

Wainwright, Hilary (2009). *Reclaim the state: experiments in popular democracy*. London / New York / Calcutta: Seagull (2nd edition).

Reviewed by **Laurence Cox**

A new book by Hilary Wainwright is usually a significant event: *Beyond the Fragments* (with Sheila Rowbotham and Lynne Segal, 1979), *Arguments for a New Left* (1994) and the first edition of *Reclaim the State* (2003) all set down significant markers for the social movement left, along with her more specifically trade union-related work from the Vickers workers' report in 1978 to her recent (2009) study of union-led workplace change in Newcastle. Over the last four decades she has been a continually thoughtful and thought-provoking interlocutor for movement activists in a very wide range of contexts, from *New Left Review* and popular planning in the Greater London Council to *Red Pepper* magazine and the Transnational Institute progressive think-tank. The rewritten *Reclaim the State* does not disappoint.

"Detailed attention to the creativity of practice is one of the most fruitful sources of new theory", she writes (p. 14); a position developed in detail in *Arguments for a New Left*, which argued for a politics that respects the tacit knowledge held by ordinary people and articulated in social movements. *Reclaim the State* explores how this can be used to remake the state in its own shape - perhaps not quite in the revolutionary sense Marx argued for in his account of the Paris Commune, but nonetheless in significant ways: like Warren Magnusson's (1996) *The Search for Political Space*, the key context is the city or region where popular movements have gained sufficient power to reshape the local state significantly.

Ambiguous histories

Chapters 1 - 4 of the new edition cover the history and theory of popular movements in struggle towards a participatory democracy: the significance of the present conjuncture in terms of new movements, the ways in which neo-liberalism has co-opted much of the language of participation, her approach in writing the book and a recapitulation of the *Arguments for a New Left* position. These chapters certainly make the case, but there is a difficulty of presentation which is perhaps unavoidable: given that a decent account of participatory democracy has to cover normative political theory, distinguish real from fake participation, account for knowledge and power from below, discuss movement struggles and their (partial) realisation in different kinds of local state arrangement, there is no straightforward way to tell the story for the uninitiated.

The book really takes off (for this reader) with the empirical chapters, which Wainwright discusses in terms of the exemplary case of Porto Alegre's participatory budgeting; attempts at remaking the public sphere in (and

despite) “New Labour” Britain; and a series of shorter discussions of radical municipalities in continental Europe. These chapters recapitulate the stories explored in the first edition, but with an additional six years’ experience - by no means all encouraging.

The 2004 defeat of the Workers’ Party in the Porto Alegre local elections has led to a weakening, fragmentation and professionalisation of the city’s famous participatory budgeting process - leaving it certainly as a historical experience and inspiring model, but increasingly weakened in practice.

In Luton, southern England, the success of the radical Exodus collective in pioneering a community takeover of the verbally participatory schemes of New Labour “regeneration” on the Marsh Farm council housing estate led to constant assaults by local government aimed at restoring the power of consultancy and commercial development but the slow achievements of the “organized and strategic activity of the residents” (p. 228).

In east Manchester, local attempts at “redistribution, regeneration and public and community-led public service reform” (p. 277), again putting pressure on the abstract simulation of participation cooked up by central government and this time drawing on long-standing trade union traditions, cooperative organising, environmental and religious groups, achieved some gains but again against a background of state-led pressure for privatisation and commercialisation.

In Newcastle, more dramatically, plans for the gentrification of an old working-class area led to a powerful alliance of community groups and trade unions under the leadership of the public sector union UNISON, which developed strategic alliances, contested the contracting-out of key services and pushed participants to understand the struggle in terms of international conflicts over neoliberalism; a process chronicled in more detail in her *Public service reform - but not as we know it* (2009).

The final empirical chapter discusses a range of continental European experiences: the Norwegian trade union’s model municipality experiment; participatory democracy in Italian towns; and participatory budgeting in Seville. The book concludes with an analysis of the political potential of non-state sources of popular power; a restatement of the importance of democratic knowledge; and an argument for the continuing significance of participatory democracy.

Reclaiming or remaking the state?

The book’s title was originally intended both “as a challenge to New Labour - and a provocation to my anarchist friends”. Her debate with John Holloway (2011) about *Reclaim the state* and his *Crack capitalism* (2010) explores somewhat different arguments, where (to this reader at least) Holloway’s critique of politics and Wainwright’s defence of state-as-politics left the space of social movement politics *beyond* the state almost untouched, as though to be

political and organised is to be part of the state. But another organisation is perhaps possible...

My feeling on closing *Reclaim the state* was that Wainwright's case is unproven. Those who *have to* fight these struggles necessarily do so, and those she chronicles are doing so well and against great odds, winning at times and losing perhaps more frequently. But for those who can make choices as to where to fight their battles, the book does not convince that the local state is a wise battleground. If a single-country revolution is unsustainable, then a single-city one is even less likely to succeed against the pressures that the national state can bring to bear on any substantial challenge to local power relations; something recognised by the Newcastle anti-privatizers in their focus on national and international alliances and analyses (p. 292).

She argues that "Today's experiments place a far greater emphasis on institutional design and sustainability" (p. 376), as against those of the 1960s and 1970s; but as the book itself demonstrates, one thing is sustainability on paper and another is the ability to actually sustain radical changes to even local power relationships in a hostile national and international context. It may indeed be the case that local transformation can *only* survive in the context of wider revolutionary struggles.

This is not to argue with Wainwright's powerful demolition of the top-down approach of Stalinism and Social Democracy - something which the university-educated left (to say nothing of Left establishments) have much to learn from - or with her arguments for grounding organisation in popular knowledge - for which she is an exceptional spokesperson and perhaps the best current theorist. Indeed the book would be an excellent read to recommend to anyone who still believes in exclusively electoral forms of democracy on progressive grounds.

It is rather to radicalise this argument, *contra* both Wainwright's desire to reclaim the state and Holloway's silence on the question of organisation, to ask how movement politics can remake popular organisation in the image of popular knowledge rather than in the image of the state. To return, perhaps crudely, to the question of democracy: states as we know them are in most cases elite political formations loosely modified to co-opt popular movements (democratic movements, independence movements, socialist movements, feminist movements). A genuinely democratic state would not look like a radical version of present-day Britain; in keeping with Wainwright's *Arguments*, its form can hardly be outlined in advance other than to ground it in workplaces, communities and movement alliances rather than units of top-down administration.

Respecting each other's struggles

Having said this, it should be clear that the kind of grassroots struggles for power chronicled in *Reclaim the state* are a necessary *part* of this kind of democracy, and the inability of schematic forms of thought to recognise them is itself unhelpful. As Wainwright notes, its realities are complex (and not easily

summarised) and often “below the conventional radar” (p. 403). If participatory democracy cannot be achieved at the local or regional level alone, and a war of position will not of itself deliver transformation, neither will a war of manoeuvre which fails to build on many such wars of position within many different institutional and extra-institutional fields, and which attempts to radicalise them and connect the dots.

Translated into everyday political practice, that position which rejects community-based struggles and attempts at participatory democracy *a priori* because of their insufficiently revolutionary character (once from a socialist point of view; these days equally frequently from an ecological or autonomist point of view) is as limited as the position of community activists who fail to make the connections and alliances beyond their own sphere of work. It is demanding, bruising and exhausting; but no more so than that of many other popular movements whose support is needed if gains in one community are to survive.

The besetting sin of twenty-first century Northern politics, perhaps, is its weakness at alliance-building and the tendency to fetishise particular methods and spheres of action. Genuine popular democracy has to start from *respect for each other's struggles* - not uncritical respect, but taking each other's battles seriously, as a basis for critical debates geared towards alliance-building and practical solidarity. *Reclaim the state* is an important step in this direction, shining an unusual and penetrating light on an area of political life all too often ignored by activists in other movements.

References

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