

Book Review: Ideology and the Future of Progressive Social Movements by Rafal Soborski

In Ideology and the Future of Progressive Social Movements, Rafal Soborski provides a punchy and passionate critique of the post-ideology approach of progressive social movements from an anti-neoliberal perspective. While questioning whether all grassroots protest movements have abandoned ideology to the extent described in the book, Luke Martell finds this a distinctive and stimulating contribution recommended to all those interested in social change.

***Ideology and the Future of Progressive Social Movements.* Rafal Soborski. Rowman and Littlefield. 2018.**

Find this book: 

Neoliberalism has spread across the world from the 1970s onwards. Anti-neoliberal movements have developed in response, amongst them the global justice movement and anti-austerity protests. In *Ideology and the Future of Progressive Social Movements*, Rafal Soborski provides a punchy and passionate critique of such movements from an anti-neoliberal perspective, accessible and fluent. An [ideology expert](#), he focuses on the disabling effect of post-ideology on politics and is spot-on in arguing for the importance of ideology and politics in social change.

Soborski outlines the rise of neoliberalism, concepts of ideology and end-of-ideology theories. His book focuses on networking, prefigurative politics (where future societies are tested out in the here and now) and the populism of the 'Occupy' movement. Soborski's argument is that ideology is unavoidable but anti-neoliberal movements have chosen not to foreground it, and so are unable to develop a coherent alternative. Instead, they are inward-looking, vague and disparate; they stay at a pre-political level and do not go beyond this to develop a political agenda and strategy. This leaves power in the hands of neoliberalism, whose proponents, conversely, have used ideology and politics astutely to advance their project, with the book highlighting the role of think tanks.

For Soborski, anti-neoliberal movements claim they have moved beyond ideology and replaced it with new and unique networking and prefigurative practices. This makes coherence and mobilisation difficult as there is nothing around which to build a political programme or organisation. Soborski's book is, quite reasonably, not reporting on an empirical study of activism. It makes its conclusions more on the basis of well-identified statements from its intellectual advocates, in which they make proposals or offer interpretations of the movements. But some of these reject dogmatism, predetermination, exclusivity and abstraction, as much as ideology itself that the book says they are disavowing. On the ground, participants sometimes draw on longstanding ideologies and movements to which their spokespeople are said to pay too little attention, like Marxism, anarchism and even social democracy. While Soborski argues that activists claim too much novelty for their own practices, my experience is that some try to learn from previous generations and educate themselves about past experiences.





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What may be characteristic of recent movements compared to the early days of anti-neoliberalism is less the dismissal of ideology and perhaps more of a willingness to draw on different ideologies rather than be confined to one framework. This isn't such a bad thing. Soborski himself appositely says that no single choice provides the answer. Socialism could learn more from liberalism and vice versa, Marxism and social democracy from each other, and more organised politics from anarchism as well as the other way around. Combining elements of ideologies brings its own problems: for instance, managing tensions and contradictions. But mixing ideology is not the same as abandoning it. Furthermore, prefigurative experiments are not so much rejecting ideology, as the book suggests, as materially testing it, instead of building future societies on theories without practice.

Soborski argues that anti-neoliberalism has stayed at the level of social movements and pulled back from developing into politics, and he questions the impact of these movements. With instances like 'Occupy Wall Street' in their moment, he has a good case. However, in historical context, social movements often develop party organisation or take their issues into the political sphere over time, from the workers' movement to the green and women's movements, amongst others. If we view 'Occupy' and other anti-neoliberal movements not in isolation but as part of a process and within a wider frame, then they are not as pre-political as is argued and have [fed into the political sphere](#). For instance, they have been behind the rise of the Spanish political party Podemos, which is discussed by Soborski. Jeremy Corbyn's leadership of the UK Labour Party and shifting of the agenda to incorporate anti-neoliberalism into mainstream politics is based in part on movements laying the ground for bringing up the anti-austerity case. A political programme, ideologically-based and an alternative to neoliberalism, has consequently been developed in the Labour Party, and anti-neoliberal movements are part of this story.

Movements and politics are not self-contained and dichotomous. Many in anti-neoliberal movements are also involved in prefigurative experiments and political parties. Where the shift of anti-neoliberalism from movement to party has not worked well, for instance in the case of Syriza, this may have as much to do with the party as the movement itself. In general, the failings of the party-political left are as much a factor in the way neoliberalism has gone unchallenged as are those of the social movement left, the focus of this book, the latter rising sometimes as a reaction to the former.

Soborski is critical of postmodern identity politics for inhibiting ideological and political strategies and regrets the neglect of political economy by movement activists and intellectuals. He has a good point about some parts of the anti-neoliberal movement. But in others, [capitalism and neoliberalism](#) are central concerns of the global justice and anti-austerity movements, and anti-austerity has shifted the emphasis from post-material to more economic and material concerns and towards demands on the state for a political alternative, for instance in Southern European countries. Prefigurative communities can be absorbed in getting their own practices right, as the book argues, but co-op and radical pedagogy projects, for example, also put effort into wider education about what they do and in trying to spread similar forms throughout society.

Soborski is right to express scepticism about the fetishisation of networking via information technology. He makes good points about the way informal horizontalism can allow power and the abuse of it, whereas formal organisation can limit these. However, I'm not sure that the focus on technology has replaced the development of political vision; many movements combine both. There have also been significant positives in electronic horizontalism, as Soborski himself writes. Organisation and discussion can be undertaken without having to go through bureaucracies or leaders. Truth-checking is easier, people have instant access to huge amounts of knowledge and information and views can be validated by peers rather than needing authorities to verify them. But corporations and states can censor the network and turn it off, and the smartphone faces an unequal battle when confronted with military power. Furthermore, as Soborski states, social media can be an echo chamber where you share your opinion with the like-minded and feel you've done your bit politically after having your view confirmed by them. It can do what he's worried about: that is, undermine real non-virtual political struggle. Yet, it may be the older intellectual commentators that Soborski pertinently refers to who over-optimistically fetishise IT. The young don't have anything before to which to compare it, making it an instrument rather than something revolutionary or to be viewed in such a celebratory way. Instead, their experience may be of the use of IT for surveillance, access to personal data and states using social media to undermine democracy and rights.

The book finishes with good questions and tasks for an ideological and political anti-neoliberalism. Some of these are ones that anti-neoliberal movements have already been grappling with, and Soborski deliberately doesn't prescribe an ideological alternative and political strategy. In holding back, he stays within the limits that he rightly says anti-neoliberalism needs to push through. One possibility would be to further analyse attempts at pursuing ideological and political change, from the Latin American left to Podemos, Corbyn and the radical left elsewhere, and Soborski highlights some of these mentioned. Corbyn combines left-populism, co-operative, socialist and social democratic inputs, drawing on different ideologies rather than just one, building on anti-austerity protests and the attempt to make his party a mass movement, but with an ideological, political programme.

In this book, Soborski brings a healthy dose of scepticism about anti-neoliberalism and an important antidote to excitement over recent counter-movements, making telling points. His criticisms apply well to some intellectuals and movement strands, although I'm not sure the grassroots of anti-neoliberalism all run counter to what he prescribes. The book is nonetheless a distinctive and stimulating contribution, recommended to those interested in social change: a concise, readable, heartfelt and thought-provoking case for an anti-neoliberal politics based in ideology and pursued through politics. That this is the way anti-neoliberalism needs to go, Soborski is right.

Luke Martell is a Teaching Fellow in Sociology at the University of Sussex. He has written on socialism, social democracy, environmentalism and globalisation. [Read more by Luke Martell.](#)

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.