

# Chris Dixon; *Another Politics:* Talking Across Today's Transformative Movements

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*Another Politics* looks at the practices of numerous activists in many North American non-violent resistance groups and attempts to extract some common challenges and possible solutions. In particular, the role of leadership is highly contested within many anti-authoritarian political movements. Much can be learned from these struggles, which often take place inside groups and organizations and are therefore somewhat hidden from many members and outsiders. The everyday struggles that take place within resistance movements are very productive events or relationships that can inform academic work and help create a broader understanding of social and political change. This book is an excellent example of how empirical research can give rise to fresh ways of conceptualizing social movements and may also provide solutions for change that avoid some of the common obstacles we have seen in the past.

Resistance movements are diverse in their aims and methods, although the simple division between peaceful and violent resistance has often dominated discussions on characterizing resistance. This sort of dichotomous thinking does little to explain the many possibilities within these movements. Ideas such as 'diversity of tactics' enable activists to both discuss and practice a broad variety of resistance strategies. For resistance studies, these different groups can help reveal the various benefits and costs of alternative strategies. There is still a great deal of thinking to be done about these differences and it is valuable for this theorizing to be informed by actual struggles. Sometimes new ways of theorizing a problem are first enacted through practice before being translated into academic theory.

## The approach of *Another Politics*

*Another Politics* is the product of a multi-year project to explore and connect political movements that work to oppose and change current power

structures. It is of particular interest to activists engaged in organizing for progressive social change and will also appeal to those who work within academe attempting to align their work with activism. The specific movements and organizations addressed in this book are largely based in North America and often focused on local issues, however they feature connections to global perspectives. The case studies represent a large and diverse group of communities that are well-connected to the increasingly globalized nexus of modern capitalism and various anti-globalizing forces. This book succeeds in finding commonalities between various movements. The resistance actions discussed fall under the broad umbrella term of 'social justice movements' including but not limited to students, veterans, feminist and gender activists. The author, Chris Dixon, specifically argues that anti-authoritarian currents could provide effective paths for social change. Said anti-authoritarian currents have increasingly come to the attention of academics noticing that anarchist ideas previously belittled or excluded from many discussions of social movements are gaining more tolerance or support amongst both professionals and the general public.

This book is written in an accessible style which offers readers many ideas for making activist discussions more productive and planning political actions that more effectively achieve their goals within a variety of social movements. It is not a narrative of the creation, growth, and decline of specific social movements, but is rather a thematically organized discussion on how groups work to implement change in both their local communities and the global arena. It includes numerous stories of campaigns on anti-authoritarian projects. The themes on which Dixon focuses most heavily are anti-racist feminism, prison abolitionism, and anarchism. He posits that these issues are currently some of the most significant and valuable movements covered by anti-authoritarianism. All three share historical roots, yet seem to have gained a new impetus in their opposition to a globalized, neo-liberal pressure that seems to define dominant political and economic structures.

As part of his effort to understand how these resistance movements work, Dixon uses a 'critically synthetic' approach. He defines this as a way of combining knowledge from divergent traditions and move-

ments in order to avoid ‘correct line’ politics (p. 60). He asserts that when people pay too much attention to reaching a ‘correct’ analysis, they miss lessons that can be learned from the messy, everyday world of political action and the multiplicity of experiences, circumstances, and consequent negotiations that occur when different people and communities meet. He argues that a nonsectarian approach is valuable when working across the international, complex web of hegemonic imperial capitalism.

For the purpose of this book, Dixon breaks down the current wave of resistance to four ‘anti’s’: Anti-authoritarianism, anti-capitalism, anti-oppression, and anti-imperialism. He asserts that these four streams of resistance are at the heart of what he labels ‘another politics’. Inspired by the Zapatistas in Mexico, the term ‘another politics’ helps to delineate a political movement that Dixon describes as ‘increasingly sophisticated’ and whose story is ‘largely untold’ (p. 7). He does not claim that this movement is entirely unique but rather that it addresses known problems in a way that could provide new wisdom and power to ‘victims’ of oppression. One of the challenges that arises within a resistance movement is concerned with how to construct new social organizations which can effectively create opportunities for those subject to exclusion and oppression. ‘Another politics’ helps us understand how we can both, for instance, oppose prisons in general and support their abolition while also exploring new ways to help people living within the existing prison system. Dixon points out that there is tension between being in opposition to something like the prison system and trying to live beyond the effects of that system. It is difficult to both escape and engage. We must find a balance that gives us some freedom while also allowing us to fight systems effectively to produce new social possibilities.

## **Strategy and tactics in resistance movements**

The discussions of strategy and leadership within movements for social change are important within the realm of resistance studies and are thus a particularly strong element of the book. As part of these conversations, Dixon discusses the oft over-used term ‘prefigurative politics’ and the different ways in which it can be understood. This is important because the term usage is often misunderstood in terms of its implications

for developing social change strategies. Prefigurative politics describe a specific understanding of how goals and strategies are connected. Prefigurative strategies involve such ideas as being ‘in the world but not of it’. This refers to the difficulty of being enmeshed in localized struggles that involve goals that may seem to be at odds with a movement’s broader political aims. For instance, he talks about the group ‘Solidarity Across Borders’ and the difficulties that some members have in reconciling the work that they do with the broader political objectives of the group. The ultimate aim of some in this group is to eliminate national borders completely or nullify their ability to stop people’s movements on a global scale. However, in their practical projects to defend immigrants, refugees, and other people subject to border control, there is an acceptance of borders as a fundamental reality that must be accepted in order to benefit people subject to border oppression (p. 131). He sees this as a problem for people who wish to adhere to a ‘correct political line’ but also as an area of productive tension where new strategies and tactics can be developed that take the current conditions into account but still keep more idealistic goals in mind.

His experiences within different anti-authoritarian resistance groups provide examples of different goals, strategies, and tactics for negotiating with power. All of these possibilities mean that there are many different forms of resistance and their efficacy can be highly contested. Struggles around goals, strategies, and tactics take place both within and between groups and external powers. For instance, ‘No One is Illegal’ (NOII) is an organization that is in many ways fundamentally opposed to the existence of modern forms of the state because they theorize that the states are the primary reason for the existence of borders and border controls that can create a great deal of hardship for people (p. 128). Particularly in the case of refugee crises, borders can become very arbitrary and punitive obstacles. States are given the role of the neutral arbiter of border conflict, and it is often assumed that there is a logic inherent to the state that determines these decisions. In practice, NOII has found that the enforcement of borders and border controls is actually far more complex and involves many small-scale decisions that are made by individuals and private interest groups, including companies and corporations. Many activists in NOII have learned from their practical experi-

ence of influencing decisions about border enforcement and developed different forms of resistance that do not come from a theoretical understanding or a 'strategic vision' but are reactionary in some ways. Dixon then argues that connecting these lessons back into theory and strategy is an important component of successful resistance organization.

## **Leadership in anti-authoritarian movements**

The kind of empirical data that is found in this book allows for a further analysis of how power and resistance interact and connect. Dixon does not promote a particular theoretical agenda, although his educational background would enable him to do so. He prefers to present information about what people are doing (praxis) and what people are thinking (theory) within activist communities and allow these different voices to mingle and contrast with one another. This facilitates a creative path of resistance that can adapt to constantly changing power relations. There are numerous ways in which these relations can be theorized. For instance, the same action could exhibit some aspects of a Foucauldian analysis of power, but could also be considered within a Bourdieusian framework of forms of capital (habitus, field and symbolic), or through the Marxist lens of class conflict. The point is that there are many paths of resistance and that these paths include different experiences and understandings of power relations.

One type of power relationship that is important both within and without resistance movements is the role of leaders. Classical sociological texts, such as those of Max Weber, tend to classify and analyze different types of leadership without questioning the existence or role of leadership itself. Leadership can be quite difficult to reconcile with anti-authoritarian politics in particular and is often a source of disagreement within resistance movements. Dixon argues that we need to recognize both the strengths and weaknesses within different forms of leadership, and find ways to analyze and use the qualities of leadership to move towards more abstract goals of liberation or social change. He advocates for 'leadership from below' that can utilize the existing leadership skills of certain members of the public while simultaneously developing leadership skills in others. Cyclic redistribution of leadership power contributes to a better understanding on how leadership roles are filled, and can help groups

actively learn how to deal with personal differences in constructive ways. He describes the idea of building a 'leaderful' movement that will make any organization both stronger in advocating for change, more equitable in how it currently functions, and more empowering for group members.

This question of leadership is particularly revealing when trying to understand resistance movements. The presence and form of leadership structures is often an aspect of organizations that is taken for granted. Two opposing arguments are often presented. One is that 'strong' leadership is needed to keep an organization focused on specific goals and to effectively engage and negotiate with powerful structural elements that the movement would like to change. For instance, a prison abolition organization may feel that is important to have knowledgeable leaders who can talk to decision makers within the criminal justice system. This often means that the leadership of the resistance group may share characteristics and communication styles with the leadership of the group that they are trying to change (p. 177). The activism leadership must speak the same language and share social norms with the dominant group so that they are not immediately dismissed as unreasonable. This is often seen within union movements where there is little observable difference between union leaders and business leaders when they occupy the same space. This type of leadership is also normally associated with a hierarchical decision-making structures that give preference to the opinions of leaders and may even give them power over others.

The other argument is that the presence of leaders is a problem that is best solved by reducing a leader's power or, more problematically, hiding the leadership roles by disguising a system or group appear leaderless(p. 178). This is often a reaction to the hierarchical structures on which conventional leaders often depend. Whether they use persuasion or punishment, a hierarchy gives precedence to their perceptions and decisions. Reducing this precedence is seen as a crucial component of creating a more egalitarian organization. Dixon describes the 'no leaders sleight of hand' that often results in a refusal to recognize differences and diversity within a movement and therefore fails to address possible means of working with these differences in order to create a more egalitarian and just societal organization. This argument over the visibility and usefulness of leadership has been around for a while. For instance, it was

addressed in the pamphlet, “The Tyranny of Structurelessness”, by Jo Freeman in 1972. If we do not make the qualities and practices of leadership visible, we cannot analyze them. If we cannot analyze them, we cannot change them or adapt them to new circumstances. In order to follow through with a ‘critically synthetic’ approach to understanding resistance movements, a full discussion of how leadership works is necessary. There is much to be learned from the practical struggles on this subject that have taken place within anti-authoritarian groups in particular.

## **Building resistance and resistance studies**

Establishing strategic goals and reworking leadership models and practices are only two pieces of building an effective resistance movement. Resistance does not solely concern disruption. It is also tasked with building new structures and relationships. Resistance movements struggle with numerous questions that are not present within the discourses of dominance, such as: how can activists operate within a system that they fundamentally oppose? How can they exemplify new social structures when so many people are dependent on the old social structures? How can they retain an independent identity in resistance to hegemonic norms yet also acquiesce to said norms daily to survive? Some of these questions, while potent amongst anti-authoritarian groups, are relevant to all activists and researchers who wish to understand resistance.

Dixon’s analysis of current resistance movements is coloured by his own efforts as a North American activist and educator. After earning a PhD from the History of Consciousness Program at the University of California, Santa Cruz, Davis opted out of a career in formal academics. *Another Politics* offers a great deal of advice to both academic researchers and activists. It does an excellent job of bringing the experiences of current activists into academic discussions around social movements and politics. The book appears to be largely meant as a resource for activists rather than a contribution to some specific school of thought within academe. It is nonetheless an excellent example of how academic work can inform real-life efforts to organize and change social structures without completely losing sight of some of the lessons to be learned from more abstract theoretical discussions. The book cites an extensive bibliography, and includes numerous references to further references useful to

researchers and activists alike. The book is not easily categorized within a specific discipline but is a valuable resource for anyone with either an academic interest or an active involvement in resistance movements.

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