

## [Review] Jeremy Gilbert (2014) Common ground: democracy and collectivity in an age of individualism

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Francesco Di Bernardo, 'Review of *Common Ground: Democracy and Collectivity in an Age of Individualism* by Jeremy Gilbert'

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## Reviews

**Francesco Di Bernardo**

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*Common Ground: Democracy and Collectivity in  
an Age of Individualism* by Jeremy Gilbert  
London: Pluto Press, 2014

Jeremy Gilbert's new book is an intellectually compelling work which provides a detailed and rigorous account of the philosophical, cultural and historical formation of individualism in the Western world and its latest developments under the aegis of neoliberal cultural hegemony. Individualism, Gilbert suggests, has been a facet of 'mainstream Western political thought since the seventeenth century', and he thus traces our contemporary age of individualism back to both Hobbes and the tradition of liberalism (p.33). By mining the faulty foundations of individualist culture, Gilbert offers a convincing attempt to debunk the neoliberal narrative that asserts the intrinsic individualist nature of the human being. More importantly, however, *Common Ground* is a ground-breaking work which seeks viable alternatives both to

the hegemonic culture of competitive individualism and to conservative communitarianism. Gilbert's study subsequently not only analyses the current alternatives to neoliberal individualism and how they can develop renewed forms of communality, collective creativity and participatory democracy, but also seeks to provide possible responses to the evident crisis of democracy caused by the entrenchment of neoliberalism in cultural, political and socio-economic practices.

Gilbert has written widely on cultural theory and anti-capitalism, actively dealing with these topics on his blog and in radical independent media such as openDemocracy.net. He recently published an article in which he analysed the legacy of Stuart Hall in the independent radical magazine *Red Pepper* (2014) and authored *Anticapitalism and Culture: Radical Theory and Popular Politics* (2008). Moreover, in 2007 he published an essay entitled 'Alternatives to Liberal Individualism and Authoritarian Collectivism' in which he confronted some of the issues that are also examined in his latest book, *Common Ground*.

Given recent events in Europe— austerity measures imposed by non-elected technocratic governments and institutions not being held accountable to citizens as just two examples—the issues discussed in this volume are certainly topical. The book, in fact, commences with a controversial but plausible assumption: 'Today we live in a post-democratic age' (p.1). The affirmation is followed by a series of arguments to sustain the idea that that with the transition to the era of late capitalism 'elections become increasingly empty procedures, offering publics the opportunity formally to validate programmes whose contents they have virtually no control over, and which differ little between competing parties' (p.1). In this scenario, Gilbert argues, politicians have increasingly presented themselves as 'competent technocrats whose role is to commission solutions to discrete problems from appropriate "experts"', rather than being representatives of 'a coherent body of ideas and goals' (p.7). Gilbert proceeds with a cogent historical account of the preconditions of neoliberal hegemony and the current crisis of democracy, identifying the fall of the Soviet bloc as an event that 'was a clear precondition for the full-scale neoliberal assault of the 1990s' (p.12). In addition to the military threat the Soviet Union represented to the West, Gilbert claims that the threat of Soviet support to anti-capitalist movements and to governments hostile to capitalism 'was arguably one of the significant factors which put pressure on Western governments to make democratic concessions in the post-war period' (p.13). When existing socialism

collapsed due to its inability to ‘adapt to the post-Fordist world’, neoliberalism ushered in a period of socio-political consensus characterised by what the author calls ‘post-democracy’ (p.20).

Gilbert makes the crucial point that neoliberalism bases its hegemony on the notion that it is ‘unavoidable, unchangeable, a fact of life’ (p.26). To be perceived as such, it must be seen as ‘exciting, amusing, liberating and desirable’, while fostering the idea that ‘individualised social relations are normal, desirable, inevitable’ (pp.20, 26). Gilbert, therefore, traces the origins of the primacy of individualism in the history of political thought through to its position as a dogma of neoliberalism; the second and third chapters of *Common Ground* are dedicated to understanding the historical and philosophical roots of modern individualism. In these two chapters, Gilbert provides a compelling analysis of five centuries of cultural and philosophical Western thought, beginning with the mainstream assumption that all social relations are nothing but contracts (p.33). Gilbert’s analysis attempts to debunk the ‘basic postulate of individualism: the independent autonomy of the individual’ (p.34). He does this simply but effectively by dismissing a famous affirmation of Emily Carr, who said that ‘you come into the world alone and you go out of the world alone’ (p.34). This sentence, according to Gilbert, became a cliché of twentieth-century individualist culture yet is proven false by the fact that our mother is there at the moment of our birth; moreover, ‘there is no known culture in which it has ever been normal for the mother and child to be unattended by other members of the community’ (p.34). Gilbert continues his analysis of individualism by drawing on Ernesto Laclau’s idea of the Leviathan logics of society as meta-individual and relating this concept to Freud’s model of the social, which is understood as ‘the organisation of the group into a “collective individual”’ (p.67). Hobbes’s theorisation of the Leviathan, in fact, is intended as the expression of unlimited political authority, of unlimited individualism. Limiting individualism, according to Hobbes, would limit the legitimization of the political authority (Gauthier, 1979). One of the most compelling passages in this section of the book is Gilbert’s explanation of the transition from a populist form of neoliberal power, exemplified by Thatcher’s combination of traditional social and market values, to the technocratic neoliberalism of the Third Way, based on a ‘politics of regulated inequality’ (p.63). The author points out, however, that ‘when confronted with stubborn resistance which threatened to politicise and differentiate the neoliberal programme from its potential antagonists,

Third Way leaders were forced to make populist gestures' (p.64). Third Way, Gilbert claims, configured itself as institutionalised neoliberalism, 'occlud[ing] the very possibility of any challenge to [its] legitimacy' and to any alternative conceptions of society beyond the primacy of meta-individualism, which therefore became the institutionalised norm (p.64).

In the following chapters of the book, Gilbert explores alternatives to the Leviathan logics of neoliberal competitive individualism and to what he calls 'meta-individualism', namely:

the belief that the 'collective subject' constituted by these vertical relations can, at best, only act in a meaningful or purposeful way if its agency, rationale and intentionality are understood to be formally identical to those which define the individual subject. (p.70)

The author investigates concepts such as multitude, infinite relationality, affect, common and democratic sublime, delving into theories and practices to propose a social vision radically alternative to the individualistic approach fostered by neoliberalism.

Gilbert starts his analysis of the various theories and practices opposed to neoliberal individualism by acknowledging that 'liberal democracy [...] has succeeded in making itself appear [...] the only form of democracy' (p.73). However, as also proven in recent years after the financial crisis with governments asking to simply ratify top-down decided measures and policies, 'the liberal valorisation of individual sovereignty and the democratic principle of shared, collective sovereignty are, when carried to their logical conclusions, mutually exclusive' (p.73). Gilbert consequently explores the concept of multitude as theorised by Hardt and Negri, which, in contrast to the Leviathan logic, implies a society 'organised on the basis of lateral relations between its members' (p.75). The attention to forms of participatory democracy and demands for a politics of horizontality are convincingly associated with the emergence of the New Left in the 1960s, which recent movements such as Indignados or Occupy have subsequently adopted. However, Gilbert explains that the politics of horizontality were also appropriated by management theorists of the 1980s who praised the 'the virtues of "flat" organisational structure, decentralised decision-making and collective creative dynamism', thereby undermining the inherently progressive stance of the concept of horizontality (p.91). Nevertheless, horizontality

has never been applied to the political sphere to produce a participatory democracy. In fact, the managerial reinterpretation of the language of the New Left ‘does not mean that [power] ... is evenly distributed: it is merely concentrated in key nodes rather than being located at the top of an easily describable hierarchy of relations’ (p.91).

*Common Ground* is at its best when the author analyses modes of relationality in chapter five (p.99). ‘Capitalism works’, Gilbert convincingly argues, by ‘regulating our modes of relationality [...] to ensure that only those which facilitate capital accumulation can occur’ (p.129). On the other hand, ‘authoritarian forms of socialism [...] work to inhibit any form of relationship which might enable concentrations of power and resources to accumulate anywhere outside the purview of the state apparatus’ (p.129). To contrast these forms of relationality the book suggests that the implementation of affect, as recently discussed by various theorists such as Lauren Berlant, could play a crucial role in theorising forms of communality. Gilbert thus provides a survey of the most recent theories of affect while raising questions about how to effectively implement it to ‘make viable the realisation of radically democratic goals’ (p.161). In order to produce valid alternatives to the neoliberal narrative, Gilbert asserts that the articulations of these goals should incorporate, but not be limited to, the language of identity politics and must necessarily go beyond ‘poorly defined notions of “community”’ (p.162). Consequently, he proposes a ‘language of the commons’ (p.164). The concept of commons, drawn from Hardt and Negri, is ‘understood as that domain of creative potential which is constituted by, and constitutive of, sociality as such’ (p.167). The proposition of a language of the commons is at the core of the book and it is proposed as a theoretically cogent and valid alternative to the individualistic discourse fostered by neoliberalism.

The last chapters of *Common Ground* provide an analysis of the different movements which have tried to articulate the language of the commons. In chapter seven, Gilbert explores the limits and potentialities of: movements such as Occupy or the rave movement; concepts such as Democratic Sublime, Politics of Carnival; and artistic movements such as relational art. In particular, Gilbert argues that both relational and conceptual art are limited due to their incapacity to produce long-term cultural change, falling inevitably into ‘compulsory reflexivity’ (p.191). Drawing on Guattari, the author explains how this compulsory reflexivity is typical of postmodern culture where the institutions of control society constantly invite or oblige subjects to

‘participate in an endless questioning and deconstruction of their identities and relation to the world’, while containing these processes in a way that can never lead to a political proposition (pp.191-192).

One of the most interesting analyses provided in the book is certainly that of countercultural movements, such as the London clubbers, the psychedelic trance fans of Goa, the Boom Festival in Portugal or Burning Man in the US. Gilbert investigates the limits of these and other countercultural movements, which he defines as inscribed within the hegemonic narrative of neoliberalism. The participants in these events and in these forms of counterculture, Gilbert suggests, are ‘indifferent to any possibility of changing social relations in general, as long as they are permitted to pursue their lifestyles more or less unhindered’ (p.198). This critique of countercultural movements draws on and expands Raymond Williams’s theorisation of the distinction between alternative formations, which do not challenge the hegemonic norms, and oppositional formations, which pose an authentic challenge to cultural hegemony (p.198). In a cultural context characterised by hegemonic neoliberalism, which fosters lifestyles sold as amusing, liberating and ‘alternative’, Gilbert’s critique of certain countercultures is very relevant.

Ultimately, *Common Ground* proposes a model of society where people engage in ‘a hell of a lot more meetings’, creating spaces where it is possible to envisage a world based on communality and to produce forms of ‘radical and experimental anti-individualism’ (pp.211, 216). By engaging with thinkers such as Deleuze, Laclau, Mouffe, Guattari, and Hardt and Negri, Gilbert has produced a thought-provoking book which successfully critiques neoliberal individualism and evaluates, envisages and proposes possible alternatives to respond to the profound crisis of democracy in recent decades.



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