

Geoffrey Kurtz

Review

Teamsters and Turtles?
U.S. Progressive Political Movements in the 21st Century
edited by John C. Berg

reviewed by
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Just as the building trades workers' attack on New York anti-war demonstrators in May 1970 came to symbolize the gulf between labor and the new social movements, the November 1999 Seattle demonstrations against the World Trade Organization now evoke the hope of cooperation between them. Bringing together blue-collar union members, environmentalists costumed as sea turtles, crusty-punk anarchists, middle-class human rights activists, ACT UP militants, and thousands of others, Seattle offered a tantalizing glimpse of the unity that leftists have only dreamed of for the past few decades. As John Berg cautions in his introduction to this collection, such unity "remains a goal, not an accomplishment." Understanding how long-term Teamster-Turtle solidarity might be achieved is the ambitious goal of this volume.

In this book, 13 contributors examine 10 contemporary left political movements in the United States. Each of the essays includes an overview of the movement in question, a detailed study of a particular movement's organization, and some attention to the larger significance of the movement. Although all the authors have both academic and activist credentials, few of the essays seem to be informed by their authors' political experiences; only Benjamin Shepard, who links personal narrative and movement analysis with uncommon felicity, uses his own experiences to significantly deepen his article's insights.

One gap in *Teamsters and Turtles?* is the lack of any article on racial justice organizing. For a book on left politics in the U.S., where race matters in a way it does not in any other industrialized country, this is a problematic omission. Race is all the more urgent an issue here given that one of the most striking political problems with the Seattle demonstrations from which the

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book takes its title was their overwhelming whiteness.¹ The new social movements are often as distant from people of color as they are from the white working class; one wonders how incorporating research on anti-racist organizing might have shifted the tenor of the book as a whole.

Berg notes that questions of ideology (what is “the left?”) and organization (what is a movement, as opposed to a party or a conventional interest group?) divide the groups examined here. Furthermore, these movements appeal to different constituencies, seek different goals, and employ different strategies. For Berg, these distinctions are at least as important as those emphasized in the academic discourse about new social movements that draws on Ronald Inglehart’s distinction between “materialist” and “postmaterialist” values. Inglehart posits a profound cultural divide in advanced industrialized societies between privileged political actors who pursue a politics of personal autonomy and cultural symbolism and those who, because they are less materially secure, concentrate economic gain. Berg notes that if Inglehart is right, a broad egalitarian left is unlikely to cohere; materialist and postmaterialist movements, as Inglehart understands them, are separated by too deep a shift in consciousness to work easily together. The key question for Berg thus becomes: what are the actual divides between and within movements?

Berg insists that any move toward a united left must be preceded by theoretical work: we need to know *why* left movements are fractured before we can bring them closer together. However, Berg refuses to offer premature certainties. The questions at stake here are difficult, and the book’s lack of theoretical closure allows for an invigorating review of the state of left movements while suggesting promising directions for future exploration.

Ronald Hayduk’s examination of Global Exchange and the global justice (or “anti-globalization”) movement, the first piece in the volume, rightly emphasizes the fragmentation of what “often looks more like several movements that are at odds with each other.” Hayduk points in particular to the divide between those who would abolish institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) and those who would reform them, as well as the debate over property destruction and other quasi-violent tactics. Hayduk indicates that questions of goals and tactics are related: direct action militants are often also World Bank and IMF abolitionists, and like Global Exchange that favor pragmatic tactics generally have reformist goals. Relationships between the organizational structure of global justice groups

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and their ideologies are also evident in Hayduk's account, as when he draws a parallel between the decentralized, loosely coordinated framework of many global justice organizations and what he calls their "radical democratic" vision of global social change. Hayduk's suggestion of a complex relationship among ideologies, organizational structures, and tactics introduces a theme that reappears at several points in the book.

After Hayduk's article, Berg arranges the nine remaining pieces into three groups: "Movements Based on Material Needs," "Movements Based on Postmaterialist Identities," and "Altruistic Movements." Given his suspicion of Inglehart's categories, this is a strange decision. He states that the classification is "for convenience," but the reader is tempted to interpret it instead as a device for putting the shakiness of Inglehart's thesis on display. Berg notes that "the fuzziness of the distinction will become even clearer as the individual chapters are read." This is an understatement.

Some articles in the book discuss groups with clearly materialist or postmaterialist concerns—for instance, Laura Katz Olson and Frank L. Davis's piece on senior citizen interest groups, or Melissa Haussman's on the women's peace movement, a quintessential new social movement. More often, however, the movements examined blur the line between Inglehart's categories. In his article on the disability movement, David Pfeiffer strenuously objects to the notion that disability rights activists are concerned with "postmaterialist" concerns, pointing out that this movement's highest priorities include workplace rights, health care, and physical access to buildings—unarguably material concerns. Similarly, Benjamin Shepard describes ACT UP as an organization formed in response to a cultural and ideological phenomenon—the "sex panic" of social conservatives—but one that has nevertheless focused its demands on material issues such as affordable housing and access to medicines. Claude E. Welch, Jr.'s brief comments on the increasing openness of human rights groups to the notions of economic and social rights also disrupt the materialist-postmaterialist distinction.

If the categories "materialist" and "postmaterialist" fail to adequately account for movement differences, where should we turn? Suggesting more promising avenues for social movement theory, other contributors to this book take up ideological and organizational themes. As in Hayduk's piece, Immanuel Ness's article on labor and Meredith Reid Sarkees's on the direct-action peace organization Voices in the Wilderness (VitW) propose

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relationships between organizational structure and ideology. Ness sees a decentralized labor federation as one of the central causes of declining union density and political influence, since fragmentation hinders organizing and campaign efforts. At the same time, labor leaders like John Sweeney have linked an emphasis on organizing with a policy of fostering ties to other social movements. In Ness's vision, if labor is to act more militantly—more like a class-based social movement than a “parochial” interest group—it will need the strength that can only come with a greater degree of centralization. Changes in organizational structure, Ness suggests, are part of the answer to Berg's question about the possible basis of lasting Teamster-Turtle unity. Sarkees introduces a distinction between “expressive” and “instrumentalist” ideologies within peace activism as she details the non-hierarchical, amateur-led structure of VitW. Her discussion makes clear that VitW's expressive orientation is tied to both its structure and its decision to use “outsider” tactics of civil disobedience—and, one might add, to its lack of strong ties to social movements outside the radical sector of the peace movement.

Here we have one potential re-description of the divide between elements of the contemporary left, and a hint of how to understand that divide. Centralization, mass participation, and orientation toward effective action seem to go together, as do decentralization, intense personal commitment, and an expressive orientation. Like Hayduk, neither Ness nor Sarkees offers a full account of *how* organizational, ideological, and tactical questions are related, but all note that a relationship among the three factors is clear in the movements they study.

In the contribution to the book that offers the most rigorous engagement with theoretical questions, Christine Kelly and Joel Lefkowitz show how the United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS) illustrates a path by which the “conscience constituency” can find its way into cooperation with the labor movement. Kelly and Lefkowitz argue that USAS represents a “new class politics” that is pragmatic in its strategies but radical in its goals and analysis, in contrast with the sharp divide between expressive and instrumentalist orientations that Sarkees assumes. USAS also marks one of the points at which Inglehart's categories break down: USAS is unambiguously concerned with material issues, but not material issues that directly impact its own members. The capacity of USAS to bridge the differences of constituencies and goals that bedevil the left at large, Kelly and Lefkowitz argue, is due to its decision to define itself through a “class ideal” or “class ethic”²—albeit in the case of USAS a class ethic that self-consciously avoids a critique of capitalism

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as a system. This adoption of an ideological emphasis on class concerns has allowed USAS to shift gears fairly smoothly between confrontational and conventional tactics, to bring together students—a core constituency of the new social movements—and workers, and to achieve concrete victories without losing a radical edge.

Unfortunately, Kelly and Lefkowitz choose not to discuss the telling events at the 2000 USAS conference, now legendary among student activists. This gathering saw a lily-white, largely male, pro-consensus, decentralist, direct-action faction pitted against a pro-voting, pro-centralization, more pragmatic group that included most of the people of color and women at the conference.³ If Hayduk, Ness, and Sarkees are on the right track, we might expect organizational and tactical debates to fall out very much like this. An analysis of this tension within USAS would have given Kelly and Lefkowitz an opportunity to illuminate the ideological dimensions of organizational and tactical questions, something they would be well positioned to do given their discussion of USAS's role as a "bearer of ideas."

If ideology is central, then the fundamental divide might not be between materialist and postmaterialist movements, but between those with a commitment to social equality that transcends the radical-pragmatic divide, and those without. Berg suggests exactly this when he asks whether "a common desire for greater equality" has the potential to unify labor and the new social movements. What the contributors to the book add is a sense of the organizational and tactical decisions that match this ideological choice. In this context, James R. Simmons and Solon J. Simmons's discussion of the Greens makes it embarrassingly clear that there really is something to the Greens' claim that they are "neither left nor right." If we take the example of the Greens seriously, an ideological decision to eschew a class ethic appears to entail both a persistent orientation toward non-pragmatic action (to put it kindly) and an organizational inability to reach beyond what Simmons and Simmons call a "new class" constituency. Despite Simmons and Simmons' sympathy for their subject, their article calls into question the possibility that the U.S. Greens could ever play a helpful role in bringing Teamsters and Turtles together for the long haul.

Berg avoids tying these threads together into an explicit argument. This makes sense, given the loose connection between the various articles in the book. Neither Berg's introductory discussion of ideological and organizational questions nor the contributors' essays attempt to provide a

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full-fledged alternative to Inglehart's account of a cultural incompatibility between labor and the new social movements. Instead, what Berg and his contributors offer is a suggestive outline of the categories on which such an alternative might be built, along with a set of timely social movement studies that are useful in and of themselves.

Notes

¹ Elizabeth (Betita) Martinez, "Where Was the Color in Seattle?" *ColorLines* 3:1 (Spring 2000).

² See Stephen Eric Bronner, *Socialism Unbound* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2002).

³ Daraka Larimore-Hall, "Race, Structure, and Vegan Food: A Look at the USAS Conference," *The Activist* (Fall 2000).

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