

The Rise of the Post-New Left Political Vocabulary

by Stephen D'Arcy



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to the loss of a focus on liberation. A liberation focus and a systems focus share a common understanding: that the purpose of the Left is to defeat systems of exploitation and oppression. Challenging immediate impacts is important, but not enough. It is necessary, but by no means sufficient. Moreover, the way we challenge everyday impacts should be informed by our understanding that they are not produced simply by individual actions, but by the operation of large-scale systems. The Left needs a vocabulary, and a self-understanding, that highlights and foregrounds the importance of constructing and expanding anti-systemic movements that aim to defeat systems of oppressive and exploitative power. It is hard not to think that the older vocabulary better expresses this insight, even as it obstructs our access to other critical insights that are also indispensable.

One could certainly say more about the gains and losses associated with adopting either of these two vocabularies. But perhaps it is enough, in the context of a blog post, to have sketched an approach to thinking about the question. Both vocabularies have been formed to address indispensably important concerns, so we should be reluctant to give up on either one. The most important thing, I would suggest, is to refuse to allow either of these two ways speaking, writing and thinking about Left activism to evade the challenge raised by its counterpart. Personally, I would be reluctant to give up an expression like, 'the people,' and to take up 'folks' in its place. But I hope that the way I talk about the people is disciplined by a certain amount of sensitivity to the motivation that has led some activists to drop it from their vocabulary. On the other hand, I hope that people who have embraced the newer way of articulating Left politics will (begin to, or continue to) see the importance of highlighting issues of system dynamics, large-scale alliance-building, and ultimate liberation, rather than letting these urgently important matters disappear from view entirely.

raising” to “calling out,” for instance, reflects (and encourages) a loss of confidence in the capacity of people to learn about, understand and oppose forms of inequality that do not adversely impact them as individuals. These doubts are, in turn, elaborated in terms of positionality and privilege.

Taken together, these three shifts go a long way toward explaining the transformation of the way activists talk, which has been noticeable at least since the 1990s. But is this a turn in the right direction? Or has the activist Left gone badly astray?

As we try to assess both the gains and the losses of this change, it is necessary to acknowledge two fundamental, and incontrovertible facts:

First, it is true that the vocabulary, and the practice, of the Left in the 1960s and 70s had several serious problems. There is no denying the fact that their movements were vastly more potent, and drew in vastly more people from all walks of life, than any political organizing that happens on the Left today, with the possible exception of the Occupy movement during its height. And yet, many people entered and participated in those movements in spite of serious concerns about the persistence, within movement activities, of sexist behaviours and attitudes, forms of machismo that were at once misogynist and homophobic, and ways in which (in some organizations and struggles) college-educated, middle-income white people tended to dominate the proceedings and set the agendas. To the extent that the movement was plagued by problems of this kind, the 60s New Left’s practice belied the radicalism of its official rhetoric, and made its universalistic claims about the “unity” of “the people” ring hollow. It seems clear that the attentiveness in today’s Left activist subcultures to interpersonal dynamics within the movement reflects a genuine learning process. It is a step toward beginning to address problems that were, in effect, glossed over and ignored by phrases like “the people” and a complacent view of the prospects for building genuine “solidarity” and “alliances.”

Second, however, it is also true that the series of shifts from the old vocabulary to the new one has entailed certain losses. In particular, the relative de-emphasizing of system-level causation, in favour of a new emphasis on the importance of individual action or inaction, tends to weaken the integration of everyday Left discourse with the theoretical analysis of systems like capitalism and colonialism. It is true that, in exchange, we have a vocabulary that better enables us to focus on class privilege and settler privilege. But if we are to defeat colonialism and capitalism, we cannot do so one person at a time, or one interaction or relationship at a time. The systems themselves have to be named, understood, attacked and overthrown. This issue is, obviously, closely connected



If a handful of time-travelling activists from our own era were somehow transported into a leftist political meeting in 1970, would they even be able to make themselves understood? They might begin to talk, as present-day activists do,¹ about challenging privilege, the importance of allyship, or the need for intersectional analysis. Or they might insist that the meeting itself should be treated as a safe space. But how would the other people at the meeting react? I’m quite sure that our displaced contemporaries would be met with uncomprehending stares.

It’s not so much that the words they use would be unfamiliar. Certainly ‘privilege’ is not a new word, for instance. But these newcomers to the 1970 Left would have a way of talking about politics and political action that would seem strange and off-kilter to the others at the meeting. If one of the time travellers told others at the meeting to “check their privilege,” it’s not that anyone would disagree, exactly. It’s that they wouldn’t understand what was meant, or why it was supposed to be important or relevant.

We can reverse the scenario, and the picture looks similar. If a group of time-travelling activists from the heyday of the New Left,² members perhaps of the Black Panther Party, the Organization for Afro-American Unity, or Students for a Democratic Society, were transported to a political meeting of activists in our own time, they might quickly begin referring to the need to unite “the people” in a common struggle for “liberation,” by constructing “an alliance” based on “solidarity.” In this case, the problem would not be one of understanding, so much as credibility. They would be understood, I imagine, at least in general terms. But would they be taken seriously? The terms in which they express their politics — the people, liberation, alliances — seem like (and indeed, are) a throwback to an earlier era. It seems likely that they would be deemed hopelessly insensitive to the specificity of different struggles against privilege. They would be accused, perhaps, of glossing over key issues of “positionality” and “allyship” by referring not to “folks,” as most

contemporary activists would, but to “the people,” as if it were unitary and shared a common set of experiences.

Reflecting on the chasm of mutual incomprehension that divides today’s Left from the Left of the 1960s and 70s, we should resist any rush to judgment. Instinctively, some people — whether out of nostalgia or out of deeply held political convictions or both — will recoil from the vocabulary of today’s activists. There is no shortage of (usually older) critics who complain about the focus on “privilege” and “calling out” in the contemporary activist scene. But we should not be seduced by the broad-brushed dismissal with which these critics, whose political sensibility was shaped (for better and for worse) by the 70s New Left, reject the politics that pervades today’s activist subcultures. We should remain open at least to the possibility that some aspects of the new vocabulary may offer important insights, even if we retain our reluctance to embrace it wholesale. Conversely, some partisans of the post-New Left will insist that any resistance to the new jargon must be rooted in an attempt to cling to privileges which, allegedly, the new discourse threatens. This, too, reflects a narrow-minded sensibility that renounces the very possibility of learning from engagement with perspectives that contest one’s own basic assumptions. It is this fundamentalist sensibility that has earned “the Twitter Left” and the “social justice blogging community” a sometimes well-deserved bad reputation, but it shouldn’t be allowed to insinuate itself into the real-world activist Left.

In fact, neither of the two political vocabularies considered here should be deemed to be either above reproach or beneath contempt. Both are ways of articulating the politics of people committed to the struggle for social justice, so they deserve, if not necessarily our endorsement, at least our willingness to listen and, where possible, to learn.

Two questions really do have to be addressed, however, in the face of this terminological fork in the road:

1. First: why are these vocabularies so different? Does the emergence of the new vocabulary, roughly in the 1990s, reflect a learning process, so that we can think of it as more sophisticated and illuminating than the jargon of the 60s and 70s New Left — the product of a new sensitivity to key issues that were previously overlooked or badly understood? Or does its emergence, with its symptomatic timing in the wake of the Reagan/Thatcher era and the wave of defeats inflicted on the Left in those years, indicate that the new vocabulary is not so much innovation as errancy, straying from radical politics in the direction of a de-fanged adaptation to defeat and political marginality?

what to do. For example, what is happening in this meeting, today, is emphasized much more, because it is not seen merely in instrumental terms as a means to destroy systems of domination. The meeting itself is generating impacts that have to be challenged as they arise. Addressing problems of “process,” which once would have been seen as a “distraction” from an urgent liberation struggle, is now seen as part and parcel of what the Left is for.

2. A Shift of Focus from Analysing System Dynamics to Analysing Interpersonal Dynamics. The old vocabulary assumed that political analysis should study large-scale, often transnational social systems and structures, centuries in the making, e.g., systems of oppression and exploitation. In contrast, the new vocabulary assumes that race and gender and other forms of privilege are enacted in everyday, interpersonal interactions. This is key to the concept of “privilege.” It is likened to “an invisible backpack” of advantages or monopolized benefits that some receive and others are denied. Privileged persons gain these benefits whether or not they even know or acknowledge it. Thus, whereas activists in the late 60s and 70s were keen to use history and political economy to develop a sophisticated analysis of the historical process, centuries-long, that established European colonial domination of much of the world, the new vocabulary both reflects and encourages a change of focus, toward how racism (for example) is enacted or reproduced in the everyday interactions of white people with racialised people, as individuals or in groups. The analysis of the power dynamics of these everyday interpersonal interactions has tended to gain in prominence and sophistication, in parallel to the relative de-emphasis of the importance of political economy and critical sociology within the activist Left.

3. A Shift in Emphasis from Commonality (Among Social Groups) to Specificity. The vocabulary of the 60s and 70s grew out of and contributed in turn to the construction of broad-based popular movements, in which hundreds of thousands and sometimes millions of people participated. By contrast, the vocabulary of today’s activists emerged in a completely different, and arguably much less favourable context. One symptom of this is a change in emphasis from the search for commonalities that could be the basis for building alliances and expanding the base of support for militant mass movements, to grappling with the barriers to joint organizing and common struggle. In brief, the old vocabulary emerged in a context where opportunities to encourage solidarity and collaboration were actively sought, whereas the new vocabulary emerged out of the frustration of failed efforts to bridge gaps between people and organizations that reflected real differences. There is a certain optimism in the idea of “consciousness-raising,” or the concept of “the people,” that seems naive and unconvincing to many of today’s activists. The shift from “consciousness-

meanings. For this reason, if one hears a contemporary activist use the word, “alliance,” which would be a rare thing, it is worth stopping to ask, Do you mean the confluence in struggle of large social forces like classes or social movements, or do you mean privileged people being committed as individuals to offering support to those adversely impacted by privilege, and taking direction from them? Only in this way can you confirm which vocabulary is being used, strictly speaking.

Fourth, my remarks refer to ‘ideal types,’ not the exact ways that every activist talks. In other words, although my account of the post-1990 activist vocabulary is intended to be recognizable by everyone familiar with contemporary activist subcultures, it is probably a bit more reflective of some ‘scenes’ than others. For example, it will be immediately recognizable, I think, to anyone familiar with the work of Tim Wise,⁶ Peggy McIntosh,⁷ Melissa Harris-Perry⁸ (recently described in *The Atlantic* as the USA’s foremost public intellectual⁹), or many of today’s ‘social justice blogs.’¹⁰ but my core contrast (in the two columns) may appear overdrawn and exaggerated to people whose contact with activist subcultures is mainly through grassroots protest organizing. In organizing contexts, most activist speech is infused with a pragmatic focus on getting things done, so some of this jargon recedes into the background. Nevertheless, I would be surprised if anyone (familiar with today’s activist subcultures) claimed not to recognize the terminology that I attribute to today’s activists.

Having said all that, I can now proceed to my two main questions, listed above (why are the vocabularies different, and how much does it matter).

So, why are these vocabularies so different? What accounts for this mutation in the mode of speech typical of Left political activists in recent decades? A close examination of the two systems of terminology reveals some underlying principles that are driving the transformation. In particular, one can discern the operation, just below the surface, of three fundamental shifts.

1. A Shift in Priorities from Ultimate Victory to Challenging Everyday Impacts. The older vocabulary looked at capitalism, racism, and sexism (for example) as social systems or institutions that could and probably would be defeated, once and for all, in the foreseeable future. Accordingly, activists of that era defined and described their movements as struggles for “socialism,” “black liberation,” or “women’s liberation.” By contrast, the new vocabulary tends to suspend judgment on (without denying) the prospects for ultimate victory, and to focus its attention on challenging everyday impacts of capitalism, racialization and gender, in the here and now. This prioritization of resistance to everyday impacts infuses, not only the way activists today talk, but also how they choose

2. Second: why, if at all, does it matter that they are so different? Are these just competing *styles* of speech and writing, or do they embed within them contrasting sets of assumptions about the nature of the Left, its main targets or aims, the appropriate way to respond to injustice, and the place of the Left in the wider society?

Without claiming to have figured anything out, I touch on both questions below. But before turning to that, we need to get a feel for these two vocabularies, and how they differ. Consider the following table. In the left column, several keywords of the New Left era are listed, along with their definitions. In the right column, each word is paired with a keyword from today’s activist Left, which has largely displaced the older term.

NEW LEFT VOCABULARY (1960s-1970s)	POST-NEW LEFT VOCABULARY (1990s-today)
<p>“Oppression”: a pattern of persistent and systematic disadvantage imposed on large groups of people, in many domains of social life, including employment, social status, treatment by the legal system, vulnerability to violence, and more; e.g. racial oppression, gender oppression, etc.</p>	<p>“Privilege”: a set of unearned benefits that some individuals enjoy (and others are denied) in their everyday lives, by virtue of their place in a racial or gender or other ‘identity’-hierarchy, e.g., male privilege, white privilege, cisgender privilege, etc.</p>
<p>“Exploitation”: a feature of economic systems, including capitalism, in which unpaid labour is extracted from working people for the benefit of a relatively small number of exploiters, who comprise, in economic terms, a ruling class.</p>	<p>“Classism”: an attitude of scorn, condescension, or disrespect toward persons of low income, similar to what once was called “snobbery” or class-based “elitism.”</p>

<p>“Alliances”: the confluence in struggle of large-scale social forces (like social classes, or social movements), as part of a strategic orientation toward the coordinated pursuit of common aims.</p>	<p>“Being an Ally”: a sincere commitment on the part of a privileged individual to offer ongoing support to individuals, groups or organizations that oppose that kind of privilege, and to take direction from them about the form that support should take.</p>
<p>“Consciousness-raising”: a process of popular political education, in which learners are viewed as already having an implicit grasp of critical insights about injustice and social change, but invites them to participate in a collective learning process in order to become fully aware of these insights and their implications through dialogue with peers.</p>	<p>“Calling Out”: an approach to challenging “folks” who show a lack of insight or concern about issues of privilege, in which they are confronted by peers and urged to “check” their privilege. A regional variant in parts of the US is the phrase, “calling people on their shit.”</p>
<p>“Solidarity”: a stance, within and between social movements, of treating “injuries to one” as if they were “injuries to all,” and resisting them in common, as matters of shared priority, rather than as the concern only of those under attack. Example: The “I am Trayvon Martin”³ slogan used in anti-racist protests in 2013, which echoed the old labour-movement principle of solidarity (“An injury to one is an injury to all.”)</p>	<p>“Positionality”: a practice of acknowledging the specificity of one’s social position, especially one’s access to privilege, which may make one incapable of understanding or speaking authoritatively about the ways others are impacted adversely by the operation of privilege. Example: the “I am not Trayvon Martin”⁴ meme from 2013, which urged white people to refrain from identifying with African-American resistance, for reasons of positionality.</p>

<p>“The People”: a label for the totality or potential collectivity of those who are not members of the small, ruling elite; it is usually seen as including workers, the unemployed, small farmers, students, and almost all women, people of colour, and so on.</p>	<p>“Folks”: a term that refers to groups of people, in the plural, without suggesting that they comprise a singular totality that could be united in one common struggle, which may be precluded by the difference of their experiences and degrees of privilege.</p>
<p>“Liberation”: a term used to refer to ultimate victory in struggles against systems of oppression and/or exploitation, e.g., national liberation, women’s liberation, black liberation. Cf. “emancipation,” e.g., the emancipation of women, the emancipation of the working class.</p>	<p>“Safe[r] Space”: the attempt to create occasions or locations⁵ wherein the adverse effects of privilege on marginalized people are minimized in everyday interpersonal interactions, notably by encouraging “folks” in those spaces to “check their privilege” and by “calling out” any failures to “be an ally.”</p>

Some immediate caveats and qualifications are necessary, to ward off misunderstanding.

First, the new vocabulary is used almost exclusively by the English-speaking Left in a few countries, especially Canada, the US, and (to a lesser extent) the UK. Elsewhere, such as in Latin America and southern Africa, the Left has its own distinctive vocabularies, which would have to be analysed separately.

Second, the old vocabulary is still in use today. Indeed, many people use both vocabularies, or at least draw from both, even if they have a primary vocabulary that dominates their speech and writing about activism. But it seems clear that the first vocabulary has faded and continues to fade from use within today’s activist subcultures, as the second one continues to gain ground.

Third, it is possible to use one set of words to express the other set of meanings. That is, one can retain the words, “solidarity,” “oppression,” or “consciousness-raising,” while using them in a way that is shaped by the new vocabulary, so that by “solidarity,” you mean acknowledging positionality; by “oppression,” you mean individual privilege; and by “consciousness-raising,” you mean calling people out. Conversely, one can use the new terms, but give them the old