

# Digging for the Future

An English radical manifesto

Charles Leadbeater

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## DIGGING FOR THE FUTURE

First published in Great Britain in 2010 by:

The Young Foundation  
18 Victoria Park Square  
London E2 9PF  
UK

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library  
ISBN 978-1-905551-13-2

## Preface

Sudden crises often impel us to reach for the history books. It's through the past that we try to make sense of the present and the future. Over the last 18 months, the sheer scale of the financial crisis led many to look again at what happened last time the world's economy tumbled in the 1920s and 1930s. From the mistakes made then, lessons were learned about how to prevent banks from collapsing and economies from grinding to a halt.

But as Charles Leadbeater shows in this essay, for some of the deeper lessons about what needs to be done, we need to reach back much further.

Nearly four hundred years ago a small group of radical reformers saw with remarkable clarity what might go wrong in the parallel emergence of a market economy and representative democracy. Democracy was meant to turn the state into a servant, and was founded on the claim that people are fundamentally equal. Yet, as they argued, when there are deep inequalities of wealth and income, states, and the parties that rule them, are more likely to be captured by the rich.

These issues feel particularly acute just now, in the wake of bank bailouts and expenses scandals. At the time of the English Civil War the radical diggers and levellers argued that the formal apparatus of liberty, and even elections, would count for little if the underlying structures of power were heavily weighted against the poor. After all, what point would there be in simply replacing monarchy with an almost equally distant oligarchy of merchants and landlords?

Gerrard Winstanley's *Law of Freedom in a Platform*<sup>1</sup> was published in 1652 and set out in ringing prose why economic equality was essential for political liberty, and how a communal, non-competitive equality could achieve a better world. His philosophy built on the old rhyme from the time of the Peasants' Revolt - 'when Adam delved and Eve span who was then the gentleman?' - promising a return to a primordial equality without ranks or property. It stood against government

which 'locks up the treasures of the earth from the poor' and against the punitive policies that have so often accompanied economic inequality which meant that if the poor begged 'they whip them by their law for vagrants; if they steal they hang them ...' The task for reformers, he argued, was to 'make restitution of the earth, which has been taken and held from the common people by the power of conquests.'

Gerrard Winstanley was the product of a unique moment in time, revolutionary, millenarian, angry and also optimistic. Some of his ideas are anachronistic. Yet from the vantage point of 2010 many have a renewed resonance. His fusion of what today we would call an ecological consciousness with a passion for social justice looks appealing amidst the wreckage of an often rampantly destructive and unequal capitalism. Clear echoes of his arguments for mutuality and equality can be found in the countercultures of the web, open source technology and social entrepreneurship.

Nor does the metaphor of digging seem quite so quaint as it did when I first came across Winstanley's ideas. You don't have to look far to find examples of people trying to be more directly engaged in producing their own food, digging up gardens, allotments and parks for urban agriculture, just as they want to be more directly engaged in producing their own energy or health.

Truly radical ideas always look back as well as forwards, and it's right that we should now be open to learning from an earlier generation. They were only able to plant the seeds. Now, as Charles Leadbeater shows, their ideas may at least be bearing fruit.

Geoff Mulgan  
Director

## Eating Ourselves

The financial crisis may have abated but its aftershocks continue to unsettle us and not just because of the ensuing recession, ballooning public debt and the prospect of rounds of cuts in public spending.

Our unease stems from a profound sense that society seems to be eating itself from within, undermining itself even as it tries to get back on its feet. Financial recklessness on the part of a small minority has eaten a huge hole in our shared wealth and public finances. Everyone in the UK is poorer than they thought they were because the size and profitability of the economy was vastly overstated in the last decade. The financial system profited only by wrecking the rest of the economy and imposing costly cuts on many people on average and low incomes. It has taken little more than a year for bankers to get back to normal.

The financial system's naked lack of respect for the rest of society is not the only reason for worrying that society is in danger of crumbling from within. There is a widespread sense that things of particular and personal value are being eaten up by bland and standardised commercial culture of administered desire offering pre-packaged fulfilment. More people than ever do apparently creative jobs in an innovation driven economy; yet much of work and life seems dreadfully pre-programmed and mechanical. Our managerialised politics marked by spin, self-interest and timidity has eaten away at itself by comprehensively losing the trust, respect and even interest of most citizens. Politicians who urge us to act in the name of some greater cause are routinely assumed to be doing so out of low self-interest. Excessive individualism and uncomprehending diversity seem to be eating away at the bonds of belonging and community, just as industrial production and mass consumerism eat away at the environmental base for our society. It is hard not to conclude that deeply destructive and wasteful cycles are at work and yet we find it impossible to face the scale of the crisis. Modern society is a melange of political pragmatism, cultural relativism and constant consumerism that seems at once

wonderful, distracting and hollow.<sup>2</sup> The financial crisis has left a hole in our balance sheets but it has also widened and deepened the hole that was there already in our beliefs: the chasm between our need to have a sense of purpose and our incapacity to muster the collective commitment to do so. That gap haunted the Copenhagen climate change talks and stalks Barack Obama, in whom so much hope was invested. It is that hole that we all teeter on the brink of and which we need to fill in if our society is to prosper in any meaningful sense.

The ultra free market, driven by finance and shareholder value, has lost its dominant power. That does not mean it will go away, witness the rapid return of inflated profits and outrageous bonuses in the City. Yet the crisis has turned ultra financial capitalism into a sectarian creed rather than the universal religion it once aspired to be. People still follow the creed, bow down to it. Yet only the minority who directly profit from it really put their faith in it.

However, if the ultra market has failed, it is difficult to see how the state has really won. True, government will play a larger role in the economy than ever before through ownership and regulation of the banks, alongside regulation of energy and media, transport and utilities. Yet no one seems able to say what the state's newfound power is for, other than to save ultra capitalism from itself and to get the market back on its feet when it fails spectacularly. In 2009, the state often did not appear strong but weak, held to ransom by banks that are too big to fail and bankers who demanded bonuses despite being in work only thanks to the support of taxpayers. The market and the state seem to cancel one another out. We seem to have reached a stalemate.

Yet this crisis is far from over. Its economic, social and political effects are still unfolding. A recession is a purely economic event. A crisis of the kind that occurred with the depression of the 1930s and "stagflation" (simultaneous inflation and economic stagnation) in the 1970s is something more than that. As Andrew Gamble puts it, crises "create the conditions for the rise of new forms of politics and policy regimes, and the rebalancing of power between states... their outcomes have been new institutions, new alignments, new policies

and new ideologies. They come retrospectively to be seen as major turning points... a period when capitalism is reorganised.”<sup>3</sup>

Thus far, the scale of the financial crisis has been matched by the timidity of political responses, although some more radical proposals have started to emerge for taxing bankers’ bonuses, banks repaying taxpayers’ funding, bank-funded insurance schemes to provide against future financial catastrophes and more talk of taxes on financial transactions to limit volatility. Past crises, in the 1930s and 1970s, were also marked by a prolonged sense of powerlessness and impasse before new ideas broke through: Keynesianism in the 1940s, neo liberalism in the 1980s. The financial crisis of 2009 may not bear its full load of political fruit until later in this decade, once new sets of ideas have taken shape and coalesced, new generations of politicians have emerged to articulate them and new coalitions have formed. We may be in an impasse, but this second half of the decade is the time in which ideas should take hold that may break that impasse, and lead to a new kind of capitalism.

Where might we turn for inspiration for a comprehensive programme for radical change on the scale required? A good start would be with a bunch of men in southern England, in April 1649.

That month Gerrard Winstanley led a group of men to the top of St George’s Hill, in Surrey, and started digging. Winstanley wanted to embody in action his ideas for a self-governing, cooperative and productive community as the basis for the new social order that would emerge from a revolution in which the King had been executed and a timid English republic, barely able to speak its name, had come into being. Winstanley’s plan was that his group would plant and tend crops, and feed and sustain themselves, by taking unused land into common ownership to boost food production and provide employment. Behind this radical community lay a sophisticated philosophy, centuries ahead of its time, which linked social justice to self-determination, innovation and democracy.

The Diggers were the leading edge of a radical movement that included the Levellers, Fifth Monarchists, Ranters and other sects, whose ideas spread across England in the 1640s. The Levellers, best

known for their influence over the New Model Army and their participation in 1647 in the Putney debates on democracy, proposed a new political settlement, an Agreement of the People, based on popular sovereignty, which would widen the franchise, protect individual freedoms and limit the power of the executive. Winstanley drew on these ideas to mount a sweeping critique of what was wrong with England.<sup>4</sup>

Winstanley argued society should be judged by how well it treated the poorest and that the dispossessed could be agents of social justice for all; unused land should be given over to mutual ownership to boost food production; democracy should be radically extended, including greater local power, rotation of public posts and limits to the power of property. Winstanley was an innovator. He argued that knowledge, even of the word of God, came from within rather than being handed down by the clergy. A productive, cooperative community would share and create knowledge rather than be ruled by the dogma of a narrow elite.

Winstanley’s ideas were a remarkable English radical synthesis: a Christian account of social justice that was served by mutual ownership, democratic revolution, a love of the land and knowledge sharing. He was an English nationalist, nostalgically seeking to restore a sense of self-government lost with the Norman invasion. In a series of scintillating pamphlets written between 1648 and 1652 Winstanley sketched out a reform programme for English society that should still inspire radicals today. He started in January 1649, just days before the King was executed, with *The New Law of Righteousness*, a mystical tract which argued the spirit of Christ would emerge in England only if people worked together and ate together as equals. In *The True Leveller Standard*, published in April of the same year, Winstanley explained that the Diggers had taken to the land to bring economic and political freedom together. As he put it:

*England is not a free people till the poor that have no land have a free allowance to dig and labour the commons, and so live as comfortably as the landlords that live in their enclosures.*

In *A New Year's Gift for Parliament and the Armie* in January 1650 Winstanley argued it would not be enough to get rid of the King when regal powers were enshrined in property laws. Land ownership had to be mutualised to rid the country of Kingly power. Finally, in February 1652, Winstanley published his most famous work, *The Law of Freedom in a Platform or the Magistracy Restored*, in which he argued for common ownership, production and storage of local produce, underpinned by a democratic vision of a government founded on a contract with the people. Winstanley was a mutual moderniser. He was suspicious of the power of the King, the market and the gentry. For him, only what we would now call radical self-organisation would guarantee innovation and productivity, justice and dignity.

By then, however, the Digger experiments were already over. Their communities collapsed or disbanded in the spring of 1650 in the face of hostility from local landlords. Yet Winstanley's ideas still stand inspection today as an impressively coherent, radical synthesis created before the political categories of left and right, market and state had come into being in their modern form. For that reason Winstanley's stress on localism, democracy and mutual ownership could inspire progressives across the political spectrum, not just in the contemporary left, as it struggles to find its sense of mission and purpose. Indeed, echoes of Winstanley's ideas can be heard in many quarters today bringing together campaigns for social justice and sustainability; bottom-up economic reform and more open politics; spreading and sharing knowledge using the web for open access. This cocktail of ideas is being developed on the fringes of politics, in disconnected pockets of campaigning and social entrepreneurship, among open source communities and social innovators. The time is ripe for it to be brought together. That synthesis could provide the basis for a comprehensive political response to the crisis later this decade, a response that could reorganise capitalism rather than merely moderate some of its worst excesses.

At first sight it might seem improbable that the ideas behind a failed radical experiment in England 360 years ago might have any

bearing on the global economic, social and political challenges we face in our intensely interconnected, high tech society. Yet in many respects the concerns of mid 17th century England were surprisingly like our own:

- › **Holding power to account.** The Diggers and Levellers were concerned with the overwhelming power of the King and landed gentry; we are concerned with a distant political elite, financial and corporate power.
- › **The environment.** The Diggers' politics stemmed from the idea that land was a "common treasury" that should belong to all. Modern politics will have to become just as concerned with the state of the land to create a sustainable economy.
- › **Religious fundamentalism.** The radicals worried Puritans would create an exclusive, intolerant and punishing culture. They argued for a more humane, forgiving and creative form of faith. We find ourselves concerned by the rise of fundamentalist Islam and Christianity. Winstanley was comfortable yoking together religion and radicalism in a way that modern, secular politicians do not.
- › **Collaborative innovation.** The Levellers wanted to raise food production through mutual ownership of underused land that would allow new technologies like manuring to take hold. One of the key issues for our generation is how best to share socially useful knowledge, especially through digital technologies and the web.
- › **Social cohesion.** Our most troubling dilemmas stem from the flux of globalisation. Culture and economics, and trade and money have become more open and globalised. Yet our identities, social ties, sense of belonging and political institutions remain rooted in nations and regions, particular places and our close relationships. Winstanley's philosophy was also the product of extraordinary flux and transition as a more democratic, individualistic, market-based society took shape, even though the corporate bonds of

feudalism had not dissolved.

Winstanley was one of the first philosophers to deal with distinctively modern political themes. Even today his original synthesis could animate a radical, progressive programme for a society suffering a profound loss of self-belief. These would be its main ingredients.

## Start with the Poorest

For Winstanley, a righteous moral order would emerge from a politics primarily concerned with the poor, because their needs would be recognised only when people put aside questions of property and wealth to focus on universal human needs. Frailty rather than strength could have a heroic and redemptive power. Politics should build on bonds based on a shared sense of weakness and vulnerability. That is why in 1652 he called for a free national health service. Winstanley used religious language to announce the arrival of the poor as a political force long before Marx and Engels identified the industrial proletariat as agents of revolution:

*The Father is now raising up a people to Himself out of the dust, that is, out of the lowest and most despised sort of people... that are counted the dust of the earth, mankind, that are trod under foot. In these and from these shall the law of the Righteous break forth first.*<sup>5</sup>

Yet Winstanley's remedy for poverty was neither charity nor welfare, but a fairer distribution of productive assets so people could sustain themselves. The Diggers blamed the enclosures and private property for driving up grain prices and throwing people off the land. Their remedy – mutual ownership and work – was designed to increase production, raise real incomes and put food in the mouths of the landless poor.

In our setting, that would mean promoting mutual, socially entrepreneurial solutions to poverty, which build up capabilities for work and so incomes. Winstanley would have been critical of the dependency culture created by long term welfare services and the idea that transfer payments – cheques in the post – could substitute for social solidarity. Social entrepreneurs such as Mohammed Yunus at Grameen Bank and Bunker Roy of the Barefoot College echo the Diggers and Levellers: they believe in economically empowering the poor through

new forms of mutual ownership, collaborative production and useful work.

Adopting this approach in the developed world would mean recasting the welfare state as a productive undertaking, based on local mutual ownership, turning spending into investment, providing work and building up capabilities rather than sustaining people on benefits.

The biggest challenges facing the UK stem from deeply ingrained poverty in places and families cast adrift by economic restructuring since the 1970s and 1980s with the loss of low skilled, manual jobs in industries employing large workforces. In greater Manchester, for example, after a decade of sustained growth, 400,000 adults cannot read or write properly, more than 120,000 are on incapacity benefit and 100,000 unemployed for more than a year and this in the UK's most successful city after London.<sup>6</sup> The clearest way to generate higher productivity and improve social justice is to cut deep into these ingrained cultures of low skill and aspiration. Yet the welfare state largely maintains people in the midst of this social devastation rather than providing routes out of it.

Making that shift would mean more integrated and intensive interventions into these communities and families, to invest more up front to prevent cycles of deprivation spreading across generations. Budgets would have to be devolved, to the micro level of housing estates and tower blocks, to families and individuals to fashion solutions that work locally. Many of these solutions will not come from large-scale private sector suppliers, nor from the mainstream public sector, but from social entrepreneurs promoting solutions that turn on building mutual self-help.

The same is true globally. The biggest challenges we face will stem from the growth of cities in the developing world. On current trends, the world's urban population will grow by 33 cities of 2 million inhabitants each year for the next 30 years, or 6 new megacities of 12 million people per year. By 2030, eight out of ten city dwellers will live in the developing world. Most of the new arrivals will live in slums, bereft of public services and mainly working in the informal economy. These

cities and their slums will be where we will face our biggest challenges in health, education, politics and the environment.

The millions living in these slums desperately hope for a better life. Traditional aid policies and Western models of the welfare state can only offer them so much. We will need to fashion an entirely new kind of politics of mutual self-help if we are not to lose many millions of these people to fundamentalism, ethnic hostility and despair. Capturing the support and hope of the very poor should be as important as designing the world to be fit for mobile capital and entrepreneurs.

## Share Knowledge for Social Good

Winstanley believed the problems of the poor would be addressed only if knowledge was freely shared rather than hoarded by an elite.

The Levellers put their faith in a more expressive, open culture, that would allow everyone to follow their inner light rather than blindly follow the lessons of the scriptures handed down by the clergy. Trusting in individual experience and creativity, however, threatened to turn everything on its head. As Christopher Hill puts it:

*One consequence of the stress on continuous revelation and on experienced truths was that the idea of novelty, of originality, ceased to be shocking and became in a sense desirable.<sup>7</sup>*

The Levellers believed any person who had the spirit of God in them could preach better than a university-trained divine who lacked the spirit. Any place could become a site of worship. Religious truth came from within, rather than from the scriptures. As George Shulman puts it in *Radicalism and Reverence*:<sup>8</sup>

*Winstanley attacks the clergy in the name of an authority earned by experience, manifested in authentic speech, and dedicated to teaching others to become agents of their own right.*

The Diggers did not stop with the clergy. They were against all monopolies that held back knowledge. They argued that the College of Physicians limited the supply of remedies for poorer people and so foreshadowed contemporary disputes about how pharmaceutical companies should make their knowledge available to the developing world. They were fierce critics of the universities. By 1655 English radicals had a well-developed, shared vision of universal, largely vocational education in the vernacular for boys and girls to the age of 18, followed by six years' university for the best pupils. Winstanley

wanted to bridge the divide – still present to this day – between academic and practical education, to prevent a scholarly class of well-educated people lording it over everyone else.

For Winstanley the rejection of the professions' monopoly on truth and knowledge would be the basis for a massive expansion in what could be thought and said, that would in turn fuel innovation to make society more productive. Winstanley imagined “postmasters” in every region posting information about new ideas that had emerged elsewhere in the kingdom. The Levellers created one of the first national newspapers, *The Moderate*, and wrote a stream of pamphlets, papers and tracts much as people today blog. Clay Shirky, the media theorist, argues the web is making possible the greatest expansion of expressive capacity in human history.<sup>9</sup> The Diggers were advocates of that expansion centuries before it was a realistic possibility. They could already see that democratising knowledge, expanding sources for ideas and allowing them to be shared should fuel innovation and social progress.

Winstanley looked forward to:

*A society of all round non-specialists helping to arrive at truth through the community.<sup>10</sup>*

That sounds like many of the most optimistic accounts of the potential of the web to spread knowledge and promote collaboration.

Latter-day Levellers and Diggers stand for the opening up and sharing of knowledge for social good, through open source software, open access to scientific knowledge and education, and platforms for knowledge sharing such as Wikipedia. Educational social entrepreneurs such as Sugata Mitra, the founder of Hole in the Wall, and Rodrigo Baggio of CDI from Brazil are latter-day Diggers using technology to take learning into the poor communities that lack schools and teachers.

The web is creating a highly permissive culture of lateral free association, in which people with similar interests seek and find one another out to share and develop ideas. The mutual media of the web encourages people not just to enjoy what is delivered to them, but to

create content themselves, individually and collaboratively, to form groups and networks, to share and collaborate, and to adapt and spread it.

Wikipedia, the online encyclopaedia created and maintained by volunteers, which now has more than 10 million articles, is the most famous example of mutual media. The Creative Commons and open source movements are heirs to the Leveller faith in the power of sharing ideas. More of this activity is having a social impact through, for example, the spread of the Social Innovation Camp to bring together social entrepreneurs and web designers to create new ways to address social need through web-based collaborations. Tom Steinberg, founder of the My Society site, which uses the web to make politics transparent and accountable for ordinary people, stands in the tradition of the Diggers. Lawrence Lessig, the founding father of Creative Commons, who has done most to provide an overarching legal framework for all this activity, is the Winstanley of the web. All these efforts are setting up camps of mutual activity to share resources more effectively.

As yet, however, no politician, including Barack Obama, has fully articulated into politics the web's potential to allow us to share knowledge in new ways and radically, to increase the rate of socially useful innovation. To do that, we would need to reverse the polarity of the regime of intellectual property and patents. All knowledge and ideas should be assumed to be available for sharing unless there are specific and legally justified restrictions on that sharing. All knowledge should be in the public domain unless there are very good reasons for it being withheld. Patenting should be the exception rather than the rule. We should be extremely sceptical of attempts to extend the reach of copyright and patents that make it harder for people to mix and share ideas. The greatest indictment of that regime are the vast mountains of orphaned works: copyrighted books, films and music which are no longer in commercial production but which are beyond the reach of consumers and innovators because they are still covered by copyright. This is exactly the situation Winstanley was reacting to: resources being kept idle by private ownership when shared ownership could put

them to good use. We should put the expansion of the public domain of knowledge at the heart of modern politics.<sup>11</sup>

We should also take up a return to Winstanley's attempt to bridge the divide between vocational and academic, formal and informal learning. Schools are industrial-era solutions to the problem of learning that are becoming increasingly ineffective and outmoded, leaving about 30 percent of children, mainly from poorer families, with little to show for their time at school other than a simmering resentment. We need to improve schools and to supplement them with more effective supports for family-based learning. But most of all, we also need to provide alternatives to school as they stand. This alternative approach to education should be based on pulling people to learning rather than pushing education at them; real-world problem solving rather than sitting in classrooms; collaborative rather than individualised learning; promoting social, emotional and entrepreneurial skills rather than focusing on narrowly analytical and academic ones; ways for students to show what they know through creative problem solving rather than exam passing. Education should start from open questions rather than a body of knowledge to be imparted. We need an entirely new story about education and learning, one that does not exclusively rely on schools.

## Democratic Revolution

The Levellers railed against a disconnected, arrogant, illegitimate state that was driven by the interests of the rich, propertied and self-seeking elite. An all too familiar argument.

The commons, wastes and forests of the 17th century were the radicals' schools of economic cooperation. The New Model Army created in 1645 was where they learned democracy. The Army was founded on a democratic covenant, a Solemn Engagement between officers and men, in June 1645. Leveller ideas about self-government started to spread in the army from 1647 as the rank and file elected their own leaders – Agitators – to voice their views. By 1649, with the power of the Army at its height, the Agitators were within a whisker of putting their ideas for democratic self-government into practice across the country. No army had ever been founded in this way. There was nothing like it until the Workers and Soldiers Councils met in Russia in 1917. The Levellers were centuries ahead of their time.

For Winstanley, democracy was essential to social justice and economic efficiency. People were kept poor, he argued, because they could not access common resources that had been unjustly privatised through the after-effects of the Norman conquest. A republic based on the rule of property would be little better, Winstanley argued, because the property laws had been set by the King. Only a legitimate, self-governing state would guarantee public goods and common resources and so enable a true commonwealth to emerge.

Even as England was moving towards a constitutional monarchy and rule by parliament, Winstanley foresaw many of the problems that would beset the system and imagined many of the remedies that are still needed today. He wanted frequent elections, the decentralisation of decision making to communities and rotation of fixed term public positions to root out corruption. Every citizen should play a role in governing, Winstanley argued, to ensure that all took their responsibilities seriously.

Two centuries ago the disenfranchised majority began to clamour for access to the formal political process. A century ago that battle was largely won. Now people are deserting the formal politics in droves. Politics has had to resort to marketing and branding to lure them back. In the 2001 and 2005 British General Elections four out of ten people chose not to vote, rising to six out of ten among 18–25 year olds. The 1997 election recorded the lowest post-war turnout. By 2007, membership of the main political parties was less than a quarter of its level in 1964. Members of political parties make up less than two per cent of the voting population. Less than one per cent of the electorate say they campaign for a political party. A more individualistic, consumerist culture has eroded the collective identities that mass political parties were based upon. The institutions of government seem more distant from and insensitive to the intimacy of people's lives and yet less able to protect people from impersonal global forces. People talk of their political representatives as invisible, distant, alien, partisan, arrogant, untrustworthy, irrelevant and disconnected. Policy debates are boring for most people: complex, abstract, dry, the province of “wonks” and lobbyists. Politics induces a shuddering yawn because all politicians' statements of principle are quickly interpreted as self-serving ad copy. They are judged not for their truth or ability to inspire but for their tactical shrewdness and marketability.<sup>12</sup>

This democratic decline is fatal for any society that depends on collaborative creativity and shared solutions to common problems. We need to go back to the fundamental questions that the Levellers asked at the Putney debates: how should the state be constituted; how is government made legitimate; what rights should be clearly reserved to secure a zone of freedom from the state?

This means decisively reversing the drift towards more centralised and statist solutions that lie at the heart of popular distrust in politics and which also weaken our capacity for collaborative social innovation. We need what the Brazilian political theorist Roberto Unger calls a “democratic experimentalism” which brings change through the accumulation of a mass of smaller scale, often local, initiatives.<sup>13</sup> Unger

calls it a “high-energy politics”, which pulses with ideas, experimentation and commitment, rather than the weary, exhausted and cynical politics we have.

What might it take to create a “high energy politics” in Britain?

- › a convention to draw up a written constitution, modelled on the Putney debates
- › voting reform for the House of Commons based on proportional representation
- › an elected House of Lords but not one dominated by political parties
- › elected mayors in major cities, combined with substantial devolution of budgets and tax raising powers
- › greater use of participatory budgeting, local referenda, citizen conventions and other forms of direct citizen engagement in policy making
- › limits on private donations to political parties to force them to raise their money through small scale donations, something that will also accelerate their use of the web as a tool for mobilising and campaigning
- › the removal of the last vestiges of Kingly Power by making government and secretaries of state subject to Parliament rather than the Crown.

We need a new culture of democratic experimentalism to unlock our public capacity to devise new ways to provide education and learning, welfare and health. That will only be possible with a higher energy politics that really engages people. That will require a constitutional revolution. We are in danger of becoming a hollow democracy. That hole needs to be filled by radical measures to promote more direct, local and engaged citizenship.

## Social Capitalism

In the cruelly hard winter of 1648 Winstanley had a vision of England’s future that would be based on common ownership and work:

*He that works for another, either for wages or to pay him rent, works unrighteously... but they that are resolved to work and eat together, making the earth a common treasury, doth join hands with Christ to lift up the creation from bondage.*

Work was central to Winstanley’s vision: a moral responsibility and a route to autonomy. For Winstanley, dignity, work and community were bound together: people gained dignity by working *with* one another rather than *for* a lord or an employer. In *The Law of Freedom*, Winstanley argued that human dignity would be possible only when people were free from medieval lords but also from the necessity of selling their labour to an employer. That is why he envisaged an economy based on small-scale, mutual self-help and self-production as an alternative to both feudalism and the market. Winstanley advocated voluntary and collaborative forms of work of the kind that the open source software movement today embodies. Just as latter-day file sharers and hackers are often dismissed as pirates and thieves, so the Diggers and Levellers’ ideas of common ownership and work emerged from a century of unauthorised encroachment on forests and wasteland by squatters and commoners.

The Diggers believed their promise to work and eat together would meet their immediate need for food, subvert the emerging market, preserve rural communities, create a zone of freedom from the landlords and the state, and in the process modernise England by bringing in new farming techniques. Winstanley was not opposed to private ownership but to its unwarranted extension, driving out alternative forms of ownership.

In the wake of the crisis of financial, free market capitalism, we are

once again searching for a new way to make sense of how our economy should work. Collaborative models of organisation, often exploiting the web, are all the rage. There is a growing recognition that cooperation feeds innovation as much as competition and that over-reliance on the market and corporations is dangerous. We need a more social and mutual capitalism: an economy of *with*.

A reinvigorated progressive politics would have to recast the market economy to make it more democratic, diverse in its patterns of ownership and investment. As Roberto Unger puts it:

*Leftists should not be the ones who seek to suppress the market, or even to merely regulate it, nor to moderate its inequalities by retrospective compensatory redistribution. They should be the people who propose to reinvent and to democratise the market by extending the range of its legal and institutional forms. They should turn the freedom to combine factors of production into a larger freedom to experiment with the arrangements that define production and exchange.<sup>14</sup>*

We need to re-imagine how we could organise the market economy, from the bottom up, rather than just hope to keep the lid on risk-taking through regulation or ameliorate inequality through welfare programmes.

The economy should be subject to more open democratic oversight, especially as most of the big risks taken in the private economy end up being paid for socially, usually through the state. Banks were taking risks with taxpayers' money because when boom turned to bust the taxpayers picked up the bill. If all major risks of the market economy end up being socialised – pollution, unemployment, bad loans, technologies that go wrong – then the case for clearer democratic oversight of how the market works is inescapable. The rallying cry of the English revolution was “no taxation without representation”. Today it could be “no systemic risk taking without representation”. That might well come through more effective regulation which should directly involve citizens and greater transparency and accountability.

We need more experiments with different forms of ownership and organisation, including mutuals and cooperatives. A more democratic and experimentalist economy would not rely on a single, dominant form of organisation: companies driven by shareholder value to deliver results to global finance. To develop more socially useful forms of production, however, we will need social innovation in finance. We should encourage financial innovation that works in society's interests rather than mainly serving the interests of bankers. The financial crisis that led to this recession was a product of excessive and fundamentally self-interested financial innovation, which took increasingly baroque forms. Yet the 1990s were not just the era of ultra complex debt products. At the other end of the social spectrum, the Grameen Bank found ways to get millions of small loans to poor farmers and villagers to allow them to do the most basic things, like put tin roofs over their huts. Other examples of mutual, we-banking are developing in Grameen's wake, enabled by the web and mobile phones. Kiva, an exchange that allows people in the developed world to invest directly in entrepreneurial businesses in the developing world, is handling \$10 million a week two years after being established. Zopa, the online peer-to-peer banking exchange which directly matches lenders and borrowers is lending more than £2.5 million a month. In Africa, new micro banking systems are emerging, such as M-Pesa in Kenya, which uses mobile phones as its infrastructure and phone credits as its currency. M-Pesa, launched in March 2007, now has more than 6 million members in Kenya, exchanging about £17 million a month directly without going through a bank. We need more financial innovations like Zopa, M-Pesa and Grameen that are simple and clearly socially useful.

All of this has to be done in the name of innovation and experimentation rather than protectionism and the status quo. Economies that innovate are good at creative combination and collaboration. That is why the collaborative ethic should be at the heart of a modernising agenda. Unger describes it as a piecemeal but cumulative reorganisation in which everyone has power to share in the permanent creation of the new: a mass form of social innovation.

## A Politics of the Land

The land was at the heart of the Leveller programme. Increasingly it will have to be at the heart of our politics as well.

The Levellers had strikingly modern ideas about freedom and knowledge but they operated in a pre-industrial setting: their politics was agricultural. That meant they were not concerned, as later radicals would be, with work and technology, machines and organisation, the pressure of living in cities and mass movements. Their main concern was how the land should be used to feed people. Winstanley regarded “manuring the earth” as both an innovation and an act of love. His radical language often combined religion and the earth: Christ’s spirit would rise up, he argued, like corn from a clod of earth, through communal labour on the land, what Winstanley called our “common treasury”. Winstanley was a democratic radical because he was an environmental egalitarian: the earth was common storehouse to which the poorest man had as much title as the richest. That right could be secured only through a democratic revolution. He was not against exploiting the earth. On the contrary, he wanted to do so more efficiently. But he believed that the earth needed to be replenished and access to it shared fairly.

Sustaining the land is returning as a central theme in our politics too. As with the Diggers increasingly our politics will need to take cues from how natural systems work. Winstanley’s stress on manuring may seem quaint, yet it is the principle that is at the heart of most modernising environmental thinking, from the closed loop systems advocated by Paul Hawken, Amory Lovins and L. Hunter Lovins in *Natural Capitalism*, to the work of radical architect William McDonough. As he puts it in his book *Cradle to Cradle*:

*If humans are going to prosper we will have to learn to imitate nature’s highly effective cradle-to-cradle system of nutrient flows and metabolism in which the very concept of waste is eliminated.*

We will have to find new ways to work with one another and with nature, rather than seeing nature as a stock of resources to be extracted and a vast waste disposal system to be dumped on. Economies of the future will need to be modelled much more on natural systems that involve closed loops and zero waste. As Fritjof Capra puts it:

*We should arrange our industries and our systems of production in such a way that matter cycles continuously, that all materials cycle between producers and consumers. We would grow our food organically and we would shorten the distance between the farm and the table, producing food mainly locally. All of this would combine to create a world that has dramatically reduced pollution, where climate change has been brought under control, where there would be plenty of jobs because these various designs are labour intensive and as an overall effect there would be no waste and quality of life would improve dramatically.<sup>15</sup>*

Perhaps the most striking British grassroots example of Digger-style thinking in action is the Transition Town movement inspired by activist Rob Hopkins, which encourages local people to collaboratively imagine low energy futures for their towns based on local production of food and other commodities. The Transition Towns are heirs to the Digger ideal of local people working together and eating together. The Diggers’ politics was born close to the earth. That is where more of our politics will be in the future.

## Freedom and Community

Winstanley's philosophy was underpinned by a powerful argument about the connections between autonomy and community that remains highly relevant. This alternative account of freedom conditioned by relationships is perhaps his most enduring and potentially powerful philosophical idea.

England in the mid 17th century was, as it is now, a place of "teeming freedom" in which people were coping with a sudden explosion of opportunities for mobility, free thought and expression. Winstanley was writing for a world in transition between the feudal and the modern. Old bonds were dissolving but still exerted a powerful pull. The turmoil and uncertainty unleashed by this transition produced a welter of fears and ideas, including radical religion and millenarianism.

Hobbes' *Leviathan*, published in 1651, has proved one of the most enduring responses to that turmoil.<sup>16</sup> In response to a selfish war of all against all, there was little option but for the state – the Leviathan – to impose order from without. The modern version of that insight is that the unruly free market will always need the strong state as its counterpart. The financial crisis is the latest evidence in support of Hobbes' insight. Hobbes started a tradition of political theory that reached its modern culmination with John Rawls' *Theory of Justice*, published in 1971, which invites us to imagine society being constituted through a social contract.<sup>17</sup> Seemingly envisaging that everyone goes off to debate what society should be like and then returns to normal life once agreement has been reached.

Winstanley's approach was quite different. He put his faith in social norms to establish a just society. Hobbes and the social contract theorists believed order and justice come from people stepping outside normal, everyday society, to see it from without. Winstanley believed justice had to come from within, from how people behaved with one another in everyday life because they were committed to one another's

wellbeing.

Winstanley was on the side of individual freedom because it would overturn the social order. As he put it in *A Watch Word to the City of London*, in 1649:

*Freedom is the man that will turn the world upside down, therefore no wonder he hath enemies...*<sup>18</sup>

Yet he also worried that untrammelled individualism and selfishness would corrode the bonds of mutual support between people:

*True freedom lies in the community in spirit and the community in the earthly treasury.*

Winstanley's account set out in the *Law of Freedom* and echoed today by politicians of left and right was that mature freedom would be constrained by our own recognition of our sense of obligation to one another, rather than through the state, at arm's length, imposing solutions upon us. Winstanley believed society could overcome the conflict between individualism and collectivism through communal cultivation and mutual support, a form of freedom heavily conditioned by our social ties to one another. Such a sense of conditioned freedom would need constant and careful cultivation.

Winstanley's position illuminates why we now feel so stuck. We have lost faith in the big collectives of class, occupation, nation and even the mass market. For many people society is too abstract an idea, global society even more so. The state appears distant, cumbersome and impersonal. Yet we are also losing faith in the ultra individualism of the free market.

Since at least the 1980s politics has been driven by the idea of "I want": that society, the market and public services will be better, the more they respond to individual consumer demand. We have become more mobile as a society, less tied down politically and socially by geography and marriage. Lying behind all this is the idea of the self-

generating self, created by its own will, from its own resources, standing alone, almost a post-social self, unencumbered by all but the more revisable alliances. Being free has come to mean being unencumbered by traditions or ties that hold people down. Freedom is release.

Yet we have also found that this ideal of the self-generating self, mobile and restless, seems destructive and fragmenting. As the philosopher Jerry Cohen put it in his essay *The Truth in Conservatism*, we cannot have everything under review all of the time in case we find a better option.<sup>19</sup> Isolation we have found, breeds not satisfaction and safety but the opposite – loneliness and insecurity – a point that even Hobbes conceded. People who are isolated do not feel liberated but abandoned. Loneliness, especially among the young and the old is perhaps our biggest social problem.<sup>20</sup> The self-starting self is often accompanied by a sense of sadness and loss as much as triumph. As Michael Walzer puts it in his essay *The Communitarian Critique of Liberalism*:<sup>21</sup>

*We are more often alone than people once were, being without neighbours we can count on, relatives who live nearby or with whom we are close, or comrades at work or in the movement.*

The creed of individualism started life to protect us from the unwarranted intrusions of power by establishing a private realm beyond the reach of the King and the state. Yet it has had an atrophy-ing impact on social solidarities. Ultra individualism encourages us to see ourselves as agents standing apart from the world, emerging from our private life from time to time to act upon the world, rather than seeing ourselves in the midst of it, constantly engaged and part of it.<sup>22</sup> The sovereign, separate, self-possessed individual can all too often feel frighteningly alone. The state's role in such a society of self-inventing individuals is to stand out of their way most of the time but to keep order and prevent social breakdown when things get out of hand, like a police car racing to the scene of a civil disturbance, its blue lights flashing.

That is why ultra individualism leads to a dead end. A different way forward would have to start with a different story of how individuals form themselves through their connections to one another rather than in spite of them. The way forward is not to retreat from individualism but to deepen our account of it, to understand ourselves as individuals who are made by our connections. As Walzer puts it:

*It is the very nature of a human society that individuals bred within it will find themselves caught up in patterns of relationship, networks of power and communities of meaning. That quality of being caught up is what makes them persons of a certain sort. And only then can they make themselves persons of a slightly different sort by reflecting on what they are and by acting in more or less distinctive ways within the patterns, networks and communities that are willy-nilly theirs.*<sup>23</sup>

In others words, we are what we share with others. Freedom matters because it allows us to find who we are. But who we are is nourished by relationships that provide us with a sense of care, confidence, energy, and self-belief. Our key relationships are the grounds for our sense of independence not impediments to it. Being free does not mean breaking the bonds of relationships that sustain us but acknowledging how important they are to us. Translating that insight into politics and policy is far from easy but it would mean making supportive relationships much more central to every aspect of public policy.

Relationships are at the heart of what makes for a good life. Most of what we most value – love, friendship, trust, recognition, care – comes through relationships with family, friends and in our peer networks. People grow up well and age well if they have supportive relationships. In Britain's largely service economy earning a living turns on social skills and being able to understand and respond to a client's need. Innovation comes from our capacity to collaborate creatively: to form the right relationships. In an innovation-driven service economy, basic social skills – how to listen, understand and work together – are as important as reading, writing and arithmetic.

Equally, relationships that collapse or turn sour are the main source of the “bad life”. Loneliness is reaching near epidemic proportions among older people: more than 50 per cent of people over the age of 60 say they are lonely at least some of the time. Families that live in a constant state of crisis, with children caught up in the fracturing, centrifugal and violent relationships of the adults in their lives, are another significant source of long-term social costs. Much of the challenge of youth offending, knife crime and gang culture comes down to malign peer influences: the wrong sets of relationships. Even among the affluent, there is a pervasive sense that life is increasingly organised through fleeting, impersonal transactions rather than lasting relationships.

We need Winstanley’s conditioned view of freedom more than ever. Societies that have this conditioned approach to freedom will prosper more than those that have no option but to rely on the corrective powers of the state.

We need a politics that puts people and their relationships at its heart rather than abstractions, whether that is the idealised individual or imaginary collectives. That means a democratic politics that brings people to understand their connectedness and so enables them to shape their common life, a society in which people are free and equal but also connected and responsible. The state cannot be just an umpire, a night watchman, nor an emergency ward doctor on hand when society has a crisis. It has to be more like a teacher or gardener, developing capabilities and associations within society, so that society can better govern itself. The state cannot go it alone: it works best through the associations, relationships and networks of civil society that draw people out of isolation and help them to cope together. Roberto Unger’s democratic experimentalism, finding different ways in which we can live together, is designed to reconcile our desire to be ourselves, to find our identity and yet also to be sustained by our membership of groups and associations. We have to find a way for people to be themselves without betraying the bonds of communal solidarity or turning those bonds into limits to individual ambition.

Effective democratic politics is about creating ties that bind people together, a sense of belonging and a capacity for collaborative coping, which will enable individuals to make better choices about their lives: better for them but also for those they are connected to. Politics in a powerfully individualistic liberal market society must be a process of bringing people together – free, equal and democratic but connected, responsible and related. The state as it stands, both in the services it delivers and the way it makes decisions, is far too distant and clumsy to make that possible. The state is not the living embodiment of social solidarity but too often a dead zone of anonymous transfers, procedures and rules.

As Walzer puts it, advocating an ideal of liberal community close to Winstanley’s:

*A good liberal or social democratic state enhances the possibilities of cooperative coping.*<sup>24</sup>

This should change how we think about the pursuit of social justice. As Amartya Sen puts it in *The Idea of Justice*,<sup>25</sup> the primary justification for democratic reforms in the rich and poor world is not primarily to revive exhausted political institutions but to improve our capacity for public reasoning, to debate and decide what we should do. For Sen, justice is best advanced not through abstract designs for the perfectly just set of institutions but through a continual and always unfinished process of learning and adaptation, constantly comparing different ways to eliminate outright injustices and to make society gradually more just. John Rawls’ hugely influential theory of justice starts with the problem of how a society of self-interested individuals could agree on measures of social justice. Sen, Walzer and Winstanley all argue we need to engineer our way to a different starting point. The most important step is the first and that is to get people to see that they are not solitary, that we live through our relationships and are made by our connections to one another. We are not concerned with justice only prudentially to protect our scope for self interest, as Rawls would

have it. We care about justice because we care about how others are treated and because we recognise at some deeper level our reliance on relationships and interdependence. The more people understand their connectedness, as well as their individuality, the more likely we are to have a democratic society oriented towards social justice in its culture, values and outlook.

## Look Back to Move Forward

It is not difficult to make the case against taking the Diggers as guides to the future. They were a failure.

Their brief experiments with mutual organisation were quickly disbanded. Even if the local gentry had not attacked them, they may well have collapsed from within, through their own naivety and lack of self-discipline (Winstanley was particularly troubled by the Ranters, proto-anarchists and early modern hippies, who were the original free riders and a law unto themselves). Tellingly, Winstanley's own subsequent career foreshadowed that of many other radicals: he ended up as a Church Warden and Chief Constable of Surrey, the model of respectable society he had despised. After the defeat of the radicals, the rulers of England organised a highly successful commercial empire and class system that proved to have enormous staying power.

To stand a better chance than the original Diggers, the emerging movement of New Diggers need to develop more effective models of economic organisation; work with mainstream political power more astutely; find an accommodation with the market rather than seek to operate entirely outside it. The Levellers were a failure in their time yet their ideas had enormous staying power. When Cornwallis surrendered to the American revolutionaries at Yorktown in 1781 the band played the Leveller ballad *The World is Turned Upside Down*. Even today, when Wired magazine proclaims that technology is helping outsiders turn the corporate order upside down, it is but a pale imitation of Winstanley and his followers. It is their language it is appropriating.

The New Levellers – social entrepreneurs, open source hackers, grass roots political campaigners, civil libertarians and environmental innovators – operate in the margins. Yet, even so, a synthesis of ideas is emerging that could redefine mainstream politics based on a series of fundamental corrections to ultra free market, environmentally unsustainable financial capitalism, governed by an enterprise state with declining legitimacy and a welfare state of declining efficacy. Those

corrections would mean shifting:

- › from a prime focus on attracting entrepreneurs and financial capital, **to** seeing the life chances of the poorest as the prime measure of social and economic progress
- › from a welfare system based on services that maintain dependence, compensation after the event and cheques in the post, **to** one that invests in capabilities, focuses on prevention and engages as many people as possible to be contributors in seeking solutions
- › from the private exploitation and hoarding of knowledge, **to** sharing and collaboration as the engines of innovation and growth, based on the presumption that all knowledge and culture should be available for sharing
- › from propping up the exhausted, low energy parliamentary politics, **to** a high-energy politics based on a new constitution of the state which itself is based on high levels of citizen engagement
- › from linear industrial, high-energy systems, based on doing things to the environment, **to** circular, low energy and low waste systems, designed for zero waste working with natural systems
- › from the ultra individualism of “I want”, **to** the collaborative individualism of “We can”, in which the quality of relationships rather than units of individual choice are at the heart of a good society
- › from the constitution of the individual through self-willed choice, **to** a conditioned freedom in which people are made by the relationships that connect them
- › from the idea that we are what we own and control, **to** the idea that we are what we share
- › from financially driven, shareholder value capitalism, **to** a variety of ways in which organisations can own, connect and trade, in a more plural, social, democratic and innovative economy.

All of that might sound utopian. Yet the scale of the failures that

surround us in finance and the market, politics and public services, in the deterioration of the environment and the quality of our relationships, demands that we seek fundamental remedies. Our society seems to be eating itself from within. The financial crash is just the most obvious and painful symptom of that. The Levellers at Putney in 1647 and the Diggers in 1649 dared to think big thoughts, to chart a transition away from feudal power and the Church. That is why their ideas have had such reach and power over such a long time. We must follow in their footsteps.

Society must be more than a set of procedures – free elections, open markets and just institutions – to reconcile competing self-interests. That is why often we find ourselves yearning for what the philosopher Bernard Williams described as societies that were “held together by some more unifying and concrete conception of the good itself and not merely by procedural arrangements for negotiating the coexistence of different conceptions of the good.”<sup>26</sup> The challenge is to come up with a sense of legitimate community that does not collapse into blank tribalism, one which allows for criticism, experimentation and adventurous variety as well as care, sharing and solidarity. We need to invent a radically different kind of politics, one which weaves together disparate elements: radical democratic reform; environmentalism; egalitarianism; a more collaborative and so innovative economy; mutual approaches to economic organisation; new approaches to welfare based on participation and investment in self-help; a sense of freedom conditioned by relationships and mutual commitments; a way to connect with people’s search for something more to life than units of buy and sell. Our society wants and needs to believe in something more than materialism but cannot quite bring itself to do so.

One of the most fertile sources for a new political synthesis is not to look forward but to look back, a long way back, to the dawn of the modern era, before the categories that entrap us now – of left and right, state and market – were fully formed, when for a brief time it seemed as if the world could be turned upside down. That is why we need to think upside down once again.

## Notes

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**Where might we turn for inspiration for a comprehensive programme for radical change on the scale required to match the crisis we are in?**

A good start would be with a bunch of men in southern England, in April 1649, led by Gerrard Winstanley who started digging common land to create a self-governing, cooperative and productive community as the basis for the new social order.

Charles Leadbeater argues that one of the most fertile sources for a new political synthesis is not to look forward but to look a long way back, to the dawn of the modern era, before the categories that entrap us now – of left and right, state and market – were fully formed, when for a brief time it seemed as if the world could be turned upside down.

Leadbeater draws on Winstanley's sweeping critique of the inequities of power in 17th century England to inspire modern Levellers and Diggers, social entrepreneurs and environmental innovators, open source hackers and grass roots campaigns. From these apparently marginal movements a new synthesis might emerge to redefine capitalism, through a series of fundamental corrections to ultra free market, environmentally unsustainable financial capitalism, governed by an enterprise state with declining legitimacy and a welfare state of declining efficacy. Those shifts would be the development of new approaches to mutual ownership and sharing of knowledge; a welfare state that builds capability and self help; an education system designed for collaborative and practical problem solving; a political system capable of high energy local engagement.

**Charles Leadbeater is a fellow of the Young Foundation.**

