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Another Politics (book review)

Chris Hardnack PhD

Colorado Mesa University, chardnack@coloradomesa.edu

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Another Politics (book review)

Abstract

What are the main political articulations of today's radical movements in North America? In a review of Chris Dixon's *Another Politics* these questions are addressed in terms of the influence of anti-racist, feminism, anarchism, and prison abolition movements, and how a new form of radical leftists politics is emerging across the continent.

Keywords

Social Movements, Anarchism, Ideologies

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Book Review:

Dixon, Chris. 2014. *Another Politics Talking Across Today's Transformative Movements*. Oakland: University of California Press

Over the course of the last three decades of neoliberalism in North America, the relative power of corporations increased dramatically, but has not gone unchallenged. Movements emerged to challenge the dominance of capital that drew upon new types of anti-authoritarian politics and organizing principles. These movements, which include Idle No More, the Global Justice Movement, the Immigrant Rights Movements, Prison Abolition Movements, Occupy Wall Street, and Climate Justice have shaped the political context in which movements organize within and provided a tradition and lineage for new movements to draw from.

In *Another Politics*, Chris Dixon provides an overview and history of the North American anti-authoritarian current and the political, strategic, and organizational challenges it faces. Throughout the book he provides several insights into the workings of today's transformative movements and distills important lessons for organizers. His main goal is to articulate the politics of the movement, which draws from multiple sources and avoids traditional labels. Hence, Dixon chose "another politics" to describe this political tendency which both distances itself from, and incorporates previous modes of organizing. As Angela Davis writes in the foreword, "This book not only allows the reader to feel part of these conversations about radical movements of today, it also helps all of us to identify key points of convergence and possible future directions for social justice movements in our part of the world" (xii). Perhaps the most refreshing aspect of the book is how Dixon positions himself as a researcher involved in the movement. Dixon describes himself as, "politically committed to helping this movement flourish" (12), and views the movements themselves as producers of knowledge. Finally, he states that he identifies as an activist-researcher writing with, rather than about these movements.

The bulk of the work is an overview of radical movements that contain a common thread of anti-authoritarianism. He contends that there is an anti-authoritarian current that "cuts across a range of left movements in North America" (5). The individuals within this current are striving to create new ways of engaging each other and new ways of opposing systems of domination. Dixon identifies four components of another politics. These include:

1. Struggling against all forms of domination and oppression.
2. Developing new social relations and forms of organization to proceed in struggle.
3. Linking struggles for improvements in the lives of ordinary people to long-term transformative visions.
4. Organizing that is grassroots and bottom up.

Another politics is what characterizes radical fractions of contemporary movements such as Occupy Wall Street and Climate Justice. The above components may most easily be identified within the Anarchist wing of these movements, but Dixon points out that these differences go beyond Anarchism. As he explains, three movement traditions and their histories of struggle provide the foundation for today's transformative movements: a reconfigured anarchist tradition, anti-racist feminism, and the prison abolition movement.

These movements contributed knowledge and strategic insights that are often ignored or forgotten, which Dixon reminds us in an especially insightful chapter that outlines the social movement history of the anti-authoritarian current titled, “Fighting Against Amnesia.” This amnesia is the result of a “systematic forgetting” which is “deeply connected to the organization and administration of power in society. Given this, it’s not terribly surprising that movements—and writing about them—are frequently afflicted by historical amnesia” (24). Each current, which is usually described as separate movements, is presented as part of a singular tendency in North American radical movements.

First, Dixon highlights the important contributions of anti-racist feminism, also known as woman of color feminism. He describes women of color feminism as a new radical political identity that challenged racism within the women’s movement and sexism within radical political formations. This feminism is best known in academic circles for the concept of intersectionality, which posits that “a truly revolutionary politics is necessarily a multilayered fight against oppression” (35). In terms of anti-capitalist politics, Dixon is quite right to include this tradition and point to the concept of intersectionality, which provides the language to discuss multiple forms of oppression. It is worth acknowledging the fact that women of color feminism, has become fairly well known on college campuses as a result of women and gender studies, ethnic studies, and other social science classes. In this context, anti-racist feminism has its most important impact because it is often the first step many student activists take toward a politics that seeks to transcend oppressions rooted gender, race, and capitalism. Drawing upon the Combahee River Collective’s classic statement on the issue, Dixon reminds us that “social relations of capitalism, racism, patriarchy, and heterosexism operate with a through each other—‘they are interlocking’” (35). Furthermore, another politics is inspired by the practice of anti-racist feminism, which is described as “a desire for a way of doing things that doesn’t treat people as instruments—a politics that doesn’t ‘mess people over’ in its own name” (36). Indeed aside from these vagaries there are also important lessons to be learned from this movement. For example, the anti-racist feminist organization INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence has addressed a key question to movements, which is how to gain resources and funding in their popular publication *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded* which critiques a “nonprofit industrial complex” that can often tie organizations to state funding, foundations, and nonprofit organizations in a manner that undermines and contains radical movements.

The second influence is the prison abolition movement, which provided both insights into race as a fundamental aspect of domination, but also provides prefigurative insights due to their desire to crowd out the prison industrial complex, which is “the interlocking set of institutions and social relations based on surveillance, policing, and imprisonment” (39). Prison abolition, which traces its history to the early 1970s, the Attica Prison Uprising, provides a political vision that, as the Prison Research Education Project states in their three pronged abolitionist ideology, “(1) economic justice for all, (2) concern for all victims and (3) rather than punishment, reconciliation in a caring community” (Dixon 2014:38). Dixon quotes the modern abolitionist organization Critical Resistance to explain that “Our goal is not to improve the system even further, but to shrink the system into non-existence” (:40).

The third major influence that contributed to the development of another politics is a “reconfigured anarchism” that draws its inspiration from classical anarchism of

Bakunin and the Spanish civil war, but then became reconfigured in the North American context through the experience of anti-nuke activism, ACT-UP, radical environmental movements and the global justice movement. Dixon provides a broad overview of the historical and cultural shifts that have brought about anarchism as we know it today. He describes this reconfigured anarchism as consisting of a “bundle” of political practices. The first aspect of this bundle is nonhierarchical organizing, which is most well-known for consensus decision making affinity groups and the spokescouncil. The second aspect of the bundle is the importance of prefigurative politics. Beyond that the “threads linking these movements are commitments to direct democracy, criticisms of existing political and economic systems, impatience with traditional party based politics, and audacious willingness to engage in collective action.”

He also describes another politics in terms of what it is opposed to in what he calls “the four anti’s.” Indeed a key component of identifying the core values of a movement is to outline what the movement is against or opposed to. These include anti-authoritarianism, anti-capitalism, anti-oppression, and anti-imperialism. The anti-authoritarianism of another politics reflects an opposition to social relations of hierarchy within society and within movements. Dixon quotes one activist who explains that “the emphasis is on the people’s struggle for autonomy, not gathering power to topple the state and take it over. Revolution is about the process of making power and creating autonomous communities” (65). In terms of practice, oppositions to hierarchy has resulted in horizontal organizing.

Capitalism is the next anti. Dixon defines capitalism the following way: “Capitalism, in short, isn’t an agreement or an institution. It’s a system of social relations: it has a history, it changed over time, and it’s neither natural or invincible. As something constantly created through social relations, it is also something we can undo. That is, capitalism can be resisted, undermined, and displaced through collective action.” (69). This conception highlights the importance of movements in challenging capitalism, because they are the expression of agency within this set of social relations.

The third anti is anti-oppression, which “refers to a set of politics and practices aimed at confronting and transforming intersecting systems of exploitation and social relations” (71). Anti-oppression politics has three prerequisites, which include recognizing the interconnectedness of oppression, a commitment to confronting oppression, and a focus on transcending these systems of domination.

Finally anti-imperialism entails a recognition and confrontation with the global domination of powerful countries in the global North over countries in the global South. One of his most insightful points is that within the broader political framework of another politics is a recognition of indigenous struggles against colonial domination as providing historical as well as contemporary examples of the struggle for autonomy.

Prefigurative politics occupies a prominent position within *Another Politics*. Dixon explains:

Indeed, the combination of the oppositional and the reconstructive is foundational to another politics. This politics brings together refusal of domination with affirmative commitment to building new social relations and forms of social organization in the process of struggle. It aspires to fuse the ‘against’—our

rejection of ruling relations and institutions—with the ‘beyond’—our creation of new ways of being relating and doing. (P. 83)

Beyond the simple Gandhian “Be the change” Dixon outlines different components such as a lifestyle, the development of counter-institutions, a horizontal orientation, and egalitarian practices.

Perhaps the most impressive aspect of the book is the amount of honesty and sober reflection on the problems, dilemmas, and debates of today’s transformative movements. This adds to the usefulness of the work, in that it does not read like as if “anarchists have all of the answers,” but rather that these traditions are works in progress that are struggling to grapple with the many matrixes of social relations, especially the complex intersections between race, gender, and sexuality. In other words, they are working toward answers to these common problems. For example, he never shies away from the realities of the lasting residue of white privilege and patriarchy within these movements, or the problems and inconsistencies that emerge from organizing strategies such as consensus decision making. Readers outside of the anti-authoritarian current, as Dixon describes it, be they liberal reformers or revolutionary party builders, stand to gain a great deal of insight in to the complications of inherent in this kind of organizing an appreciation for the candidness with which he speaks. He does not shy away from difficult movement questions, for example. Questions of organization and the relationship to reform movements are also addressed. These also don’t have easy answers indeed, anarchists are often lampooned for opposing organization and leadership, while maintaining *de facto* leadership and organization, which Dixon also acknowledges. Perhaps one limitation is that he does not give the same flexibility to other types of radicals, especially Leninist inspired activists who are also battling to find the most effective way to organize and avoid a one size fits all approach to organizing.

While the focus of *Class, Race and Corporate Power*, is the empirical understanding of systems of domination rooted in capitalism and racism, it is equally important to understand the history, ideological commitments, and debates that take place outside of the “ivory tower” and produce practical theory and knowledge to these ends. *Another Politics* is indispensable in that regard.