greatly, and I wish to explore both the work of theorists

who support engaging with it, and those that do not. First, I will examine Karl Kautsky's

arguments for engaging in electoral systems. Then, I will turn to Peter Kropotkin, who argues

that engaging with electoral systems is harmful to the revolutionary effort. Lastly, I will argue

that engagement in electoral politics is valuable because it creates a sense of community, teaches

organizing skills, and grows class consciousness. This argument is made partially based upon the

argument made by Mae Ngai in "Challenges for the Left in Electoral Politics: Looking to the

1990s."

In *The Road to Power*, Karl Kautsky argued that the proletariat must engage with the

electoral system by participating in elections and holding political office. This, he stated, would

allow leftists to occupy systems that function as "an organ of class rule"[46] currently used to

subjugate the proletariat. However, Kautsky did not believe that only having a few leftists in

public office was valuable, and instead stated that proletarians must seize control of the whole

governmental system, because, "a proletarian party which shares power with a capitalist party in

any government must share the blame for any acts of the subjection of the working class.."[47]

Within Gramsci's framework, Kautsky's view of electoral work falls within the war of

maneuver: he viewed winning elections as a direct assault against existing governmental system,

rather than seeing electoral engagement as a means of infiltration. This is partly because of the

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[46] Karl Kautsky, *The Road to Power.* Trans. A.M. Simons. (Germany: Bloch, 1909.) 10,
https://www.marxists.org/archive/kautsky/1909/power/ch01.htm

[47] Kautsky, *The Road to Power*, 10.

speed at which Kautsky envisioned the switch to a socialist government taking place, and partly because he envisioned it as the primary means of change.

There is a certain appeal to Kautsky's argument, which I interpret as saying that if leftist candidates successfully raise consciousness to the degree that the majority of a country aligns with socialist or communist platforms, those individuals will vote for similarly positioned candidates, themselves working people. Then, the elected officials will be able to legislate with the proletariat's best interests in mind. In some ways, an electoral approach may be the most palatable for many Americans, most of whom have been taught that electoral engagement is the only way to participate in a political landscape. Furthermore, Katusky relied on a classic notion of representative democracy: that the will of the common people choses a candidate that represents them and passes policies that benefit their communities. This line of argument is familiar to most Americans, which may lead to its easier acceptance.

However, I have several major concerns in the applicability of Kautsky's argument: the first is the ability to raise consciousness levels to the point where a number of leftist candidates could be elected to office. Kautsky acknowledged this concern himself and wrote that if "the proletariat is still weak in numbers . . or if it is politically weak, because it is unorganized, and lacking self-consciousness"[48] elections would be lost, and it would be easy for moderate or capitalist politicians to win back governmental control.

My other concerns are all based in applying Kautsky's positions to 21st century politics. There are real institutional barriers facing leftist candidates and issue-based campaigns. Districts

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[48] Kautsky, *The Road to Power,* 10.

are gerrymandered in Republican favor.[49] Voter turnout among non-homeowners has

historically been about twenty points lower than homeowners.[50] Minority populations suffer

voter suppression via voter roll purges and strict ID laws.[51] These restrictions target working -

class people and minorities, the exact voters that are likely to form a base for leftist candidates.

The Democratic party is also a barrier: in Oregon, the Senate Democratic Leadership Fund and

Future PAC, the campaign arms of the Oregon State Senate and House Democrats, respectively,

pick candidates early. They provide money, consultants, staff, technology, and trainings to the

selected candidates. All of those factors form an intimidating roadblock to leftist candidates

considering a run. Furthermore, running a campaign, much less winning one, is hard. For many

leftist candidates, it is a struggle to raise money. Most refuse any corporate or political action

committee money, and instead rely on small donations from individuals. These donations, while

generously given, are usually not large enough to afford what traditionally funded campaigns

consider basics, such as a mass texting service, mailers, other printed literature, access to a voter

database, and paid staffers. Interestingly, many of the difficulties mentioned above are mirrored

in an explanation Irish socialist James Connolly gave for the loss of a socialist candidate in 1901,

as documented in a speech entitled "Socialist Electioneering."

> the Labour Electoral Association supported the middle class candidate; our enemies had
> hired corps of paid canvassers and agents, whereas the Socialist candidate had none but

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[49] David Daley, "The Decade Republicans Hijacked Our Democracy, Via the Gerrymander"
Salon, December 30, 2019.
https://www.salon.com/2019/12/30/the-decade-republicans-hijacked-our-democracy-via-gerrymandering/

[50] Chris Salviati, "Renters vs. Homeowners at the Ballot Box—Will America's Politicians
Represent the Voice of Renters?" *Rentonomics,* October 30, 2018.
https://www.apartmentlist.com/rentonomics/renter-voting-preferences/

[51] "Oppose Voter ID Legislation—Fact Sheet", ACLU, accessed June 7, 2020,
https://www.aclu.org/other/oppose-voter-id-legislation-fact-sheet.

unpaid volunteer canvassers; that our enemies had the funds of the capitalist class in the Ward to aid their candidature, and the Socialist nothing but the coppers of poorly paid workers. . . [52]

Connolly's passage highlighted the elements of political campaigns that have historically been hard for leftist candidates. Now, there are yet more barriers. For Kautsky's argument to be truly plausible in the 21st century, there would need to be massive campaign finance reform, fair districting, and a weaker Democratic party. None of this however, serves to ask the bigger question, which is: how much power will a bourgeois representative democracy allow leftists to hold via the electoral system? I think the answer to that depends on what is considered power. The existing political structure will not allow enough leftists to hold office for them to be a significant voting bloc. The system may allow a few leftist Congresspeople or state legislators, such as Senator Bernie Sanders or Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, neither of whom are not particularly far left, but the Democratic Party will not allow enough leftists to hold seats to heavily impact the passage of legislation. However, as I will discuss later, winning elections is not the marker of worth for leftist electoral attempts. Instead, it is the community-building organizing work, skill building, and growth in class consciousness that are the gains of a leftist campaign. By those metrics, which cannot be limited by a bourgeois democracy, electoral work is powerful.

Peter Kropotkin's 1892 pamphlet, entitled "Revolutionary Government" is Kautsky's natural opposition. As an anarchist, Kropotkin argued that no government could ever be considered revolutionary. He stated that, "all forms of government as yet tried have so many forms of oppression, and ought to be replaced by a new form of grouping."[53] Kropotkin defended

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[52] James Connolly "Socialist Electioneering" (speech, Ireland, February, 1901), Marxists' Internet Archive. https://www.marxists.org/archive/connolly/1901/02/election.htm

[53] Peter Kropotkin, *Revolutionary Government.* (London: The Commonweal, 1892), 1.

this position by talking about the French elections in March of 1781. He said that these elections were free and fair, and that the electorate felt "the desire to place in power the best of men, men for the future, true revolutionists."[54] Here, Kropotkin described that the newly elected officials are exactly those that Katusky thought should be given power. Unfortunately, the outcome was not favorable: although the men were good, bringing change to the governmental systems was not possible:

> these reformers found themselves smitten with incapacity and sterility. With all their good will and their courage they did not even know how to organize the defense of Paris. Of course people now blame the men, the individuals for this; but it was not the men who were the cause of this failure-- it was the system carried out.[55]

His argument is clear: even if leftists win elections, it is impossible to enact meaningful change. In a following part of the document, Kropotkin argued that the government always represents the past, regardless of who is in charge of it. He noted that moderate individuals control outcomes of votes, and that with this power, they can more easily form connections with the well-known or well-funded. Furthermore, he noted that in elections, there is an emphasis placed on presenting moderate arguments that candidates believe the majority will favor.[56] Essentially, the political system is controlled by moderates, and no amount of organizing will be able to change the system's innate qualities. If an organizer wants change, they are better avoiding electoral work. Because Kropotkin's claim is that there is no value in electoral participation, and that it can only distract from the real work, it would not be categorized as war of position or war of maneuver.

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[54] Kropotkin, *Revolutionary Government*, 3.

[55] Kropotkin, *Revolutionary Government*, 3.

[56] Kropotkin, *Revolutionary Government*, 4.

Kropotkin is right when he says that a leftist movement will not get sweeping, revolutionary change when participating in electoral politics. However, as Mae Ngai wrote in her 1989 article, electoral work can result in better lives for working people:

> As socialists, we do electoral work because we recognize it is integral to the expansion of democracy for the people and in building a mass base for the left. The winning of electoral reforms, such as changing unfair electoral laws and putting progressives into office, is important in improving the lives of working people and improving their conditions to organize and fight.[57]

I want to stress Ngai's first line, which noted that electoral politics build a base for the left. It is on this argument that I believe that lost campaigns are still incredibly valuable, and therefore, all electoral work has value. First, campaigns often connect with first-time volunteers and people who have never felt empowered to try to create change. By creating community, opportunities to build skills, and showing common community concerns in their platforms, campaigns can help get groups of people ready to organize on a longer-term projects. In this sense, electoral politics can act as a "gateway" to more radical organizing, as an individual can expand their understanding of their political landscape and learn skills applicable to other efforts.

Furthermore, left engagement in electoral politics can be critical in shifting the Overton window towards the left. The Overton window is a concept that states that there is a "window" of ideas in the common American political discourse that are popular enough for politicians to propose and support. [58] Ideas outside of the window are usually dismissed as crazy, impractical, or implausible. Generally, the window is shifted slowly, as public opinion changes over time. It can also be shifted more quickly when elected officials or candidates consistently talk about

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[57] Mae Ngai, "Challenges for the Left in Electoral Politics: Looking to the 1990s." *Forward: Journal of Socialist Thought* 9, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 1989).

[58] "The Overton Window" The Mackinac Center For Public Policy, accessed June 5, 2020. https://www.mackinac.org/OvertonWindow

ideas that are considered radical. Even if the ideas are outlandish, getting people to think about them is the first step to them becoming commonly understood, and even popular. In recent years, the right has been much better than the left in widening the window, but a good recent leftist example is single-payer health care. Bernie Sander's 2016 presidential campaign is often credited with bringing single payer into mainstream political conversations, at which point it was largely dismissed. In 2020, there are organizations excited to promote single-payer health care and health care for all, ranging from health care groups and labor unions to churches and county democratic establishments.

Essentially, when a candidate, particularly with views too far left to win an election, is able to offer their ideas and gain support for those perspectives, they are shifting the window farther left. This can shift local, or even national, conversations around a given policy issues. It opens the possibility for other candidates to be met with enthusiasm later, and increases the likelihood that legislation in that policy area may be changed. Additionally, these messages can raise class consciousness. When campaigns structure messaging around which members of the population have access to critical resources like health care, education, and even publicly owned internet, they are highlighting the material differences between classes. In doing so, they can start conversations about why those people have those resources, and how to create a more equitable world. Functionally, therefore, electoral work is part of the war of position. While this action is more visible, its goal is to build the power for a bigger action, or an action more threatening to existing power structures. Spanish leftist and writer Amandor Fernandez-Savater

described this well when he wrote that the war of position was "based on the building and development of a new definition of reality."[59]

Overall, while it is hard to run a campaign, campaigns have the potential to build movements. As people work and learn about leftist and left-leaning campaigns, it is possible to educate people about the ways existing systems, including capitalism, are failing them. Through the skills and connections volunteers are able to gain, many are likely to go on to more radical participation. Additionally, by presenting radical ideas, candidates are able to change conversations and shift what the public sees as "reasonable." All argue these elements to lend themselves to a war of position: a base can be built, messages communicated, and the Overton window shifted, without a declaration of massive resistance against the status quo. It is part of the groundwork, rather than the rebellion.

Strikes

A strike, as Emma Goldman wrote in "Syndicalism: Its Theory and Practice," is "a stoppage of work, the cessation of labor."[60] A general strike, however, is more than that: Siegfried Nacht's 1905 pamphlet described a general strike as a time where workers would not work for their bosses, but would take control of the means of production and produce for the public good. Gramsci himself characterized strikes as a war of maneuver. He did not explain his own reasoning for this classification, but strikes are confrontational, direct actions in which

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[59] Amandor Fernández-Savater, "Strength and Power Reimagining Revolution" Guerrilla Translation, accessed June 5, 2020. https://www.guerrillatranslation.org/2013/07/29/strength-and-power-reimagining-revolution/

[60] Emma Goldman, "Syndicalism: Its Theory and Practice" *Mother Earth* 3, no 12 (February, 1913) 1.

workers loudly refuse to participate in the existing system. Therefore, war of maneuver seems fitting.

Lenin often used strikes to talk about spontaneity, or the unorganized outpouring of revolutionary action. First, Lenin stated that many early political actions of workers were spontaneous, but that they "were not, and could not be, conscious of the irreconcilable antagonism of their interests to the whole of the modern political and social system. . . "[61] Because Lenin did not believe that the participants in these political actions had any true consciousness about the larger socio-political struggles, he regarded their actions as revolts. Later, in the St. Petersburg industrial war of 1896, Lenin found that there were some systematic, organized actions, which had achieved a greater degree of consciousness, and therefore, could be considered strikes. Lenin's other differentiating factor between the early revolts and the actions taken by the true strikers was that the strikes were planned in detail, strategically timed, and influenced by the experiences of other groups that had planned similar actions.[62] This, again, related to consciousness, as Lenin wrote, "the strikes of the nineties revealed far greater flashes of consciousness; definite demands were advanced, the strike was carefully timed, known cases and instances in other places were discussed, etc."[63] However, Lenin did not believe that strikes should be solely a working-class struggle. He argued that professional revolutionaries would need be involved order to win a "special 'struggle against the political police'"[64], which is a task the masses spontaneously drawn into the movement could not fulfill. Overall, Lenin advocated

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[61] Lenin, "What Is to Be Done?*"* 364.

[62] Lenin, "What Is to Be Done?" 367.

[63] Lenin, "What Is to Be Done?" 364.

[64] Lenin, "What Is to Be Done?" 416.

that a real strike requires consciousness, organization, and a skilled group of professionalized

revolutionaries to struggle against the political police.

Personally, I dislike Lenin's proposal of the creation of the vanguard of the proletariat, or

the professional revolutionaries that will "centralize all the secret aspects of the work—the

drawing up of leaflets, the working out of approximate plans; and the appointment of bodies of

leaders for each urban district. . . "[65] I am suspicious of this hierarchical approach. Actions of

any kind must be led by the working people most affected by the issue. They understand their

lived experience and know the material struggles of their community, something that non-

community members cannot. Furthermore, such organizers likely have the interpersonal

connections among community members to make the proposed action successful. While it is

possible that the professional revolutionaries could be members of the communities they are

organizing with, Lenin never specified that they are, or should be. This, combined with the idea

that the professionals will work out the plan, without any mention of the input of community

members, concerns me.

Rosa Luxemburg conceptualized strikes differently in *The Mass Strike, the Political

Party and the Trade Unions*, and identified several key elements of strikes. The first is that the

mass strike is not just one action, but is the "indication, the rallying idea, of a whole period of the

class struggle lasting for years, perhaps for decades."[66] As I understand it, she meant that one

strike often inspires following strikes. Luxemburg noted that strikes that are meant solely as

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[65] Lenin, "What Is to Be Done?" 427.

[66] Rosa Luxemburg, *The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Unions,* trans. Patrick
Levin, (Detroit: Marxist Educational Society of Detroit, 1925), 88.
https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1906/mass-strike/ch03.htm

political demonstrations often show the most party unity and are the most strategically organized. They also occur first. Following these strikes are fighting strikes, which Luxemburg identified as more labor-focused, less organized, and fairly spontaneous.[67] Luxemburg argued that both types of strikes are important, because it is impossible to separate economic and political factors. Furthermore, Luxemburg argued that as the political struggle becomes stronger and gains more clarity as the economic struggle is able become more involved in political actions. Likewise, the political struggle benefits from the worker's economic struggle with capitalists, which activates new political activists. Luxemburg summed the relationship up by stating that "the economic struggle is the transmitter from one political center to another; the political struggle is the periodic fertilization of the soil for the economic struggle."[68] Through this combination, the mass strike represents the unification of both the economic and political struggles.

Luxemburg continued to expand upon the meaning of the mass strike, in this case by stating that it is inseparable from the revolution. She drew from her experience in Russia, where she found that nearly every long term-strike lead to an encounter with the czarist order.[69] Furthermore, Luxemburg explained her idea of the revolution: she did not believe it to be an armed struggle, as many of her contemporaries did. Instead, she viewed it as a nation-wide strike, during which there is a sudden change of the economic struggle into the political one and of the political struggle into a mass strike. She ended her pamphlet with this line: "in reality the mass strike does not produce the revolution, but the revolution produces the mass strike."[70]

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[67] Luxemburg, *The Mass Strike,* 86-87.

[68] Luxemburg, *The Mass Strike,* 97.

[69] Luxemburg, *The Mass Strike,* 99.

[70] Luxemburg, *The Mass Strike,* 102.

Both Luxemburg and Lenin provide good insights on the matter of striking, although I side solidly with Luxemburg. I do believe that certain degree of organization, created by the working people who are striking seems reasonable. Many people like having tasks to support the tasks, and help to meet other striking members' basic needs, like food, are met. Furthermore, strikers should increase consciousness by discussing their strike within the context of their economic and political reality. However, Luxemburg is right in saying that no amount of organizing could create a general strike and that it is dependent on the economic conditions of the moment. She is also right about the relationship between the economic and political struggle, and the ways that the economic struggle strengthens the political struggle.

William Connolly built on Luxemburg's idea of the mass strike in "The Politics of Swarming and the General Strike," in *Facing the Planetary*. Connolly set up this chapter by discussing the politics of swarming. The idea of swarming is one that comes from bees: when they search for a new hive site, a few hundred female bees go to look for possible options. When a bee returns, she provides a dance that shows each potential hive's location and qualities, and other scouts go to look at the site.[71] Slowly, with many bees providing many assessments, they find a new site. In organizers, Conolly argued, that same process should happen in micropolitics, with organizers trying out a variety of tactics within the organizations that the organizers already belong to. Connolly utilized Foucault's idea of a specific intellectual, or an individual whose "technical skills and specific capacities form a niche that have become strategic during this era."[72] He argued that these specific intellectuals can lead within their organizations, and can

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[71] William Connolly, "The Politics of Swarming and the General Strike" in *Facing the Planetary.* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017), 124.

[72] Connolly, "The Politics of Swarming" 125.

serve as the "scouts" for the metaphorical hive. In this role, they can invite others to try out tactics with them, thus building the preliminary movements that will build to cross-regional general strikes.

Connolly then identified other thinkers who wrote about mass strikes. He began with Georges Sorel's idea that the actual possibility of a general strike is unimportant, but that the concept of the general strike can mobilize individuals and sharpen awareness of class divides. However, Sorel's belief in revolutionary violence, Connolly argued, is out of place, which is why Gandhi's teachings are critical. Connolly used Gandhi's teachings to describe nonviolence as "a strong presumption against unleashing bloodshed joined to strategic willingness to set up barricades, close down factories, initiate new collective businesses, curtail consumption, participate in investment strikes and so on, if and when the time is right."[73]

Next, Connolly turned to Eugene Holland's idea of the slow-motion strike, or a nonviolent process of workers finding ways to own the means of production, particularly in zones where capitalists have ignored the land or people. The slow-motion strike would allow workers to participate in market transactions with each other[74]. Unfortunately, Connolly outlined a variety of reasons the slow-motion strike was implausible, ranging from the challenge of changing consumption patterns to the backlash from corporations.

Finally, Connolly described his own cross-regional general strike. He argued it should involve a withdrawal from work and travel, a reduction of consumption, and would require intense persuading of key institutions, including legislatures, churches, universities, corporations,

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[73] Connolly, "The Politics of Swarming" 132.

[74] Connolly, "The Politics of Swarming" 135-136.

foundations, and more, to participate.[75] It would need to build on the momentum created by existing swarming movements. Connolly wrote that "the point is to enliven social movement on several fronts, to respond to a new event with cross-regional citizen strikes, and to fold molds of creativity into these actions to enable them to spread further."[76] Connolly argued they will require loosely constructed groups both acting within and upon regimes, and that it is critical for the movement to have a plan to publicize the nonviolence of the group, as not doing so increases the risk that strike participants will be harmed or jailed. Connolly ended by noting that a successful cross-regional strike is improbable, although he did not see this as a point of concern. He argued instead that the question is whether these strikes can become possible, and that by engaging in micropolitics, that possibility is heightened.

I am conflicted about Connolly's arguments here: there is clear value in micropolitics, especially with an activated base. This tactic will likely work better where there are fewer corporate interests, for example, organizing members of a church, rather than trying to get the support of many members of a state legislature or trying to convince a corporation to engage, but many organizers are already engaging with those institutions. My hesitance comes from not feeling motivated on working towards a goal that even advocates for that goal say is impossible. Instead, organizers should continue to explore tactics in micropolitics and set achievable goals that will likely build momentum and lend themselves to larger, perhaps more difficult projects. The outcomes will be the same, without the potential disappointment or demotivation of not achieving an impossible goal.

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[75] Connolly, "The Politics of Swarming" 144.

[76] Connolly, "The Politics of Swarming" 145.

In this section, I have determined that strikes are categorized within the war of maneuver, because they require the proletariat to confront the bourgeois. Then I provided three contrasting views of strikes: Lenin argued for organized strikes rooted in class consciousness that rely on professionalized revolutionaries to be successful. Luxemburg mapped out worker and citizen-led spontaneous strikes, which build off of one another so that economic strikes become political. These strikes, Luxemburg said, would be the revolution, rather lead to any armed struggled. Lastly, Connolly laid out a potential global strike based in the movement-building work organizers would do within their micro-political settings. He argued that the idea of a mass strike was powerful in motivating individuals and illuminating class differences, and that this outweighed the implausibility of actually carrying out a global strike.

Conclusion

This thesis began with one pressing question: what is to be done? I argue that leftist organizers must build an intersectional mass movement positioned against capitalism and all other systems of oppression. This work starts with political education, which should involve a variety of outreach practices, including the use of media and face to face conversations. It also requires mutual aid work, as there need to be functional systems to support those engaged in organizing work. Challenges for mutual aid projects are often reliant on organizers to put in long hours and work beyond their own capacity, which is why it is crucial for all organizers to be taught about boundaries, develop mindfulness practices, and ensure that projects are structured to allow these practices to be effective. Then, organizers are able to participate in other tactics, such as campaigns within electoral politics, which is valuable because it provides an opportunity

movement-building and consciousness-raising work to take place. Lastly, the idea of a global

strike can serve as a beacon for participation in micropolitics, was seen in Connolly's article.

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