

Between the lines

Episode 04: A New Politics from the Left – Hilary Wainwright

Welcome to *Between the Lines*, a monthly podcast that explores books for a better world, brought to you by the Institute of Development Studies. What if we turn politics on its head? If we put people at the centre and recognise the knowledge and creativity of each individual? In this month's episode, academic and activist Hilary Wainwright discusses her book, *A New Politics from the Left*. She draws on existing models and discusses the potential for a different kind of politics – one which comes from the bottom up and focuses on facilitation and partnership, rather than expert domination. Interviewing Hilary is IDS Director of Research, Professor John Gaventa.

JOHN GAVENTA: Today Hilary is joining us to talk about her newest book a new *A New Politics from the Left*. I have to say, I took this away on holiday a month or so ago, to read it, getting ready for this interview and I couldn't put it down. It discusses some complex political ideas and ideas about participatory democracy and participatory action. But does it in a very, very simple and integrated way. So Hilary, thank you for being with us. This is an ambitious title: *A New Politics from the Left*. Can you outline a little bit its core argument and what's new about the argument?

HILARY WAINWRIGHT: I'll try. It's a pleasure to be here and talking to you John, because you've been a big influence on me, in my thinking. So, I suppose it's, in a way, I was always worried it's rather a glib title for what is, as you say, a complex issue. It's really trying to turn existing politics upside down, partly in reaction to the deep disillusion there is with existing politics and existing politicians and the way they behave and the institutions that they inhabit and reproduce and support and . . . and often deploy for their own interests. And so it's looking at people and, in particular, the knowledge and capacity of people, and exploring, in a way, the politics of knowledge and saying, 'What if we thought about and imagined a politics which starts from the idea that people have got real capacity and knowledge, particularly when they share a lot of their hunches, intuitions, what has been called 'tacit knowledge' – which implies knowledge that hasn't been codified, isn't seen as scientific or official. You know, like amongst women, what's often dismissed as gossip actually is full of insights and ideas, which certainly from my experience in the women's movement became the basis of new institutions around health, around violence, domestic violence, around education, all these different experiences that came out of a recognition of this practical knowledge. So that's its basic foundation, to explore the knowledge of extraordinary ordinary people, you know, recognising that capacity which, as Thom Paine once said, lies dormant, normally lies dormant, you know, throughout people's lives up to the grave, he put it. But, actually, he was saying, you know, what if we had a form of government that harnessed all that

capacity, which sometimes does blossom in moments of struggle and revolution. He talked about . . . I mean, for me it blossomed, for example, amongst the women in the mining communities in the UK when the miners were being threatened with job loss and the closure of the mines. The communities came together and the women took a real lead. And women who had been completely, you know, subordinate and just living a very private supportive life for their men became political leaders, you know, they went round the world explaining what was going on and why they needed support. And it was just obvious they had this capacity, which had never been the basis of politics or any public institution. So it was wasted in a way, for each other, for society. So it's trying to explore that idea.

JOHN GAVENTA: And then you bring that idea of recognition of people's knowledge, and people's everyday knowledge, to the idea of participatory democracy and to the idea of a more participatory economy. What's the link? How do you bring this knowledge of everyday people into democratic politics and how is that different from the way we've done politics, at least in the UK, before?

HILARY WAINWRIGHT: Yes, I mean, that idea of participatory democracy was influenced less by the UK and more by experiences in Brazil, in, to a degree, in South Africa, with the civics in India, in Kerala, in many different experiences. And it spoke to the inadequacy of representative democracy. I mean, these forms of participation involve representation of a certain kind, but representative democracy has this idea that an MP or a member of a congress is voted for and then they're left to act, to govern. Whereas participatory democracy is about a much more continuing relationship between the representative and the people. And if we think about it, what's the basis of that, that's not possible through traditional forms of representative democracy? And actually it is that in participative democracy, the representative, you know, on the participatory budget or in the running of an institution, is regularly informed by, and often pressured by, a knowledgeable citizenship. So participatory democracy assumes not only the capacity of the people and the confidence of the people to participate and to influence public decisions, but also assumes that they can almost improve their capacity through participation. It was actually something that a liberal John Stuart Mill emphasised: that educative role of democracy. And I think that does apply to participatory democracy, but it doesn't apply to representative democracy, which, in a way, turns people into passive citizens. It's a kind of, you know, you vote and you delegate your responsibilities to somebody else.

JOHN GAVENTA: And then you leave decisions to those representatives or to the experts, who don't really . . .

HILARY WAINWRIGHT: Yes, and they can be very vulnerable to corruption. You know, they're sort of in a little layer of their own. Often it's not accompanied with transparency. There's not a continuing flow and pressure between them and the people. And so that means that vested interests can slip into that the gap between the people and the representatives. And so I think participative democracy, often it's arisen in response to the weakness of

representative democracy in controlling the state. I mean, because that's what representative democracy is meant to do, you know, the parliament, the legislator is meant to control the executive, but it has never worked like that because representative democracy is too weak a means of actually making present the power and capacity and interests of the people.

JOHN GAVENTA: You have a really interesting section of the book where you compare that approach of bringing in people's knowledge and really believing in people's knowledge, to more of an old-style reformism.

HILARY WAINWRIGHT: [*affirmatively*] Hmm.

JOHN GAVENTA: You talk about the Fabian movement in the UK, which believed in equality but it still was, that movement was led by elites and their ideas, wasn't it?

HILARY WAINWRIGHT: Yes. I mean, I was very struck, one night I read *The Diary of Beatrice Webb* who was a sort of leading Fabian and she wrote these very frank diaries, where she sort of confessed or . . . she didn't think of it as a confession but she explained her basic beliefs, as well as reporting all kinds of gossip. But she said one night, she said that she and her husband Sidney Webb – and they did things very much as a sort of collaborative couple with other Fabians like Bernard Shaw and so on – they believed that the . . . She says, has this phrase, 'the average sensual man can describe his problems, but cannot prescribe the solutions. Therefore we need to bring on the experts', i.e. people like them. So the average person can vote yes or no, can sort of cry out in pain, but can't actually creatively produce answers. And that's been the basis of the welfare state, of the way that public interest is run: very paternalistic and often, you know, in the public industries, the nationalised industries, it's been the old bosses from the private sector plus originally, you know, retired admirals and colonels and military figures, because it was assumed they could command, they could run things, that labour was not seen as a creative force, or workers were not seen as responsible, active, democratic citizens – they were seen as voters, sometimes as a problem to be controlled not as an asset to be . . . you know, and a basis of collaboration and creative production and innovation, but as a problem or a mere factor, input in production. I mean, some managers have kind of recognised the limits of that and introduced their own sort of focus groups and quality circles. But politics is still based on that very wasteful, hierarchical and presumptuous, arrogant notion of knowledge and capacity.

JOHN GAVENTA: I think you used the phrase somewhere, 'bringing the knowledgeable citizen in', not not just the voting citizen, but the knowledgeable citizen. And one thing I really liked about that book, because we've worked at IDS a fair amount on participation and in new forms of creating knowledge . . .

HILARY WAINWRIGHT: Yeah, no, IDS is a sort of leading . . .

JOHN GAVENTA: . . . through participatory research. We've also worked a bit on participatory democracy and what that means, participatory governance – that's been the core of my work for many years. But you extend it further, because you also talk about bringing that popular knowledge and citizen voice into the economy and into the workplace. Tell us why you think that connection is also important and what that means in practice.

HILARY WAINWRIGHT: Yes, I mean I must say with all this I've not fully worked out my ideas. So these discussions are really helpful. It's not a kind of manifesto of an alternative politics, it's saying this is the basis, or, I suggest this could be the basis of a new politics. And the importance of economics struck me because it seems that social democracy always rested on the existing economy, in a way it was about distribution of the profit through taxation of that which was produced through a traditional capitalist economy in which the worker was pretty much a subject, a kind of . . . not a slave, because obviously they were free in terms of their ability to move workplaces, to a degree, but they had no rights. When somebody enters a factory they leave their rights and their citizenship behind, almost. I mean, okay trade unions have been key in resisting that total oppression, but still it's not a democracy at most factories. And it seemed to me there's always going to be a contradiction between the goals of social democracy, which is social justice, and the economic environment in which social democratic governments and parties work. And obviously that's got worse with the increasing monopolisation and sort of gigantism of corporations which have increasingly captured state institutions. So I felt you can't achieve any kind of real social justice unless you change the economy. How do you do that? It seemed from, just experience, that you've got to start from the people that are suffering, that are the subject of injustice in the economy and start from their organisation and learn from their capacity. So I'd witnessed a lot of experiences of workers actually using their trade union strength to develop alternatives using their skills, whether in the private sector, their technological, design and engineering skills, or in the public sector, their knowledge of care, of providing good services, which is often suppressed in the way the state is organised so that's why I thought we must think about participatory democracy in the economy. I mean I'm not original in that, obviously the whole co-op movement, a lot of the origins of socialism come from that belief. So I'm trying to recover those ideas and say they're relevant now, even though they're going to be very difficult, and they need the support of a facilitating state.

JOHN GAVENTA: One of the reasons your book is so interesting and accessible is because you've also been an activist and practitioner over the years and you give a number of examples, concrete, live examples of what you're talking about and I know one, for instance, was where workers and in the public bureaucracy got together to reorganise their workplace. And in a time of austerity when bureaucracies and public workers are facing these challenges all over the world, that might . . . can you share that story?

HILARY WAINWRIGHT: Yes, I'll try – I'm rather bad at telling stories quickly, but I'll try – because I sort of remember all the people and want to talk about them. But basically, it was in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, which is a big northern

city where there's quite a strong, sort of, community feeling. So workers in the Town Hall feel that they're working for the city. So there's quite a strong public service ethic, as it were, reinforced daily by people's relations with their neighbours and this sense of strong communities. And the unions there faced privatisation of, actually, the least glamorous, most bureaucratic part of the Council, it was called the 'IT and Related Services' – so it's already jargonistic. So it was the IT system and then all the . . . well, services, but, basically, key things that made the bureaucratic wheels turn – you know, the payment of bills, the collection of taxes, all these things. And I thought, 'Well, this is a bit of a challenge to write about this.' And a friend of mine from the past was the trade union convenor and rang me up and said, 'Oh, you know, you'd be interested in this, the workers are wanting to do something.' And basically, the workers there, it was a very democratic . . . he'd led the union in a very democratic, participatory way. So in response to privatisation, first there was industrial action and people saying 'no', and big demonstrations, 'Our city is not for sale.' And then people said, 'Well, actually, we know this system is inefficient. We've got our own ideas about how this could be. We'd talk about it and if we got together and shared those ideas, we could come up with a much better system, much better set of proposals for reform than British Telecom,' – which was the company that was . . . you know, already the managers who were very demoralised and our Prime Minister then, Tony Blair, was sort of deepening that demoralisation by rather castigating public sector workers. They were almost prepared to throw the problem over the fence and say, 'Okay, a private company can sort this out, I've had enough.' But the workers were saying, 'No. They're going to use those reforms to make profits, but we could use those reforms to improve the service for our citizens, our friends, our neighbours, our families. And also we could make it more . . . we can maximise public efficiency rather than maximising profit, to then use the resources to reallocate to frontline services like adult care, or old people's care, or children's services.' So they did that, they then had awaydays, it was a strong union so they could negotiate time off, because you need time to gather this knowledge together. And they brought workers together in different sections, but as a union, in a way, they had an overview – or an underview, because they had people from all the different departments – brought them together to think how could they improve the systems, which, in a way, they'd been working with and they'd designed, so they knew what was wrong with them and they shared these ideas and that began to galvanise management. So management began to come on board, the politicians in the end came on board, because these unions and workers had convinced the population of Newcastle that privatisation wasn't the way forward and there was an alternative. So then there was . . . it's a good example of the need for political support and participation from below, so there was a commitment made by the Council to say no to privatisation until alternatives had been looked at, which then put the onus on the management and workers to look for alternatives. The workers and management developed an alternative and made it an in-house bid against the private company and it was considered much more publicly efficient. You know, there's still in Britain, though privatisation has gone very far, there's still some commitment to what's called 'fiduciary duty', some commitment to maximize the interests of the people. And so it all went ahead. New managers were appointed with the involvement

of the unions and huge savings were made, which were then reallocated, as intended, to frontline needs – needs of children and old people. And so it was a very good example of, in a way, democratisation as an alternative to privatisation. I mean, sadly it hasn't really been followed. There hasn't been a government that's taken that up. Hopefully there will be.

JOHN GAVENTA: But it is . . . that was a new example to me, it is a great example of using the knowledge of workers, or the knowledge of citizens to solve everyday problems. And in fact to deal with issues of democracy, to solve them by deepening democratic participation rather than running away from it.

HILARY WAINWRIGHT: Yeah, exactly.

JOHN GAVENTA: About 10 years ago, maybe a bit longer though, you and I were together on a very exciting panel in Porto Alegre, Brazil and then there was a great excitement about participatory budgeting in Brazil, there were new participatory innovations all over the world. But now we seem to be in a slightly different era. There seems to be a closing down of civic space in many parts of the world. And some of our research now has shifted from focusing on the opportunities for deepening democracy and participation, to asking the question: what do we do when so many of the opportunities . . . when we're facing closing civic space through violence, through legislation, through authoritarian politics, all over the world? So how do we apply these ideas at this moment in time?

HILARY WAINWRIGHT: Yeah, no that's [*laughs*]

JOHN GAVENTA: Or do you think that those spaces are closing?

HILARY WAINWRIGHT: Well, I mean, to be honest I haven't got a simple answer to that. And obviously it's one that worries me, particularly after what's happening in Brazil. And so, I mean, I think, I suppose I still don't lose heart, because I do feel that people, they haven't lost their capacity, they've not had that capacity supported and developed and I think one reason why there's been support for authoritarian politicians is because the politicians of social justice have not fully respected and supported and talked to the mass of people. And so, though we've been part of very exciting and empowering experiences, they've always been a minority in whatever context, or generally they have. So I think we've got to not stop believing in that politics of empowering the people, in terms of developing their knowledge and their collective ability to govern. But we have to build on any kind of resistance there is. I mean, usually in the face of authoritarianism there is resistance. So, from what I hear about the situation in Brazil, a lot of the people voting for Bolsonaro, the victorious candidate, actually don't agree with his policies. They might support *him*, but they don't agree with a lot of the policies around privatization and so on. So there's a basis for resistance. And I think it's important to follow that up and support it, not simply in party terms. I think political parties have to accept that they've failed. The political parties on the left, generally, have failed. And I think people who are trying to open spaces

again have got to build on the daily resistance. Often it's neighbours coming together to cope with the problems, sort of the politics of survival, but out of the struggle to survive comes ingenuity and new ideas. So, in a way, it's trying to start to think about movement politics, not as a moment of, you know, exuberance and sort of mass action, but of a sort of daily interaction and mutual help and solidarity. So that's as far as I can go really, it's more a kind of approach rather than a solution.

JOHN GAVENTA: That's really interesting. Before coming to IDS, many years ago, I worked at a place in the United States called the Highlander Center, which has a long history of being a school for building civic leadership and made great contributions to the civil rights movement in the 60s and to the labour movement before that in the 30s and I was there in a period which was a bit of a quieter period and we always used to ask the founding director Myles Horton, 'What are we doing wrong, because the next movement hasn't emerged from our work?' And he said, and I've thought about this a lot in the current period, he said, 'We have to look at the peaks and valleys of citizen action.' He said Highlander's work is best known for what happened when the exuberance emerged, and we saw what was . . . things became visible.' He said that actually the most important work is what you do in between those moments. And like you're saying it's about it . . . those are the times that you continue to build citizenship, continue to try new methods. You build organisations, you develop small ideas and whatever spaces you can. So, for me, as we get to this more . . . we might call it regressive era, in democratic politics, I like what you're saying, it's not about giving up, it's actually about going deep . . .

HILARY WAINWRIGHT: Yeah.

JOHN GAVENTA: . . . and continuing to build capacities and actions in whatever spaces that you have.

HILARY WAINWRIGHT: Yes and even going personal, I mean, you know, listening more to your neighbours and workmates and seeing what can come out of issues in daily life. I mean there's often a tendency of politics, left politics, to move away from your daily life and sort of intervene, this idea of intervening, in some other sphere, rather than looking at what's happening around you and building on, on developments there.

JOHN GAVENTA: Exactly. Shifting a little bit, another theme I really liked in the book is around your discussion of power. And you and I both studied with Steven Lukes about the same time at Oxford and were influenced by his thinking on power.

HILARY WAINWRIGHT: Very much.

JOHN GAVENTA: And we continue at IDS, we work a lot on different forms of power. And you talk about the difference between transformative power, power from below, the power to act, and more institutional power – power over, that institutions or elites have over people's lives. And we oftentimes put

them as polar opposites, but, but you, interestingly, argue that we need to learn to bring them together. Can you explain that a little bit?

HILARY WAINWRIGHT: Yes, yes. I mean, yes, it's a distinction between power as transformative capacity and power as domination. And then thinking about how power's domination can be a resource for power as transformative capacity. And I have to say, here I was conference by my late husband Roy Bhaskar, a critical realist, who helped to make that distinction – though others have made it too. And I think the important thing is not to fall into that dichotomy. They are very different processes involving very different logics. So if you think about the logic of a social movement or – in a way, logic's the wrong word – but the dynamic of a social movement like the women's movement, for example, which is about personal transformation which involves a capacity to change yourself through your relationships with others, particularly others in the same circumstances. And on the other hand the logic of domination, which is a kind of . . . it's a logic that can draw people in, that can almost suffocate that creative capacity, but require people to abide by systems. So it's very different sort of logics. But on the other hand, we've seen how power over government can be a resource, in terms of public money, in terms of giving a platform to transformative movements, but it requires a change in the ways in which domination is exercised. So in terms of the public sector, public administration, it requires a building on the transformative capacity of workers and communities in the ways that I described about Newcastle, that makes that state more responsive. I mean, the exercise of power as domination has to be informed by and guided by power as transformative capacity. But I think it is useful to keep the distinctions in mind, and it might mean in any political party you have almost a division of labour, so you have those in the party that are mainly concerned with supporting movements, are involved in movements, and they're not necessarily involved in the electoral activity or the representative activity, but the two collaborate so they understand each other. But if you have everybody . . . if there was a feeling that the party's got to *either* be involved in electoral activity *or* movements then, usually, it ends up as electoral activity – i.e. the dominant kind of power, which is power as domination and the party's involvement in social movements diminishes, you know, something that's happened in Greece and happened in Brazil, so it's important that those two understandings of power guide your strategic thinking and allow for a plurality of strategies that are about combination and collaboration, rather than about either/or.

JOHN GAVENTA: And that was another key point in your book that you make in the end. You say it's not about one strategy alone. You talk about ecologies of knowledge and ecologies of action in this big process of transformation. But as a journalist and as a listener and as an activist, you've travelled all over the world: Brazil, Greece, South Africa, UK Are you hopeful?

HILARY WAINWRIGHT: Yes. I'm hopeful in a kind of guarded way. I have my hopes dashed rather too often to be kind of waking up every day thinking, 'Wow, things are going to change and things are going to happen.' So I'm always a bit wary of being too hopeful. But I'm hopeful partly because I just

find all the time that my belief in people's capacities is being confirmed. You know, even in situations of dire hardship, there's that sort of ingenuity and also, I suppose . . . I mean, this sounds a bit soppy and sentimental, but children, you know, I'm now . . . I'm not a mother but I'm an aunt and a great-aunt and these kids are just amazing in their creativity. So I can see the importance of education and forms of education that really build on that creativity, which I don't feel the existing education systems do. So that gives me hope, but also a sense of the urgency of change, in order to realise that capacity. So it's kind of . . . it's a hope that guides a sense of urgency, rather than a kind of 'hope and lie back and wait.'

JOHN GAVENTA: Great. Thanks Hilary. Thanks for being with us.

HILARY WAINWRIGHT: Thanks John, that was really enjoyable.