

On Media Practices and the Radical Imagination

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The radical imagination is the collective, dialogic capacity to envision how the world might be otherwise that sparks between people in the context of generative, critical encounters. It is also the animating force of robust, radical movements for social change. What media channels does the radical imagination travel and what is their significance? How do these different pathways shape, facilitate, or constrain the radical imagination and impact movement-building? Drawing on research conducted with radical social justice activists in the Anglophone North Atlantic over the last decade, in this paper I explore the relationship between activist media use and the circulation of the radical imagination. I understand “media” expansively as a range of channels and practices including documentary film screenings, social and digital media, community discussion groups, speaker’s series, print publications, and spectacles of dissent and resistance. The critical focus of this paper rests specifically on a social media discussion thread about a film screening and discussion of *Cowspiracy: The Sustainability Secret* (2014) organized as part of the Radical Imagination Project’s Documentary Film Series in Halifax, Canada. I turn to this example as a point of entry into a much larger terrain composed of media practices, political cultures, and activist attempts at movement-building. This example is illustrative and suggestive rather than definitive or ethnographically deep, nevertheless exploring it alongside larger dynamics of activist organizing and communicative practices lays bare important issues relating to struggles for social change in the Anglophone North Atlantic today. In so doing, I employ two central tropes in this preliminary analysis, namely, the *scene* and the *echo chamber*, both of which I content speak to important and troubling dynamics within contemporary radical milieus. I pay particular attention to the way that different media practices amplify or undermine the ability of radical activists and organizers to communicate with those beyond the ranks of the already-convinced. I conclude by considering important directions for engaged research in this area and the methodological issues they pose.

The Radical Imagination

What is the radical imagination? It is the capacity to envision that which does not yet exist, to conceive of how we might live in ways other than we do now (Bloch 1986; Castoriadis 1987; Haiven and Khasnabish 2010; Fawaz 2016; Kelley 2002). An activity done in common and not a possession of uniquely gifted individuals, the radical imagination is profoundly dialogic and only exists through collective, critical encounters. It is also the vital and necessary spark of robust and resilient social change movements. Since 2010 the Radical Imagination Project, a social movement research initiative based in Halifax, Canada and co-directed by myself and Max Haiven, has sought to not only explore or document the radical imagination but to bring it into being – to convoke it – with radical social justice activists and organizers. This research project has been animated by two core convictions: first, that academically-based social movement research ought to actually contribute to the fabric of social justice struggles and not just capitalize on them; second, that movement participants, particularly in the Anglophone North Atlantic, need many more and better opportunities to cultivate their radical imagination in common if we are to build movements up to the task of confronting and charting paths beyond the crisis complex currently confronting us. Why do we argue this? While many who have spent time in radical social justice activist scenes in the Anglophone North Atlantic will probably have a sense of the underlying reasoning already, one simple reason is that endless cycle of crisis-response organizing is not capable of producing movements able to build alternatives to the status quo (Dixon 2014; Sitrin and Azzellini 2014; Srnicek and Williams 2015; Walia 2013). While urgent responses are necessary to fend off attacks on hard won gains or those directed at vulnerable and marginalized individuals and communities, this kind of activism does not lend itself to building longer term visions and strategies essential to fundamental and lasting social change. As a follow-up to this, many movement spaces end up internalizing and reproducing toxic social relations characteristic of dominant society and, in so doing, actually end up contributing to the very relations of oppression that their members vow to challenge (Bishop 2002; Federici 2012; Mohanty 2003; Milstein 2015; Osterweil 2010). The result, especially in more radical activist scenes, is isolation from those not

already convinced of a movement's righteousness, marginalization, and an absence of longer-term strategic thinking and capacity building. While upsurges in movement activity can and do occur under these conditions, organizing social justice struggles capable of sustaining themselves and their members over the long haul does not.

The Radical Imagination Project was initiated as an attempt to put the weird, unjust, but potentially productive autonomy and resources of the academy to work in the context of radical social justice struggles. Instead of attempting to capture the radical imagination of activists and organizers in Halifax at a specific moment in time in order to dissect it and produce expert and largely inaccessible knowledge on the basis of it, we sought to make the project work as an engine for creative interventions and critical dialogic encounters in what was a fractious, sectarian, and fractured radical milieu (Khasnabish and Haiven 2012). Our research has moved through several phases. The first, from 2010-2012, consisted of an explicit engagement with and focus on self-identified radical activists in Halifax. In this phase, Max and I worked with a team of two activist-community based researchers to carry out one-on-one in-depth and open-ended interviews with self-identified radical activists. These interviews focused not only on what activists were doing at the time in terms of social justice organizing but their political biographies, their understandings of political possibilities and challenges, and their notions of what it would mean to "win" (borrowed from the excellent work of the Turbulence Collective (2010)). After completing approximately 30 of these interviews, as a research team we moved to distill key emergent themes from what our participants had shared with us. We used these themes to organize three public discussion sessions facilitated by the research team but led-off by short statements from invited participants. These themes were: fighting to win in the age of austerity; the relationship between struggles against capitalism and struggles against oppressions; and how we organize for radical social change with a focus on hierarchical versus more horizontal or anarchistic forms of organizing. The public discussion sessions were open to the public and all participants were invited to each session. The final phase of this stage of the project involved a variety of wider, more public interventions including a speaker's series, a documentary film series, an audio podcast, an activist skillsharing workshop series, and a variety of academic and activist publications both in print and online. The point to this entire phase of research was not to capture, freeze, or dissect the radical imagination in the Halifax radical milieu at this specific point in time but to use research as an inherently dialogic process aimed at provoking and curating critical encounters productive of summoning-in-common horizons of political possibility into being. Simply put, we wanted to provide a process capable of helping activists and organizers productively confront critical contradictions in their social change work, clarify their conceptualizations of how we might live otherwise, and strategize together about better ways of getting there. We wanted to provide the time and resources for movements to learn how to reproduce themselves better. In this, as we have reflected on elsewhere, we fell, like so many movements, between success and failure (Haiven and Khasnabish 2013; Khasnabish and Haiven 2015).

The second phase of our social movement research is only just now getting underway but I sketch it here to provide a sense of the way we are engaging questions around media, the radical imagination, and movement-building. Since the Radical Imagination Project began we have been committed to using the resources and autonomy of university-based researchers to curate and circulate movement-based knowledge, something that movements themselves are often unable to focus on given the weight of day-to-day struggles to resist and persist. One dimension of the research we are currently getting underway is therefore focused on soliciting, preserving, and circulating the best lessons of experienced, long-term social justice organizers with respect to movement building over the "long haul." We want to use the Project and its communicative infrastructure to curate and circulate these critical insights and reflections without only advancing the voices and experiences of movement elders. We are also interested in exploring the effects – and the affects – of the Project's popular pedagogical dimensions and, by extension, the kinds of public interventions activists often seek to utilize to raise public awareness of pressing social justice issues and to move people to act. Concretely, we want to follow six people attending our long-running documentary film series (run in collaboration with the Cinema Politica network and Halifax Public Libraries) who are new to activism rather than established activists to see how their regular attendance of and participation in the film series informs or doesn't their political activity in the wider world. We will do this by conducting three in-depth, open-ended interviews with each of them between October 2016 and May 2017 in an effort to trace the development of their political biographies in light of their participation in the film series.

The Scene and the Echo Chamber

So what does all this have to do with the radical imagination and media practices? A basic but fundamental issue is that the collective work of radically imagining alternatives to the white supremacist, settler-colonial,

heteropatriarchal, capitalist status quo is always mediated in some way. This mediation can utilize channels such as websites, social media, movies, zines, books, podcasts, and community radio but it also makes use of spaces of encounter such as speaker's series, discussion groups, skillsharing workshops, consciousness- and awareness-raising events, and spectacles of resistance. While discussion of media is usually restricted to the former group, the way the latter are organized and enacted significantly mediate the way the work of convoking the radical imagination happens as well as the outcomes and consequences of such work. As we noted throughout our work in the Radical Imagination Project, whether as scholars, activists, or some combination of the two, our attempts to communicate knowledge often remain restricted to the communities of which we are a part. While reading and discussion groups, zine fairs, activist report-backs, and public protests are all part of the standard repertoire of communicative action in the Halifax radical milieu, few of these actually reach beyond the ranks of those already part of this milieu. Similarly, academic journals, conferences, books, and presentations seldom reach those outside of the university community and, even more problematically, the small circle of specialists working on similar issues in affiliated disciplines. It is also worth remembering that both radical and academic milieus have their own cultural markers and practices which are often exclusionary and intimidating to outsiders. The use of jargon and specialized protocols for meeting management, for example, often render these milieus inaccessible to the uninitiated. This is only compounded by the frequently combative, denunciatory, hyper-judgmental, and competitive character of these contexts that frequently make them appear hostile to many, insiders and outsiders alike. Nowhere is this more true than with respect to the activist use of social media.

In the work Max Haiven and I have done since 2010 with radical activists in Halifax, Nova Scotia and beyond, we have made extensive use of web-based media to communicate and engage with activists and the broader public. Social media has been particularly important to us in this regard. Despite its obvious utility and the striking way it has displaced print-based forms of activist communication, something that struck us at an early stage of the project was just how much the echo chamber of social media resembled the insular, exclusive activist scenes all too common across the Anglophone North Atlantic. As anyone who has ever experienced or participated in a protracted political debate on Facebook can attest, while such forms of engagement can be animated in the extreme they are rarely effective at bringing in people who are not already insiders to the political culture in question. More problematically, social media platforms seem to have been fertile ground for the cultivation of hyper-moralistic, judgmental, pedantic, and shrilly denunciatory ways of relating that are actually toxic to the building of robust, resilient, and powerful mass movements. And this is to say nothing about the fact that they are spectacular and gestural, not a living radical imagination but an imagined radical politics. Indeed, as we saw in many of the public events we have organized through the Radical Imagination Project, as radicals in the Anglophone North Atlantic have seen their capacity to wield collective power eroded in the face of constant elite attacks on hard won gains, the policing of activist scenes and their membership has only become more intense and bitter. I use the term "scene" intentionally. Rather than speaking of communities or collectives in struggle, many radical social justice spaces in the Anglophone North Atlantic – and especially in the north of the Americas – have come to resemble cliques where insiders gatekeep and test the purity of others who would seek to access to them. Public purging and denunciation of people once thought of as fellow travelers in struggle have come to define these scenes. Activist blogs, social media platforms, and other media channels mirror and reproduce this dynamic. Differences that once would have been points of animated but solidaristic debate now become grounds for excommunication. The dialogic encounter so critical to the growth, development, and circulation of the radical imagination is atrophied in such spaces (whether lived or virtual) with the predictable consequence that attempts to build radical mass movements have all but disappeared replaced by a valorization of micro-level affinity and a narrow lifestyle politics (Dean 2009; Srnicek and Williams 2015). Activists who feel they have little ability to affect a world that seems increasingly violent, austere, and hostile turn inwards seeking solace as well as a measure of power. Narrow measures of movement success and failure all too often derived from the dominant order have only deepened and accelerated these dynamics.

Following the Thread

As an empirical exploration of what I mean by the dynamics of the echo chamber and the scene, below I share two conversation threads from the Radical Imagination Project's Facebook page. As some context for the scope of the discussion reproduced below, the Radical Imagination Project's Facebook page has 1357 "Likes" as of October 14, 2016 so both these threads involve only a tiny fraction of the people who follow the page and attend our events. These two threads followed the screening of the pro-vegan documentary film *Cowspiracy* (2014) directed by Keegan Kuhn and Kip Andersen which we screened on November 2, 2015 as a part of our Radical Imagination

Project Documentary Film Series run in collaboration with Cinema Politica and Halifax Public Libraries. All screenings are free and open to the public and are followed by discussion facilitated by one of the Project's co-directors. Often, we invite local activists, organizers, or academics to join the screenings to provide some important context or perspective on the issues at hand. While all the films we select to screen fit under the umbrella of "radical" – that is, they offer critiques of the status quo that are fundamental rather than reformist – we emphasize that these films do not reflect the politics of the Project or us as co-directors. Indeed, in the spirit of dialogue and critically constructive engagement we often choose to screen films about pressing social and political issues that are intentionally provocative in order to challenge people to push beyond their established political positions. While discussion following the films can often be animated and even conflictual, the discussion after *Cowspiracy* was particularly so, characterized by a hostile reaction on the part of many of the self-identified vegans in attendance to the inclusion of an invited speaker from the Ecology Action Centre, a long-standing environmental justice organization in Nova Scotia, who had planned to talk about sustainable agriculture and is a self-identified "ethical omnivore." I reproduce these threads here not to single out this screening or the vegan activists in attendance but because they highlight so well the dynamics of insularity and impassioned righteousness combined with a political communication style characterized by hyperbole, denunciation, and moralism so common in many radical left scenes in the Anglophone North Atlantic today. Of particular interest is the way that the relative anonymity and depersonalized nature of this social media engagement actually seems to inhibit transformative dialogue in favour of positions that actually appear to harden as the encounter proceeds. Of note here is the political conviction that because the Radical Imagination Project screened *Cowspiracy* we should have invited speakers and facilitated discussion that aligned with the pro-vegan message of the film. When participants in the engagement below were asked to recall that respectful dialogue is a hallmark of the Project and critical to the building of robust movements for social change, this suggestion and others like it calling for a more expansive ground upon which to build relations of solidarity are ignored by the vegan consensus in favour of further political denunciations and proclamations. While names have been deleted to prevent identification of those posting all comments have been preserved in their original form otherwise.

The Radical Imagination Project

October 30, 2015

Hey folks - exciting that so many of you are interested in joining us Monday November 2 for *Cowspiracy: The Sustainability Secret*. We're very pleased to announce that we'll be joined for the screening by two special guests, Erica Fraser (Events Coordinator for the Ecology Action Centre's Food Action Committee) and Abena A-Green (aka spoken word performer Roots n' Rhythm). Abena will perform and both she and Erica will join us for the Q&A after the screening. Even more reasons to join us Monday November 2 at the Central Branch Library!

Abena A-Green (aka Roots n' Rhythm) is an uplifting spoken word performer who fuses rhythm and soul into each line and beckons the audiences' ear. Her poetry has been performed across Canada and internationally in Ghana, Rwanda, and Ethiopia. She uses her spoken word to address cultural, social, and environmental issues and to reflect on everyday life through her unique lens as a small-town raised, first generation Ghanaian Canadian.

Erica Fraser is an ecological food systems advocate and "ethical omnivore" who completed a BSc. Biology degree at MSVU in 2011 and an Applied Permaculture Design Course in 2015. She recently spent 16 months work-trading on organic farms and homesteads in Mexico, Guatemala and Oregon, U.S. where she had the opportunity to learn from farmers, homesteaders, herbalists and radical DIYers about nature-based living. She's been unearthing the environmental issues surrounding agriculture since 2007 and is currently holding the volunteer position of Events Coordinator for the Ecology Action Centre's Food Action Committee.

7 Likes

R1: Excellent news. I'd be interested in hearing opinions about propaganda as marketing around nutrition. <http://www.macleans.ca/society/health/have-we-been-milked-by-the-dairy-industry/>
October 30, 2015 at 12:08pm · 3 Likes

R2: I don't understand "ethical omnivore"...the documentary debunks the idea that any kind of participation in animal agriculture is entirely unethical. Taking the life of any creature that doesn't want to die is completely unethical. Wish I could have made it for that discussion.

November 2, 2015 at 10:06pm · 6 Likes

R3: Animal rights aside the human population is too large to eat an omnivorous diet. Small family farms can't supply meat to everyone. I don't understand how you can say farming animals is awful and is destroying the planet....So let's just do this awful thing a little bit.

How about not at all?

Humans don't need meat

So why is everyone so hellbent on finding loopholes to consume something that is scientifically proven to be harmful to those who eat it, the planet and those animals who have to die for it?

November 2, 2015 at 11:49pm · 7 Likes

R4: exactly!

November 2, 2015 at 11:51pm ·

R2: Did the event organizer watch the documentary before setting up guest speakers? Both guest speakers go completely against the grain of what the film is attempting to educate us about. Even the eco action center is pro-small farms. The people who put the film together would be reeling at the thought of who the guest speakers were.

November 3, 2015 at 7:14am · 2 Likes

The Radical Imagination Project: Hi folks - Just to be clear, we don't screen films or select invited speakers because we agree with them or because they fully align with our own politics. We program our events in order to bring forward important issues and stimulate engaged, challenging, but respectful dialogue. This means a diversity of perspectives and a willingness to engage with them. It also means treating each other - and our invited speakers - with a degree of respect rather than contempt because we value difference and diversity. A politics of purity and certainty is often a short road to marginality and isolation. Thanks for your comments and interest, we hope you'll join us in this spirit for future screenings.

November 3, 2015 at 8:38am · 3 Likes

R5: Yes the movie speaks about animal agriculture in general, but one doesn't need to go completely vegetarian to be part of the solution..life isn't black and white..if we all decided to consume meat only 2-3 times a week instead of having meat at almost every meal every day, still means reducing meat consumption by 5-7 times, which is huge!! And the little meat you do eat, make it free-range humanely-raised instead - more expensive but less often. Better for your health, the environment and the animals. Don't just criticize people that are making changes because they aren't going full 100% vegetarian, something many aren't fully ready to do, criticize and attempt to educate the ones that choose to be and stay willfully ignorant towards this massive issue.

November 3, 2015 at 10:12am · 1 Like

R6: According to the UN and WHO's findings you need to do better than going completely vegetarian...95% of the world needs to urgently go completely vegan. It is unethical to do anything else as it causes massive suffering not only to billions of animals but is causing millions of humans to die of starvation and thirst. It is also destroying our planet and we are passing the point of no return as we both type. Ethical meat consumption is not a thing. I am not criticizing, I am pointing out that the term ethical omnivore is an oxymoron and beyond that it is damaging as it coddles people. The R.I.P.'s post says it invites different view points. This movie is a call to go vegan...not once a week but every second of you and everyone you know life whether you are ready to or not. Many share this view as I have said including the UN, the WHO and even the U.S. government.

November 3, 2015 at 11:20am · 5 Likes

R5: I agree with what you are saying, but it's very idealistic to hope that the whole world will turn vegan from where we are now, consuming so much meat. It's not all or nothing, and it's not true that if you don't go vegan/vegetarian, anything less is not good enough - any attempt to eat more plant and less animal products is worth a praise. It's true, change needs to happen fast, but good luck in getting everyone to change from the Standard American Diet of meat, potatoes and dairy - to completely vegan. Veganism isn't even a great option for everyone, it's not a easy lifestyle choice and you have to be careful to ensure you get

all the nutrients you need. Many go vegan with the best intentions and get sick because of nutrient deficiencies. What's more realistic is encouraging diets that are mainly plant-based as much as possible, which will in turn help with reducing obesity, cancer etc. This in reality will take time, but the more people realize the difference in how they feel and their health, the more they will gravitate towards plant-based foods and less towards animal products.

November 3, 2015 at 12:05pm ·

R2: It is idealistic to think the world can go vegan ~now~ but that's entirely the point of educational docs like Cowspiracy. They're trying to educate people and get the message--a very urgent message-- out there. It's redundant if people miss the point they're trying to make. It's not at all about reducing intake, its ceasing it all together. Nowhere in the film does anyone promote "once or twice a week is ok" for animal product consumption.

November 3, 2015 at 12:24pm · 5 Likes

R6: 99% of climatologists believe we need to reduce our carbon emissions by EIGHTY % by 2017...in basically the course of the next year! If you know how radical this is you will know it is basically going to require an immediate end to animal agriculture amongst manny other 'radical' moves like dismantling capitalism world wide...not gradually...gradually doing these things means we are ensuring the end of humans on earth. We have no time for switching to local sources...we have no time to try now and then reducing our consumption levels. The facts are out there.

November 3, 2015 at 12:45pm · 3 Likes

R6: Willing or not we won't be consuming it long if we don't all change as we will all be extinct...sorry if I seem somewhat alarmed but you know this life style is like killing everyone I have ever come in contact with...oh also everyone else too...and when did I bash anyone?

November 3, 2015 at 12:50pm · 2 Likes

R6: All I have done is point out facts...like saying that eating less or buying local is harmful because we will all still die...we NEED to eat none at all. Sorry but that is the case.

November 3, 2015 at 12:51pm · 2 Likes

R5: So let's keep bashing the people that are at least trying and leave all the millions that aren't willing to change and give up their meat, which make up the majority. I know the point the movie makes and agree with it and with all you guys, I'm simply talking about the REALISM of getting people to CHANGE so drastically. People can't give up eating their burgers and drink their pop even if they know how bad they are for their own health for god's sake. To make a big impact on the world we need to focus on the huge number of people who still consume meat every single day, not on the minority who try to eat consciously already. What will have a bigger effect on the environment - 2 million people that eat meat every day twice a day changing to eating it once a week or 10,000 people that already eat very small amounts of meat? The math and logic is simple. That's all I'm talking about. Drastic change on a mass scale needs to happen, but that can't happen if we go all extreme about it - vegan or anything else is not good enough!

November 3, 2015 at 1:00pm ·

R2: Don't just try...DO. there are no baby steps.. Ceasing to take part in the planet's destruction and worldwide animal torture isn't a "journey". You don't need animal products to live. Being vegetarian isn't enough. Only consuming animals a couple times a week is not enough. If you want change, then be the change and try to help others if the health of the planet truly concerns you.

November 3, 2015 at 1:09pm · 3 Likes

R2: I'm the laziest person in the world (almost I guess) and I've been vegan over 5 years. I never stopped eating meat because I didn't like it, I stopped because its wrong. If someone like me can be vegan, literally anyone can. Why eat meat? There are absolutely zero benefits you get from meat and dairy you can't get from a way better source. It's not hard or expensive being vegan. I live on a budget and I eat really well.

November 3, 2015 at 1:17pm · 1 Like

R5: Well done, I admire you for that! I guess my main point comes from being focused on the huge number of people that still need to change, and that for most this change doesn't come easy. You'd get a lot more meat eaters changing towards a plant-based diet (say reducing their meals with meat from 14/week to 2/week - that will still have a huge effect on the bottom line of the meat industry and factory farms) than trying to get someone who's used to eating it everyday to completely give up meat, and all other animal products - as much as yes, this is what is needed in time. It's a purist idea but in reality right now most people wouldn't be prepared to go to that extreme, but they would consider eating meat a lot less as an occasional treat rather than as the main staple at every meal, which too many people still do. The power of global change is in numbers I believe, and I think it's so important that we all who are trying to be the positive change to support each other's efforts as big or small as they are, and not pick on each other for not being perfect enough in these efforts (eg. being a "ethical omnivore"), when majority of people out there are still completely uninformed and/or unwilling to change at all.
November 3, 2015 at 2:07pm ·

R3: When trying to stop other world atrocities do you ever hear people speak of baby steps? With bullying, homophobia, rape, drug trafficking? Can you just only kill people a little bit? Its unrealistic to think you can eliminate crime from society so let's encourage a reduction in crime. Sounds silly right? Because what your doing is giving people a free pass to just be lazy and selfish. By saying baby steps are okay you're saying veganism is difficult. You don't need baby steps to reach a very easy and short destination. Just stop buying meat! It's not extreme or something that needs to be done gradually. Just. don't. buy. it. Good lord.

I'm not referring to homeless folks or those in food deserts or natives living off the land in remote areas. I'm talking to people who crowd at pizza corner every weekend and just "can't give up mah cheeze!" They love to use poor and disabled folks struggles to justify their own choices.

Saying that some people go vegan and can't do it because they didn't get nutrients is foolish. Do you know how many nutrient deficient people are out there vegan and non? It's because there is zero nutritional education out there and corporations have people brainwashed.... Oh wait that's what the film Cowsspiracy is about!
But if a vegan is unhealthy it must be because they're vegan not because of their crappy eating habits?

No one concern trolls animal eaters because "beef: it's what for dinner" commercials told us all an animal based diet was the omiclr of nutrition, that it was normal, and anything else must be missing something. I was handed a "got milk" bookmark in 3rd grade from Canadian Dairy who came into my classroom!!!

Any part of veganism that is hard is the fault of a meat dominated society not of veganism. Going to a restaurant and only having a salad as an option to eat doesn't mean a vegan diet is limiting, it means that's a crap restaurant.

Also no vegans are dumping on people trying to change whilst ignoring everyone else. Wer'e education everyone who isn't vegan.
Obviously vegetarian is better than meat eater , and a person who eats meat once a week is better than eating a steak every day bit that's a pretty bad attitude and a low bar to set.

Next time you go to Superstore buy the Silk milk from the front of the store instead of the Baxters milk from the back of the store. Too hard? Sheesh. :(
November 3, 2015 at 2:12pm · 4 Likes

R6: I wasn't picking on them though as I said. I was simply picking on the term. No matter how you slice it, it is unethical to torture , kill, starve and pollute because of palate pleasure. That is all it is...you don't need it and it is immoral ie unethical to eat it. Period. If you want to do better great. But it is also important to recognise that it isn't good enough to do better and it certainly isn't ethical.
November 3, 2015 at 2:13pm · 4 Likes

R3: Vegans are spending the majority of our activism targeting meat eaters rather than people here, but this still needs to be addressed. We can do both.

You keep saying extreme. I just.... Not murdering animals isn't extreme....it's the basic level of being a decent person.

Reduce your meat to an occasional treat instead of every day. That's about stop using the phrase ethical omnivore.

It's not a thing.

Doing things less is still doing it and THERE IS NO ETHICAL WAY TO KILL SOMEONE THAT DOESN'T WANT TO DIE. AND DOESN'T NEED TO FOR ANY REASON.

Like, I'm an ethical misogynist, I only sexual harass women on the weekends. If you're going to do things own up to it. If what you're doing is okay, stop trying to invent new words for it to make it sound cute. Stop trying to separate yourselves from meat eaters.

Quit this ethical omnivore, ovo lacto, vegetarian, pescatarian.

You're either a carnist or a vegan.

November 3, 2015 at 2:19pm 6 Likes

While it would be wrong to draw expansive conclusions from this Facebook exchange following the film screening it is also incorrect to dismiss it as aberrant or exceptional. Indeed, as so many have noted across a variety of digital forums, the distance and relative anonymity provided by social media seem to facilitate a flowering of some of the most problematic characteristics of political cultures. If patriarchy, classism, and white supremacy have been identified by feminist, anti-racist, and working class activists as all-too-common and problematic hallmarks of many left political spaces and cultures where people encounter each other face-to-face, resulting in the elevation of cis-, male, white, and class-privileged participants over others, particularly in the most public manifestations of movements, the lack of accountability afforded by social media has accelerated denunciatory, hyperbolic, and hyper-moralistic tendencies in activist political communication. In such spaces, vitriolic and clever take-downs of others and their positions is often conflated with “winning” and the accumulation of political capital. But what is being won and what are the stakes? Returning to the exchange above, while many words are exchanged between the contributing participants, no one’s position appears to be altered or informed by them in any real way. In fact, what appears to happen is that the exchange allows for a reaffirmation of the dominant position without any real dialogue occurring. When countervailing positions are advanced, they are quickly dismissed, frequently after being cast in the poorest light possible. Because there is no mutual recognition of dignity and no real ground to build empathy, trust, and solidarity there is no apparent willingness to be generous with one another or to extend the benefit of the doubt in any given encounter. A posture of moral and intellectual superiority, cleverness, wry cynicism, and unwavering conviction are all forms of currency in the social media game of the performance of radical politics. But what concrete actions emerge from these encounters? What social change work is enacted? What is the tangible effect of this digitally-mediated righteousness and does it touch those beyond those traveling similar networks?

Following the first discussion thread on the Radical Imagination Project’s event page for the *Cowspiracy* screening, a second was initiated by one of the participants. This thread is shorter but embodies the same tendencies present in the first. It begins with one of the event attendees offering her assessment of the real purpose of the screening:

R4 November 3, 2015 ·

I've come to the conclusion that this screening was nothing more than a publicity stunt to promote local farms.

It's really disappointing to see organizations that claim to have concern for the planet support and promote the very thing that is the cause of at least 51% of environmental devastation.

These farms care so much that their response to me just now was "Mmmmm tasty bacon.. Yummy"

Way to go 😞:/ · 6 Likes

R7: It sounds that way. What a disappointment.

November 3, 2015 at 7:23pm · 2 Likes

R8: TIME TO...FIGHT BACK? 😊:D

November 3, 2015 at 10:39pm · 1 Like

R9 [one of the featured speakers]: Here's the thing. If people are accustomed to shopping and eating in a particular way, it's likely they will go back to those old ways if they try to make a significant leap and fail. I think its important to have stepping stones so people can make those transitions successfully. Of course its ideal that we all follow plant-based diets. And asking that everyone quit meat right now in this very moment simply will not succeed- we don't all have that kind of will power, unfortunately. Although it seems counterintuitive, my offering sources for local meat is a way to help cut the addiction to meat, specifically cheap animal products. From what I've experienced, the aggressive all-or-nothing approach is not effective enough for tackling such an important issue. People simply do not respond to being told that what they are doing is wrong and that they have to stop it immediately. Being attacked makes people want to resist, not succumb to the requests of the attacker, even if they are well-intentioned individuals who want to save the planet.

I appreciate your concern, it's a heavy, heavy, topic, and we're all learning and trying to figure it out.

I would also like to say that I am one volunteer of the Ecology Action Centre, this was only one film as part of a series put on by the Radical Imagination Project and that neither my input nor Cowspiracy are fully representative of all that these two organizations stand for.

I'm going to invite you, [R4], to take a step back and look at whether or not your energy is being most effectively invested. Thanks!

November 4, 2015 at 10:59am · 1 Like

R2: Her energy--and everyone's like hers, is most definitely being invested effectively When good people discover that what they are doing, what they are participating in, is blatantly wrong, causing harm to themselves, to the animal and to the planet, they stop They don't say, well, I'm going to stop causing harm but only in baby steps because I'm not comfortable .at the drop of a hat. If you work on a farm and you are responsible for the slaughter of animals or see it or hear it everyday, you must be able to tell that they don't want to die, no? Even holocaust survivors are calling for an end to the slaughter of animals, what they also call a holocaust. I'm sorry but like Jeff Said, coddling people isn't going to cut it. There's a vast array of meatless products on the market that make the transition easy, people don't need local farms to make that transition. There's no right way to do the wrong thing.

November 4, 2015 at 11:31am · 4 Likes

R2: <http://www.onegreenplanet.org/vegan-food/eatfortheplanet-vegan-recipes/>

November 4, 2015 at 11:40am · 1 Like

R10: I don't see large differences between local and factory(non-local) farms, besides cost in products being mass produced and available at a lower cost(factory) and a slightly smaller carbon footprint due to localized shipping(local). Offering an alternative place to retrieve a slaughtered animal does nothing in helping people wean off the consumption of meat. Instead, why not emplore people to consume less per week and substitute with meatless options. A large portion of the population do not know what options are out there for meatless products.

November 4, 2015 at 11:42am · 5 Likes

R7: Lots of excuses, that's all I hear.

We're talking saving the planet, you're speaking to individual discomforts. That is precisely WHY the planet is screwed, people's selfishness. But let's keep plating into that, shall we?

November 4, 2015 at 1:02pm · 4 Likes

R2: well said [R7]

November 4, 2015 at 1:00pm · 1 Like

R6: It is true that eating locally is barely better...the simple fact that we are consuming animals at all is the primary source of the carbon emissions not their transport (although a ridiculous lack of organisation in transport is also an issue it is in animal agriculture shadow). The problem with eating meat or dairy, eggs etc is that the animals eat too taxing the planet enormously and that they fart a lot...far more than we do to the point that it is destroying the chances of survival on earth. Your eggs could be coming from a chicken in your own yard but that is not good enough that will still kill us all. The experts agree we need to all do the plant based thing within basically the next year...all of us...in order to survive...get it? The also state that

we should have done it already because even at this point our future is looking very bleak and it will be a struggle to survive but that 2017 is the end of the road for hope so it is actually URGENT that ALL of us do the vegan thing A.S.A.P. (pun intended for those who get it).

November 4, 2015 at 1:19pm · 4 Likes

Sound and Fury

It seems fitting that this thread ends with a member of the vegan consensus making reference to a pun that seems obscure. Only those already in the know are able to “get it,” much like the preceding posts affirm a conviction (veganism is necessary to save the planet and is the only ethical dietary choice) that must be first acceded to in order to be regarded as a participant in discussion worthy of respect. This is the dynamic of the echo chamber crystallized in two discussion threads. This is not to blame social media or any other mass communication channel for any of this. It is only, again, to point out that it is in the context of living, material realities of struggle that the radical imagination truly lives. This is not to chain or reduce the imagination – whether radical or political – to material realities. Indeed, if that were so, where would the radical spark of social change come from? But the warning signs from the opposite tendency are also clear: if we retreat to abstraction and pure signification through the radical imagination we substitute gesture for substance and risk forgetting the fact that movements capable of driving social change are collective, lived projects and the radical imagination is inextricably interwoven with and through them. In the absence of commitments to mass-based organizing that seeks to speak to those beyond narrow circles of the already-convinced, the radical imagination becomes an abstraction and the rituals of gatekeeping and purging come to substitute themselves for actual movement-building. It also speaks to the fact that unless we are very careful and conscious about our ways and means of organizing, even avowedly radical social justice organizations can and often do become purveyors of some of the most toxic, oppressive, and exploitative ways of relating to one another. As scholar-activist Chris Dixon (2014) has often said, radicals need to get much better at discussing plans, not just principles. While the principles guiding struggles for radical social change are undoubtedly vital, absent concrete, engaged discussions and clear-eyed strategizing about how activists might build movements out of more than our own narrow, like-minded circles vital struggles for social justice can be all too easily stymied by the toxic dynamics of the scene and the echo chamber. The political is deeply interwoven in the intersection between movements and media. The trick is understanding how the political operates through this interface without succumbing to either vulgar materialism or lofty abstraction. As engaged scholar-activists we need to learn to trace the work of the radical imagination and even participate in its convocation as a vital route to better understanding and enabling struggles for radical social justice and social change.

It is also worth considering how the dynamics of the scene and the echo chamber intermingle with what is commonly identified as “call-out culture” and the increasing popularity of discourses of “self-“ or “community-care” in radical milieus across the Anglophone North Atlantic. “Call-out culture” refers in general to the identification of violent or oppressive behaviours within movement spaces through a process of public naming that seeks to hold perpetrators accountable without turning to the repressive or punitive apparatuses of the state to do so. The end goal is a transformation of the circumstances responsible for bringing violence and oppression into being, not just consequences for the perpetrator. But problems with this approach are hardly absent (Fisher 2013). In addition to a reliance on public strategies of naming and shaming alleged perpetrators, the dynamics of the call-out are ad hoc and urgent. While strategies like this may be useful for interventions in the moment, truly transformative strategies of conflict and dispute resolution need to be better elaborated and the relations ensuring their accountability clearly spelled-out.

Discourses of “self-“ and “community-care” have focused on the phenomenon of activist burn-out and the more general crisis of social reproduction so many face under austere neoliberal capitalism (Loewe 2012; Padamsee 2011; Plyler 2006). As neoliberalism has dismantled the welfare state across the global North and austerity has further eroded the capacity of people to sustain themselves in the face of a new round of accumulation by dispossession, many activists have spent much time thinking about the necessity of sustaining ourselves together. While this seems sensible, the problem is that, like neoliberalism itself, it seeks to devolve the responsibility for the production and reproduction of social life and social beings to individuals themselves. Why should we accept that social reproduction is the responsibility of individuals or small activist collectives? Is this not directly and immediately a social and political concern? As we have argued in our work through the Radical Imagination Project, if we cannot expect the state to fulfill its minimal and meagre responsibilities for social welfare under capitalism, this means

movements themselves must become the sites for such critical work (Haiven and Khasnabish 2013; Haiven and Khasnabish 2014). Equally critical, however, is the insistence that such work is collective and communal work and is the source of all social life and wealth. In fact, as we've argued elsewhere, this may be an opportunity for movements as much as it is a challenge. Instead of being merely vehicles for the mobilization of dissent, what if radical movements were configured to take on the work of sustaining people and communities together? This would mean movements taking on the challenge of building the capacity to meet people's needs economically, politically, and socially. It would mean taking up the challenge and promise of developing autonomous, free social relations and the material conditions necessary to sustain them.

The relationship between the radical imagination and the media practices of activists and organizers is something that calls for much more research and engagement. The dynamics I have sketched here and the Radical Imagination Project Facebook discussion threads I have examined are only entry points into this much more expansive terrain. Tentatively, I would suggest that the performative dynamics of moral and intellectual superiority, political certainty, moral outrage, and wry cynicism in social media contexts serve as a partial index for the relative powerlessness and lack of effect on the part of radicals and their scenes in the Anglophone North Atlantic. Where radical activists feel they have less ability to actually affect change the performance of radical marginality actually increases. Gesture and rhetoric stand in as a substitute for real political action and effects. As we noted in the first phase of the Radical Imagination Project's active research, such performances are also present in public settings where activists come together to discuss tactics, strategies, and larger political visions. In political contexts where radical collectives are fragmented, marginalized, and far from exercising any kind of effect over society at large, some activists seek to affirm their own significance and sense of power by turning inward and demonstrating their power over fellow travelers or the uninitiated. This may be a short term strategy to salve the souls of those frustrated with their own wider insignificance but it is a long term strategy of political isolation and social alienation. The echo chamber and the scene may affirm our convictions and allow us to feel morally just and politically superior but they do not provide a basis for reaching those beyond the ranks of the already convinced or for challenging the current order and articulating alternatives to it. In the next phase of our research we seek to examine the relationship between activist media practices and the radical imagination, particularly as they relate to the engagement of people new to activism. For now, dynamics I have traced here leave us with more questions than answers. What is clear is that if social media is not "the problem" in terms of the relative marginality and fragmentation of radical social justice struggles across the Anglophone North Atlantic it is certainly not the solution to it either. Finding ways of reaching persuasively and effectively beyond the narrow confines of already established networks and communities is essential to any serious project of social justice and social change. Scholar-activists committed to assisting social justice struggles do what they do better can make a real contribution to the fabric of struggle today as well as advancing knowledge about communication and social change by putting their skills to work in mapping this terrain.

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