Emergent Political Systems: Principles, practices and institutions

The range of contemporary critical theories suggests that it is from those who have suffered the sentence of history - subjugation, domination, diaspora, displacement - that we learn our most enduring lessons for living and thinking.

- Homi Bhabha

Emergent Political Systems

Every evolutionary process has kernals from which it blooms. What are the principles, practices and institutions shaping emerging political systems?

The **principles** upon which it is based will determine what and how we can know differently, or who we could collectively become along the way.

The **practices** are strategies for transforming relations of power.

And the **institutions** reflect the ways in which we are able to take responsibility for our collective ability to seek new ways of being.

The work of myriad contemporary social struggles and critical thinkers speaks to the potential for political systems able to hold an unencumbered "economic man" accountable to all the other aspects of what it means to be human. If they are not envisioned as a means for state-managed "progress", but as the process of *learning how to order our lives together*, perhaps a vision of that larger system is one of flourishing communities with relatively autonomous, yet overlapping and interdependent political economies that prioritize individual, collective and environmental basic needs and well-being over profit and the power to exclude.

In processes of paradigmatic change, the terms and concepts we rely on to explain the world cannot be taken for granted. Those who are taking the initiative and responsibility to learn how to order their lives together are helping shape the values, relationship between Self and Other, and theories and methods for the political systems they manifest through their actions. These are political processes that engage well beyond participation in the electoral and legislative practices of citizens of a nation. Here I offer a schema of those processes I see in terms that might be able to cross discourses, academic disciplines, faiths, and other lenses that shape compartmentalized and distinct discourses more difficult to engage across.

Principles

Measures of success

Economic progress is measured in the concentration of wealth despite costs in any other realm. As such it's basic unit of measure is the dollar. A political system premised on ordering our lives together to produce and maintain individual and collective well-being measures success in the ***ability to become***. This goal is not linear, with one trajectory, but systemic in its understanding of how the well-being of distinct yet interdependent parts of a system are inherently linked to and inform each other. As such, the basic unit of measure is ***the act of engagement***.

Engagement is an expression of a ***relationship between Self and Other***. The relationship between Self and Other characterized by liberal individualism is deeply embedded in dominant political culture and the global economy. It diminishes empathy and distorts our ability to understand how our individual and collective well-being are organically linked.

Through engagement with others, we shape the world, make mistakes, and learn in the process. One gauge for assessing the order of change (learning, growth) underway is the particular ways that beliefs, understanding and emotional states lead to different choices and behavior. On a larger scale, it is those specific and changing relationships between the Self and Other a culture embodies that shape the building blocks of its future sciences, spiritualities, social systems, and human systems.

If the *quality* of our engagement in relation to the larger systems of which we are a part is not a measure of success, there is no incentive to account for unknowing through learning and growth. It is the unseen tree falling in the forest. As social animals, becoming better able to feel the impacts of our actions, on ourselves and others, need not be understood as a sign that we are making better "progress", or producing lower orders of change. The act of ordering our lives together, that engagement, is the antidote to the single-mindedness of "economic man".

Principles of engagement

It's well accepted in the realm of psychology that when a member of a human system changes their behavior (based on new priorities), it creates instability in the whole system. The shifts in values and priorities that characterize the current moment create an environment of protracted change; complex, ever-evolving, and never-quite-resolved. Conceptions of change in a liberal paradigm, glorified and exemplified by such images as the "American Dream," were not fluid and ever-changing, but were able to portray change itself as even-keeled, easy, under control, and managed by others. This is perhaps one of the most difficult challenges for those who relish that stability and security. And interestingly, cognitive scientists are discovering underlying differences between liberal and conservative mindset:

> Cognitive scientists studying liberals and conservatives are finding deep differences, differences that go well beyond politics. There are traits that are already visible in childhood that predict our adult politics: future liberals are more excited by new experiences, while future conservatives are more focused on safety and cleanliness. Conservative brains also seem to detect a wider range of values including core community-bonding values, while liberals focus on compassion and fairness. [i]

These differences (amplified rather than constructively addressed by the media) suggest effective communication skills, and political practices, for engaging across varying orientations toward change. They also suggest that, given the qualities of the paradigms we are in between, conservatives have good reason to feel unsettled, and an empathetic orientation to these concerns is in order. The table below attempts to characterize some of the qualitative differences between paradigms.

Old/current	New/emerging
Balanced, stable	Unsettled
Equilibrium	Motion
Complacent	Engaged
Comfortable	Courageous
Settled	Persistent
Established	Independent
Normalized	idiosyncratic

In this turbulent terrain the linear, single-mindedness of making progress is a liability. The map here is not a linear one in which one has Arrived or Not Arrived to some degree. It is an environment of **complexity** and **heterodoxy** by design. [I discuss this complexity and heterodoxy emerging on the theoretical level and level of discourse elsewhere.] Other variables that will express this complexity are scale or scope: many projects can simultaneously be local, regional, national and transnational. I think of this principle of engagement as from **"meta to many"**; it suggests not the reliance on meta theory, but an awareness that a whole is comprised of its parts, and therefore is fundamentally inclusive. On the level of identity, this complexity is expressed in the concept of *intersectionality*. Central to feminist political theory, political practices in which people are able to effectively order their lives together take the complexity of our lives and embodied experiences into account. The ways that people are then included into or excluded from political engagement are multifaceted.

That's why **centering those most marginalized** is a crucial principle of engagement. Elsewhere I argue that feminist political theory and practice and the knowledge of social movements should be centered rather than marginalized. In practice, this is a material way of challenging the exclusionary nature of liberal progressivism. This is the act of learning to distill from multiple and complex narratives a vision that can be negotiated toward. It requires learning from each other what each asks of the other as they become partners in a task -- not *despite* having different roles, but *because* they have different roles. In the most concrete of ways *this is the work*.

Accounting for the needs of those most impacted in a particular circumstance doesn't "only" account for their interests, but is also a contribution to the well-being of the whole larger set of sub-systems of which they a part. *In practice,* that is the difference between individualist, linear thinking and systemic or synthetic thinking. In the former, we want to do something well because we benefit in some way -- people like or respect us, we get more acknowledgment or money, etc. In the latter, the criteria for a beneficial action include not only our own best interests, but also the best interests of the others it will effect, and the whole system of which we are inter-related parts.

Deceivingly, this is *not* a distinction between capitalism and socialism, and these are not just two different ways of thinking or even ways of being. Likewise, we are not just trying to maintain inclusion in a system that we have struggled incessantly for inclusion into. Rather, it is one way to characterize what this historic transition and paradigm shift required of us if we are to build a world that serves us all: The political systems which must emerge in order for us to survive and thrive through this paradigm shift -- and the world manifested through it -- will not be premised on the assumptions of colonial imperialism, or the reactions to it, of which they were built. They will be built from those very narratives that help us understand where we are collectively coming from and headed to.

New materialism suggests that a principle of engagement is to be in the act of developing a **practical philosophy** or a way of aligning our actions with our values. This is easier said than done in a time when it is all too "normal" to compromise one's values as a regular part of the daily routine. Or when the options that seem to be available do not reflect people's preferences or needs.

Practices

The practices of a new political system are how its principals are applied in the act of **people ordering their lives together**. Ideally, they create ("produce" and "reproduce") **embodied relations of power** conducive to individual and collective well-being. These relations coalesce through and shape systems and institutions, old and new.

Grassroots organizing, networking, solidarity, coalition building and similar practices are not understood in terms of international relations, as is our current political economy. These practices are not centralized by international institutions that confer upon them legitimacy; they are much more heterogeneous and complex; they have many centers while having no center. Likewise, the work people are involved in is only sometimes

determined by a law-based jurisdiction that outlines a polity. Instead, groupings are formed across and between multiple forms of identity such as: linkages from Ferguson to Gaza or between prisoners in Palestine and the U.S.; international networks of peasants; or labor struggles organized across borders along the lines of global trade routes or between variously located parts of a global corporation.

These are practices engaged in by overlapping and interdependent *communities* deciding together what their shared goals are and how they will navigate their ways toward them together from their different locations and vantage points. In political science, the unit of measure is a State that functions in a system of states, navigating by a system of legally defined rights and responsibilities, and to which individual and individual communities are subjected. In a new political supra-system, the state is de-centered[ii], and the multiple centers, where there is no center, are the communities of people we are a part of which are struggling to survive and aspiring to thrive. Samir Amin suggests that thinking of this as a practice of "non-party" politics might prove fruitful.[iii]

What are the self-sufficiencies and inter-dependencies that will make this possible? What are the new community identities, boundaries, rights, responsibilities and relationships with "other" communities that will need to be carved out of the current system? What are the new ways of understanding ourselves, each other, theory, philosophy, movement, materiality, and politics themselves that allow for more sound ways of living?

The political practice, the way we do that, is to become aware of our own stories, narratives, discourses and those of others. From them, we distill a vision they all share that we can negotiate with each other toward. While many feminist political thinkers speak to this challenge, in the language of Audre Lorde, the intention of these practices should not be mistaken for "a deeper and real need for homogeneity."[iv] Rather, we can bring the intention of learning from each other what it will require, and become partners in that task -- not *despite* having different roles and locations, but *because* we have different histories, experiences and needs.

This is not the stuff of pie-in-the-sky utopias, but hard work. Rather than utopian thinking, it is what Immanuel Wallerstein calls *utopistics*, or the "serious assessment of historical alternatives...involving a close reconsideration of the structures of knowledge and of what we really know about how the social world works." These "serious assessments of historical alternatives" manifest in the group solidarities created when the gaze of the citizen is turned away from the state, and members of communities turn instead toward themselves and each other. Among so many other things, it is also an act of transcending or moving beyond liberal individualism.

These organic practices feed and are fed by an extensive array of political philosophy, theory and practice from within, outside of and across boundaries of the state. This *is* the essence of (U.S.) third-world[v] and trans-nationalist[vi] feminist political theory and the practice of grass roots organizing. A level of deep sophistication exists in how shared goals and ways to work across difference are identified and implemented to create relations of power not premised on domination. These skills sets also permeate practices of broader, less-formalized, more self-regulating communities organizing around, for example, the creation of their own food systems, incorporating everything from urban foraging to community gardens, re-greening food deserts, sourcing urban centers with regional produce and the like.

Learning into coalitional politics

There are as many barriers to effective participation in coalitional politics as there are specific ways that communities are segregated or isolated from each other based on divisions created by the global economy. Undoing those divisions requires learning how to work across them. A generalized example, useful in some ways and reductive and limited in others that I leave aside for now, includes the specific kinds of differences between people who have a relationship to histories of contemporary political struggle, or any of those specific manifestations today, and those who do not. This differential is often referred to as privilege. Privilege

releases people from the need to regularly engage in critical thought about our social world and its systemic threat to our individual and collective well-being, and it creates different understandings of history, different perspectives and vocabularies.

Even the term (social) "movement" is used differently by these two (momentarily generalized) groups. In today's popular discourse, a social movement refers to a broader sense of trends that affect the social order. In the broadest sense it might be understood as, for example, the "movement for greener cities". In a narrow sense, social entrepreneurs start their own "movements" with others (of their "tribe"). But historically, in the West the term emerged to describe the urban working class at the advent of industrialization who were determined to help shape the future of work, or *how we order our lives together*. They are the people who fought the long struggle for labor rights -- shorter hours, more benefits, safety precautions -- since industrialization became the status quo. Those movements were joined by the wave of movements from the civil rights era, and internationally occurred alongside national movements for political sovereignty that have also flourished into today's more complex array of "new social movements".

Contemporary social movements bring deeply developed theory and practice from the locations of the most impacted and principles of intersectionality, collaboration, coalition building and implementable principles for working across and between differences. Centering these practices allows them to reside together with the resources from various other centers. The Democratic Party has "know-how" in the experience of governance. The institutional Left brings centuries of strategic thinking and practice for building power. A "transformative organizing model" sits at this intersection already.[vii] Evolutionists, organizational development, faith-based communities, and on and on bring values, principles and practices to learn more about, challenge, and navigate. I understand this to be the practice that political theorists and philosophers such as Angela Davis, Jodi Dean, Chela Sandoval, Wendy Brown, Trinh Minh-ha, Patricia Hill Collins, and Gloria Anzaldúa and so many others have envisioned with the movements and communities of which they are a part.

Subsuming Power?

The political systems sited in this paper reflect different, contested, and collective aspirations for self-determination. Taken together, they can be seen as the manifestation of efforts to "change the world without taking power"[viii]. As such, they do not require a counterpower[ix] or the attainment of (that kind of) power, per se. They do not prioritize pursuit of a new Democratic Party, a new anti-capitalist politics, or a reinvented Left. Returning to Audre Lorde's definition of power, they pursue and prioritize *the ability to seek new ways of being in the world*.

Daily, we watch as international humanitarian law that criminalizes the targeting of civilians by armies and other "outrages upon personal dignity" is ignored with impunity. There is even a "lawfare" campaign attempting to remove these legal constraints on governments' grotesque acts of violence against people resisting domination.[x]

Perhaps this transition from one paradigm to another, and from one political system to many, is not about "winning" power but about that kind of power being absorbed and diffusing into other forms of power. The kinds of work such a fundamental shift requires become viable for more people as basic needs for employment, income, and social services go unmet and prospects for productive political change lose legitimacy.

Waiting for measured concessions, allocated by the current system, which prove insufficient, dwindle, or to be no longer perpetually en route, keeps a focus on the state. However, as people rely on and participate in these systems less, new opportunities open for the kinds of engagement on which new political systems are built. This de-centering of the state potentially reduces, or delays, the demands to democratize institutions tied to

national and corporate economic development that elicit such violence from the state (and non-state actors). It also builds the capacity, resilience, infrastructure and coalitional support that has the potential to avoid, reduce and defend against the power of violence and other forms of suppression.

Integral to these dynamics is a shift in ability to define the terms on which they occur -- another formidable source of power held by emergent political systems. For example, the power of corporations over our current political system is in no small part enabled by the ways those corporate interests are interwoven in people's daily life. Not only do people provide the labor for and purchase those products, they listen to advertising and news that confers legitimacy upon those products, and invest in them by keeping our money in banks that loan it to them. The escalation of tensions around the Dakota Access Pipeline ignited a national call to remove money from the banks that provided these loans. Emptying those coffers would shift the terms, and relations of power, without creating individual targets. This is not a protest, but a way to defend and protect ourselves. The concomitant creation of community banks and other financial institutions has a long history, in this country rooted in African American strategies for producing power and access to resources in a political economy organized and separated by race.

These kinds of power become possible in the practice of learning how to share them as well as sharing access to the legitimacy and influence that power confers. It suggests a paradigmatic shift away from wrestling power away from an enemy toward taking collective responsibility for effective and conscious cultural production, or learning how to *be here well*. It does not preclude the need to make demands of the State, defend gains made over time or recently, or to protect what we have together.

Strategies

The act of engaging effectively in third-order change necessarily requires ***distinguishing between actions that transform or reinscribe***, and in what ways. This is a tool for seeking new ways of being in the world. Transformative actions might be non-participation, Aikido-type moves, winning over, etc. Actions which re-inscribe power might include reforms, cooption, relying on the nonprofit industrial complex as a third sector, etc.). For example, nonprofit organizations that provide "public" services based on "private" resources may constitute a "third" sector, but don't reflect qualitatively new public/private relations; they rewrite the same systemic oppression in new ways. Projects driven by communities, based on their own needs, can be distinguished and prioritized from other "nonprofits" for the purposes of being able to shape and build long-term strategy.

Another key strategy I see is an emphasis on ***resilience building*** during this protracted, unstable and often violent and deadly moment. This is about building capacity despite lack of access to resources or forms of influence or power, and against political backlash. Standing Rock offers an unusually explicit example of this, even though it's not an example played out over an extending time period, which is so often the case. Nonetheless, an incredible expression of the mechanism, or function, of resilience occurred when the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers announced that they would close the lands the camps were on to public access. Rather than dissolving under that pressure, the generation of elders and established Sioux leadership stepped back and went home as the younger generation rekindled the fires at the camp over the winter. Significant internal cohesion and infrastructure backed by legal support, media attention, donated money and resources, and the role played by the U.S. veterans all contributed to this momentous resilience. Obviously it is yet to be seen how this particular political battle will end. But it would already have finished if it were not for the incredible joining of forces, institutional capacity, and resilience building.

The effects of this resilience extend beyond the camps themselves. There is collaboration between Standing Rock and the Movement for Black Lives[xi]. The ability to house, feed, coordinate and provide medical, legal and media for such actions is astounding, and now there are that many more people with new skills in this area. Moves to defund banks, interrupt other pipelines and broaden support for other Indigenous struggles are all

stronger now. We know the violence that vigilante groups, private "security forces" and governments are capable of. The extent to which we will be able to develop strategies that lower these risks is yet to be seen.

There are also **short- and long-term considerations**. In *After Liberalism,* Immanuel Wallerstein makes a case for basing strategies and practices on an assessment of the specific roles of the state. He starts by acknowledging that, historically, the state has been "*par excellence* the reformer's instrument for helping people cope." He clarifies that this does not mean it has been the only or perhaps even principle function, and that it has not been the only coping mechanism. Nonetheless, this fact justifies attempts intelligently directed by ordinary people to get states to act in particular ways. And despite the growing difficulty of this task, states can still "increase or diminish suffering through their allocation of resources, their degree of protection of rights, and their interventions in social relations between different groups". To suggest that people no longer bother with what their state does is folly, and he doesn't believe that many people will turn away completely from an active concern with the actions of their state.

However, he emphasizes that making things a little better (or a little worse) for everyone is *all* states can do. While it matters a lot in the short run, he argues that it matters "not at all in the longer run." In the project of affecting the massive transition of the whole world-system he understands the state as a major obstacle rather than a major vehicle for action.
Based on this assessment, he sees it as effective to work at the local and at the "world level", but not at the level of the national state: "It is of use to pursue objectives for the very short run or for the long run, but the middle run has become ineffective because the middle run supposes an ongoing, well-functioning historical system."

It is compelling to resist the validity of this analysis for two reasons. Firstly, it requires accepting that we now live in a world "where liberal values no longer hold sway and where the existing historical system is incapable of ensuring that minimal level of personal and material security that is required for its own acceptability (not to speak of its legitimation)". Secondly, it's a complicated strategy to implement. He concludes that no longer having an objective of state power as a focus, all those who have been left out in the present world-system have the task "to ensure the creation of a new historical system by acting at one and the same time very locally and very globally."[xii]

Institutions

In what Wallerstein calls the historical system, the field of institutions at play has been understood to exist within the realm of international relations. They were historically state institutions bound together by an international infrastructure, financial, legal and otherwise, conferring legitimacy not only on individual states, but on the state system itself. This system, at both the national and international levels, becomes less recognizable over time.

To say much here would be outside the scope of this paper. It is relevant however, to point to a few important trends. One is the **blurring of lines between the public and private sectors** taking place on every level of state governance. At the federal level, there has been growing awareness and concern about the role of PACs, lobbies, and major corporations in the workings of government and elections.

Related in complex ways that reflect neoliberal shifts in the global economy over the last decades, this blurring of the private and public sectors is also seen in the emergence of hybrid nonprofit organizations, public school systems that include privately owned charter schools, and private foundations funding social services traditionally funded by the government. Likewise, mass-based organizing and social movements express increasingly complex sets of social relations within, across and despite both national and international borders. On the international level, migration and the growing phenomena of statelessness add to this complexity.

Another trend de-centering the role of the state is the ***shift in the geographic locus of power exacerbating contradictions, divisions and tension between rural and urban spaces***. This phenomena is correlated in significant and complex ways with shifting demographic trends and race relations in this country. For the purposes of this paper, I will highlight the municipal-level, mass-based organizing of Right to the City and take-the-land back projects. Based in urban areas that are linked nationally and transnationally with other similar projects, they address the root causes of and building solutions for inter-related issues of gentrification, dislocation, homelessness and public land use. However, the larger constellation of movement organizations supporting this work are at the forefront of the struggle for democracy in the myriad ways it may manifest and in the face of conservative forces now said to be using the strategies of the left to hinder transformative change.

Another way power is shifting to urban centers is exemplified in an ideological battle spreading to cities across the U.S. over whether to recognize the "discovery" and conquest of the continent as Columbus Day or Indigenous Peoples' Day. I juxtapose this phenomena with the rash of escalated rural white hate-based institutions re-emerging in the wake of the election process and moving at a disturbing pace. Bolstered by the behavior, language and stated intentions of the president-elect, their initiatives seem to be in response to the growing size, increasing political power and racial demographics of urban areas.

In this context, institutional stakeholders of all types and scale are part of a surge in building *local* energy sources and economies, complex *regional* food networks, *transnational* organizing on peasant and labor rights, and myriad ecological issues including climate change. Of course, these are just a few examples.

Finance capital, corporate/political bonds, organized white supremacists, NGOs, non-state military, regional community-based trade across state lines, and networks of community- and mass-based building projects are just some of the actors redefining the political landscape, making it difficult to rely on a topography of International Relations, despite the continued roles of the state system.

There are many other ways that the changing nature of institutions could be understood to great benefit. This is sufficient, however, to make the point that if overlapping and interdependent communities of various sizes, scales and identities are understood as the building blocks of the next historic system, then the "institutionalization" of this complexity would be a natural goal or desired outcome. Those interlinking practices and outcomes *become* the field of systems in which we are working. And those social systems are connected to, and interdependent on, the eco-systems and other systems they are recognized to be a part of (or not).

Paradoxically, it may also be that the nature of this political work does not require the same kind of institutionalization. In *Postcapitalist Politics,* J.K. Gibson-Graham writes about how the globalization of feminist politics has its ground not in international institutions, or even unity, but in ubiquity.[xiii]

Implicit in the process of institution building described here is that the pursuit of democracy, as a way in which people order their lives together, is not limited to particular kinds of institutions that are tied to national economic development. On the contrary, it is present in the ways and locations that people are able to win the struggle for it:

> How to democratize any particular anti-democratic organization... is a question that can be answered in concrete form only through the process of an actual democratic struggle within each such organization. In this sense, radical democracy is different from utopianism. It does not seek to impose a preconceived model; such impositions always turn out to be anti-democratic, however democratic the model itself may be. It means the beginning of a struggle on democratic principles, a process from which new forms of organization emerge. Such a struggle can be begun in *any* organization, at *any* economic or technological level.[xiv]

Broadening the type and number of institutional actors in these political processes sheds new light on assumptions that governance is synonymous with government. Management of state systems is already deeply overlaid and interwoven with new expressions of co-creation, stewardship, and other forms of political responsibility.

The next political systems will not emerge out any one organized political group, but out of the ability of communities to identify and decipher together how institutions can order their lives such that they are able to seek new ways of being in the world. Pursuing such an amorphous project is a generative act, the product of which emerges out of the ways we shape our lives, relationships and economies.

i   Stephen Cataldo, *Cognitive Politics: A Communications Workbook for Progressives,* self-published, 2015.

ii   I make no attempt here to profess or project the future scale, scope, function, or presence of the state; only recognize a process in which it is de-centered.

iii   Samir Amin, "Social Movements at the Periphery," in *New Social Movements in the South: Empowering the People*, Zed Books, 1993, page 87.

iv   Sandoval, page 45.

v   In a historic sense, the term *third world* refers to the part of the world that was neither capitalist nor communist, rather than to a degree of "development" that has or has not been achieved.

vi   I mean this not only in the sense of crossing boundaries, but also moving in ways that are beyond the *concepts* of boundaries.

vii Steve Williams, "Organizing Transformation: Best Practices in the Transformative Organizing Model," Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, New York Office, May 2015.

viii This phrase is the title of the book: John Holloway, *Changing the World Without Taking Power: The Meaning of Revolution Today,"* Pluto Press, 2003.

ix https://roarmag.org/magazine/anti-capitalist-politics-21st-century/

x   http://www.counterpunch.org/2014/08/18/globalizing-gaza/

xi   http://www.injusticeboycott.com/

xii Emmanuel Wallerstein, *After Liberalism,* The New Press, 1995, page 7.

xiii J.K. Gibson-Graham, *A Postcapitalist Politics*, University of Minnesota Press, 2006

xiv C. Douglas Lummis, "Development Against Democracy" in *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Winter 1991), page 59.