The Promise of Proportional Representation: On Political Disengagement, Electoral Reform, and Neoliberalism

Tony Nguyen
Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Simon Fraser University

I. Introduction: Perspectives on Political Disengagement

All the voters belong to the most diverse groups. But to the ballot box they are not members of a group but citizens. . . Distrust increases the distance that separates them. If we want to fight against atomization, we must try to understand it first.[1]

    - *Jean-Paul Sartre, Elections: A Trap for Fools*

That there is a growing 'crisis of democracy' is likely news to few. Increasingly, modern democracy, both in Canada and abroad, is characterized by political apathy and disengagement from the traditional political process (Milner, 2005). Accordingly, voter turnout across the advanced democratic states has declined steadily from the early 1980s (a decline emphatically attributed to decreases in youth turnout), giving increasing lie to the claim that governments can and do legitimately represent the publics they purport to serve (Howe, 2011; Milner, 2005).

In Canada, in a push for electoral reform, proportional representation (PR) has been framed by some as a powerful instrument in re-engaging the electorate with politics, and revitalizing state governance by re-injecting meaning into so-called 'representative' democracy. The theory follows that, under PR, political parties observe a greater incentive to attend to the interests of citizens in all ridings, instead of simply focusing efforts on those 'swing' ridings where votes are more highly valued (Milner, 2004; Karp and Banducci, 2011). In

addition, parties, no longer beholden to the 'median' voter in order to generate broad support, under PR might instead focus on meeting voters' more specific interests, and therefore holding party representatives more easily accountable (Cusack, et al, 2007). In these ways, PR is predicted to catalyze an increase in citknowledge as parties wage widespread educational campaigns to mobilize support, and individuals may identify parties that are more closely aligned with their own particular political interests.

And yet, election statistics show that across many of those states governed through a system of PR, voter turnout has seen decline as well (Milner, 2005). In this regard, Milner (2004) identifies two causes for the decline among youth, the primary source of this change: one, that of a declining sense of civic duty and, two, that of declining political knowledge. He argues:

> The two are closely related: a decline in the sense of civic duty means that young people are less inclined to seek the information needed to vote meaningfully. Since we do not know how to boost civic duty, we must concentrate our efforts on the political knowledge (ibid, p. 28).

Milner (2004) thus advocates an emphasis on increasing political knowledge as a means to return voter turnout to its pre-1980s levels; a transition to a system of PR is an essential component of his proposal.

On the other hand however, in addressing the issue of a weakening sense of civic duty, Howe (2011) argues that a rise in individualistic attitudes, and a relational decline in social cohesion, helps account for growing political disengagement. For Howe, such individualism is attributable to an

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[1] Sartre, J. (2013). Elections: A trap for fools. In Aronson, R. & Van Der Hoven, A. (eds.) *We have only this life to live: The selected essays of Jean-Paul Sartre 1939-1975.* New York: New York Book Review.

adolescent culture operating in relative isolation from 'adult society,' in the so-called "age of adolescence," which emphasizes peer, over adult, influence. This relative isolation of adolescence, he argues, leads to the "validation and reinforcement of the attitudes and attendant behaviours" (ibid, p. 252) of political inattentiveness and individualism 'inherent' in adolescence. Howe's assertion regarding rising individualism however, while helpful in explaining disengagement, relies heavily on psychological evaluations of adolescent tendencies that do not adequately address the socio-historical context of such 'inherent' characteristics. Rather, this article asserts that such individualistic attitudes are symptomatic of subjectivities under a neoliberal paradigm, one which assumes as 'True' that humans, by nature, are wholly and inherently self-interested.

Milner's position noted above vis-à-vis PR is therefore understood as a myopic concern with the correlation found between political knowledge and turnout. This article advances the notion that Milner misunderstands the meaning behind the common assertion that "all politicians are the same" when he reduces it to an expression of the inability of young voters to "make the basic distinctions necessary for meaningful choice" (2004: 26). Such assertions should, instead, be understood as indicative of the perspective that politicians are only 'human,' which, from within the neoliberal paradigm, is understood as self-interested, and 'rational.' Such an understanding of human nature is one essential to the cultural maintenance of advanced capitalist society, which exists upon a foundation of exploitation for personal profit. Furthermore, it is predicted to be particularly apparent in those individuals whose primary socialization has taken place following the retrenchment of the welfare state and the rise of neoliberalism.

Although electoral reform is not the only recommendation Milner proposes (he also prescribes the introduction of public programs designed to increase civic and media literacy), his emphasis on the lack of political knowledge among youth focuses attention on but a symptom of a larger crisis that is intimately related to the decline in civic duty: that is,

the decline of public-spiritedness, and the atomization of the individual.

Public-spirited citizenship is "a citizenship of responsibilities as well as of rights" (Dean, 2003, p.1). A culture instilled with an ideal sense of public-spiritedness is one in which our necessary interdependence is widely appreciated, thus invoking in its people a binding sense of duty to the social body. Here, the individual is not merely an island unto herself, but inextricably enmeshed with the lives and livelihoods of others – past, present, and future. In contrast, we find the atomization of the individual wherein the acceptable range of consideration is constricted and persons are disconnected from any sense of debt or responsibility to their community and beyond. Every accomplishment is a personal achievement, and every failure a personal failing: the wider social and cultural group in this context has little to no bearing. Such a disposition has been entrenched alongside the expansion of neoliberal policy. A conception of human nature as self-interested and rational is a key narrative of this understanding, and it is within this context that we must seek to understand the rise of political apathy and disconnectedness, in order to assess the merit of any proposed resolution.

Thus, we ask: does PR truly present to us a satisfying solution to our current political woes? How effective can it be in encouraging public-spirited engagement in the political process? Will the atomizing forces of capital prove immune to any potential change prompted by electoral reform? To understand the potential of PR in instituting meaningful change, a coherent conceptualization of the atomized individual in advanced liberal democracies must first be attended to. Following this, an analysis of the socio-historical origins of PR, and a brief case study of New Zealand's electoral transition from first-past-the-post (FPTP) styled elections to PR will enable us to address such reform within a Canadian context. The following discussion will return to the argument for PR, from a socio-historical understanding of the rise of individualism, with the objective of reassessing the merits of electoral reform in addressing our current crisis of democracy.

II. Neoliberal Individualism

"Neoliberalism as a matter of government policy has assumed the self-directing, self-contained liberal subject to be a fact of nature" (Dean, 2003, p. 165).

Milner and Howe, like many other political science scholars, advance their arguments from a market perspective of the electoral process wherein the individual elector is a rational actor whose decision to vote lies in accordance with a strategic decision to vote lies in accordance with a strategic decision to vote lies in accordance with a strategic cost-benefit analysis of various potential outcomes (Milner, 2002; Wattenberg, 2002). Nonetheless, a recent shift in political science literature toward analyzing electoral processes based on the influence of group dynamics may be observed (Abrams et al.; 2010, Fedderson, 2004). For example, the theory of informal social networks proposed by Abrams et al. (2010), which seeks to account for the influence of social groups in electoral decision-making. Such conceptualizations however are but more so-called 'rational-choice' models of understanding that continue to divorce actors from the cultural context of their decision-making. While these models may help in providing a micro-understanding of the forces that push individuals to engage politically within their specific milieux, they consistently fail to acknowledge the 'rational' actor as a social construction. Furthermore, in assuming the reality of an inherently self-interested, rational human nature, such approaches further validate this persistent meme. Instead, to move forward in meaningfully addressing any democratic deficit, the political (non)action of the individual must be understood from within a socio-historical context.

In her book, *Capitalism and Citizenship*, Dean (2003) characterizes contemporary culture under neoliberalism by the tendency of individuals "to act 'as if' they were autonomous, or, to forget that behind empirical separation lies real interdependence" (p. 29). While the previous authors have built their work on the assumption that humans are inherently self-interested, Dean constructs her argument around the notion that humans "are indeterminate in a particular way, or, in a way which needs the completion of culture" (ibid, p. 13). In other words, because they are born

premature and may become fully functional only through their interactions with others, humans are *inherently social*. The tendency towards individualism, then, is a social construction encouraged by capitalist culture, one that masks and minimizes cultural indebtedness and interdependence. The meme of inherent, self-interested rationality is further reinforced and perpetuated by its own logic: if everyone else is concerned solely with their own self-interests, then I am at a disadvantage if I do not prioritize my own 'personal' interests above all. As Dean remarks, in a culture bereft of a strong sense of community and social welfare, "self-reliance is demanded under threat of future impoverishment" (ibid, p. 162). The tendency towards individualism is revealed as a function of our severed connections to the social body.

Research conducted by Eliasoph (1998) into the discursive manifestation of politics in American culture is indicative of the depth to which individualistic attitudes have pervaded the culture in contemporary liberal democracies.

For her research, Eliasoph immersed herself in volunteer, activist, and recreational groups to study the transmission of political ideas in everyday life. Observing and interviewing with a range of individuals from a variety of groups, Eliasoph sought an understanding of how and why American citizens engage, or dis-engage, with the political. A key conclusion, Eliasoph's participants are remarkable in their determined personalization of all things political in, what Eliasoph observes, a reversal of Mills' sociological imagination (ibid, p. 150). Such an attitude is indicative, for Eliasoph (and, she argues, for Mills) of an acceptance of the so-called "cold, hard facts of reality." For Eliasoph, it is the "devaluation of talk itself. . . connecting the overly individualized, personal approach to the assumption that there is a world of neutral dead facts out there, unconnected to us" (ibid, p. 152). Because individuals do not talk about the issues without personalizing them, the 'social' sources of social issues do not emerge in dialogue with others, and the self-perceived ability of the average citizen to conscientiously engage in social change is

diminished.Eliasoph (1998) further concludes that the public debate on social issues is "dishonoured" in American society, framed misleadingly as singularly self-serving and thus undeserving of wider attention. Discussion of social issues is warranted only when its relation to self-interest is pronounced and the 'integrity' of the discussion is thus preserved. The underlying assumption is the inherent self-interest of rational human actors - any pretense of public-spiritedness is therefore simply a theatrical call for attention. This phenomenon constrains the development of public-spiritedness in favour of self-interest in a self-fulfilling prophecy: individuals are constrained in their ability to publicly address social issues without reproducing the impression of self-interest. This then mitigates against the generation of solidarity in the call for collective action therefore further entrenching the notion that all rational actors are inherently self-serving. If a sense of powerlessness to change anything beyond the 'personal' is such a dominating aspect of modern life, is it any wonder that individuals no longer find themselves turning to their franchise for meaningful change?

In his introduction to *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, David Harvey (2005) pronounces the years 1978-80 as "a revolutionary turning-point in the world's social and economic history" (p. 1), remarking upon the liberalization of China's economy, the beginnings of global retrenchment of

the welfare state, the initial deregulation of industry, and the disempowerment of labour. Such transformation has surely influenced the socialization of individuals born into the world following these changes. Table 1 below describes the decline in voter turnout in three of the largest majoritarian democratic systems in the world: Canada, the U.K., and the United States. Data here represent turnout from 1970 to the present and highlight the first election in which those born at the beginning of the rise of economic neoliberalism were eligible to vote (estimated roughly to occur around 1998). A clear pattern of demarcation reveals itself. Of the three countries sampled, an average drop of 14 percentage points is observed from pre-1980s levels to that achieved in the first eligible election for the 1980 cohort. Although average turnout also declines in the intermediary period, the change is relatively insignificant (an average drop of only 2.7 points), and turnout post-1998, once individuals born within the regime of neoliberalism begin reaching the age of majority, has remained at a significantly diminished rate.

Here, Dean (2003) may help us understand the convergence of capitalist society under neoliberalism and growing political disengagement as the decline of public-spiritedness. As argued previously, contemporary culture under capitalism actively obfuscates the sense of cultural indebtedness and interdependence that constitute the necessary

Table 1
A Comparison of Voter Turnout in Canada, the UK, and the U.S.A. 1970 - 2013

	Canada	United Kingdom	U.S.A.
Avg. Voter Turnout between 1970-80	73.30 %	75.70 %	69.92 %
Avg. Voter Turnout between 1981-97	72.13 %	74.47 %	65.09 %
Voter Turnout in first election eligible for 1980 cohort	64.10 %	59.38 %	51.55 %
Avg. Voter Turnout after first eligible election to present	62.18 %	62.17%	56.35 %

Notes: 1. Adapted from http://www.idea.int.xt Copyright by International IDEA. Reprinted with permission.
2. Data for Canada adapted from
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foundation for human existence. This phenomenon results in what Dean, borrowing from Arendt, terms 'worldlessness.' In her articulation of Arendt, Dean asserts that worldlessness today is characterized increasingly by dereification, or "the dissolution of world to process" (ibid, p. 33).

She argues:

> Process. . . is a capitalist-induced reduction of the human world to an endless cycle of production and consumption which leaves nothing worldly (durable or tangible) behind; a reduction which deprives humans of a shared and reliable reality and which renders us forgetful of our capacities and responsibilities (ibid, p. 33-34)

This 'forgetfulness' has characterized, in particular, those born into our world following the rise of neoliberalism, which functions in part to internalize within individuals a sense of atomized autonomy. Such attributions have resulted in the cynical labeling of this group of individuals as "generation me" (Twenge, 2007). While Howe (2010), as mentioned, maintains that the individualistic character of this generation is largely the consequence of the increased significance and isolation of adolescence, other authors have targeted post-scarcity, the proliferation of entertainment media, and the influence of the previous 60s generation (Nevitte, 1996; Twenge, 2007; Wattenberg, 2002). All these theories however ignore the substantial influence of the current neoliberal regime in engendering narcissistic individualism and the function it plays in maintaining capitalist exploitation in a globalized economy. Without recognition of the significant cultural changes the rise of neoliberalism has wrought, such interpretations provide a weak and narrow understanding of our current circumstances.

This article submits that an understanding of rising individualism as a function of the neoliberal agenda provides a more comprehensive understanding, and it is this approach that will inform the following discussion on PR as an instrument of political engagement. The contention remains that, though many of those states governed

by a system of PR are also experiencing declines overall, they nonetheless have persistently higher election turnouts than those seen in the majoritarian systems. Milner's argument, shared by many others, thus proposes that certain aspects of the PR system are naturally conducive to higher participation rates. In order to assess whether PR may help combat the deficit of public-spiritedness, we move forward in the next section to delineate this characteristic in its socio-historical context.

III. Proportional Representation in Context

Within the recently established context of industrialization, urbanization, and (near) universal suffrage in the early stages of the twentieth century, the democracies of the world found themselves facing a trilemma (Cusack et al., 2010). In order to sustain the possibility of amassing meaningful political support, political leaders were faced with three options: 1) maintain the majoritarian system, but be forced to appeal to a wider variety of interests; 2) maintain the majoritarian system, but reduce electoral competition through either party coalition or consolidation; or 3) switch to PR.

To help explain the major historical divergence of electoral systems into those which transitioned to PR and those remaining majoritarian, Cusack et al. (2010) distinguish the 'PR adopters' by their particular structure of economic organization. Following this conception, early PR adopters were 'protocorporatist' states characterized by collectively organized economic interests that developed locally and/or regionally in a cooperative operation built on a tradition of consensus-based negotiation. Representation at the national level therefore operated more or less proportionally to the degree that economic interests remained geographically defined until urbanization and the nationalization of industry and regulatory politics rendered the majoritarian system of governance increasingly disproportionate. Consensus-based negotiation, centred around the preservation of group-specific interests, was then carried on under a system of PR which re-established the previous proportionality.

In these PR-adopting states, the guild tradition, absent or long since diminished in the staunchly majoritarian states, had fostered the development of investment in "co-specific assets," characterized by export-oriented, industry-specific technical skills (Cusack, et al, 2007) that depended on coordination with the owning class. Where labour maintained a monopoly on skills training (in the form of industrial unionization), but did not demand control over its supply, this development compelled the cooperation of both industry and labour interests under the circumstances that

> Investments in skills by both companies and workers where the return to companies depended on the acceptance by unions of a cooperative framework and the return to workers depended on collective bargaining and on effective social security (ibid, p. 374).

Those states that remained majoritarian, on the other hand, were characterized by craft unionization which was necessarily concerned with controlling the supply of its skills and, consequently, harboured interests in direct opposition to that of employers (Cusack, et al, 2007). Under such circumstances, the owning class lacked any incentive to engage in cooperative negotiations with labour. This translated to the political realm as a desire among political elites to maintain a majoritarian electoral system in order to maximize electoral support in defense against labour. In contrast, among the PR adopters, efficient cooperation between labour and industry demanded equal representation in the legislature, which both sides were readily able to agree to.

Any consideration of electoral reform must remain cognizant of these specific historical circumstances leading up to the introduction of PR in the early adopters. Nonetheless, an examination of a more recent reform may be more indicative of its potential in Canada. Does the consistently higher turnout found in early PR adopters reflect a purely structural effect of the electoral system? Or, is turnout better understood as a function of the historical socio-economic organization of the early adopters as outlined above? With his research into the experience of politicians with legislative governance under PR in New Zealand and in

Scotland, Lundberg (2012) concludes that politics in these more recent adopters still largely remains an "adversarial business." Noting the struggle of such countries to shed the cultural remnants of governance under a majoritarian system, Lundberg highlights that "PR. . . does not, by itself, create co-operation" (p. 623). Lundberg's finding is consistent with the thesis shared by Cusack, et al. (2010), which maintains that the consensus-based negotiation characteristic of early PR adopters is but the legacy of the particular, and longstanding, organization of their economies. What Lundberg also suggests, however, is that the distinct circumstances of New Zealand's experience, notably the recurrence of minority governments, with their attending incentives for consensus building, has in fact facilitated a slow transition to a style more characteristic of the ideal PR model. Whether the political cultures of these late adopters will converge with those of earlier ones, however, remains unknown, and whether such convergence will accompany a rise in political mobilization remains equally uncertain.

IV. Proportional Representation and New Zealand

For a deeper understanding of the effects of PR, we turn now to a more in-depth examination of New Zealand, which has the distinction of being the first English-speaking country in the world to adopt an electoral system of PR based on party lists. In terms that could easily be attributed to the Canadian political climate today, Nagel (2004) describes the circumstances leading up to the 1993 referendum on electoral reform:

> Contrary to New Zealanders' majoritarian ideology, it became apparent that the electoral system manufactured parliamentary majorities and that governments' electoral bases were only pluritarian and sometimes not even that" (p. 122)

Such inherent deficiencies of FPTP-type electoral systems were particularly emphasized in New Zealand following a dramatic program of economic liberalization implemented in the 1980s, absent of due public consultation. The hope placed in

electoral reform, then, was that PR would help rectify issues pertaining to such deficiencies, described, at least in part, by Nagel (2004) as the "underrepresentation of minorities, disproportional allocation of seats in favour of larger parties, and pluritarian outcomes" (123).[2] The proportional allocation of seats would therefore correct the worst of such deficiencies as the proportion of votes 'wasted' on non-elected candidates is reduced, and citizens are therefore assumed to observe a greater incentive to participate at the same time parties are compelled to mobilize them (Karp and Banducci, 1999, p. 363).

And yet, voter turnout post-implementation of PR in New Zealand, has followed the same declining trend affecting most other liberal democracies since the turn of the century. From an average turnout rate of 89.8% in 1980-90, to 88.3% in the first election under PR in 1996, turnout subsequently hit a record low of 74.2% in the most recent election in 2011.[3]

This failure of PR to restore turnout is accounted for by Nagel (2004) as a consequence of changing campaign strategies that have shifted focus to party representation in media over personal communication with the electorate. Citing a study by Vowles (2002), Nagel maintains that weaker ties connecting parties to constituents, in direct contrast to that predicted by PR models, were the primary cause of the reform's inability to reverse the decline in voter turnout. Vowles' (2002) study however, key to Nagel's contention, was able only to generalize the *frequency* of reported contact established between the study's sample and a political campaign, with no indication of the *depth* of interaction. A decrease in contacts is therefore a weak indicator of party-constituent relations, and Nagel's hypothesis, in

turn, thus presents a weak interpretation of this phenomenon. Does the neoliberal atomization of the individual provide us with a more robust account of this failure of PR to restore voter turnout?

Conclusions by Banducci et al. (1999) using panel study data collected between 1993-96 suggest that, post-implementation, public attitudes toward politicians as unresponsive and untrustworthy saw little change. Although they temper their claims by noting that trust in government "may be a function of the longer-term performance of the new parliament, and thus not affected in the time frame examined" (ibid, p. 552), their conclusions suggest that the "roots of distrust of government lie in something other than the rules used to translate votes into seats" (ibid).

An examination of the decline of voter turnout in New Zealand identifies the election of 1984 with the highest turnout rate of the past sixty years – a peak which no election since has come within 3 percentage points of meeting. Immediately prior to this, turnout had in fact been rising steadily from a nadir of 83% in 1975.4 An analysis of New Zealand's economic policy during this period is illuminating, as global recession in the late 1960s and early 1970s was especially damaging to New Zealand's heavily export-dependent economy. Following a program of increased public spending to combat unemployment initiated by Robert Muldoon's National government, "the New Zealand economy was. . . by the early 1980s, one of the most protected and controlled in the 'developed world" (Challies and Murray, p. 234). Then, in a stark reversal, immediately following the election of 1984, the newly elected Labour government began, in neglect of public consultation, a "wrenching process of market liberalisation" (Nagel, 126). When the National Party resumed its dominance in 1990, the neoliberal policies only continued with vigor and,

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2 In reference to Canada, he includes the additional deficiency that FPTP exaggerates regional political differences (Nagel, 2004, p. 142)

3 International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (2011b). Voter turnout data for New Zealand. Retrieved from http://www.idea.int/vt/countryview.cfm?id=171

4 International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (2011b). Voter turnout data for New Zealand. Retrieved from http://www.idea.int/vt/countryview.cfm?id=171

despite the injection of PR into the electoral system in 1996, turnout continued its decline.

It may be argued that the increases in turnout leading up to 1984 were merely indicative of the electorates' desperation, in a time of urgency, to reassure themselves of any semblance of hope, but that circumstances are much different today is arguable. The overriding difference, perhaps, is that there is no longer *any* option that provides hope of meaningful change – that all politicians now really *are* the same. Or, that the politicians *themselves* no longer see the possibility for public-spirited action. Instead, the political elite, like the electorate, engage the world and each other as rational, self-interested atoms. In describing modern politics, Dean (2003) argues that:

> Electorates are perceived by politicians to be calculating, egoistic, nomadic voters, ready to switch from one party to another as self-interest dictates. This perception is evinced in a timid government orientation expressed in the pursuit of policy objectives through manipulative, rather than educative, means (p. 1).

Politicians and citizens thus engage in a feedback loop of self-interested rationality. Such terms, themselves, connote a disconnect between the individual and her ability to engage in so-called 'public' affairs: instead of trying to garner the support of groups of individuals toward common social goals, politicians merely seek to accumulate the *votes* of 'citizens.' In this way, individuals are not engaged as stakeholders in a system of interdependent social relations, but as mere instruments.

V. Proportional Representation in Canada and Addressing Meaningful Action

While PR may not provide a tidy resolution to the growing lack of political engagement, at least in the short run, there is still merit to be found in a transition. That PR affords political minorities a voice in the legislature denied them by majoritarian systems should not be taken lightly. As the case of New Zealand shows, it is one aspect of the promise

of PR that holds true, and any program capable of initiating progress with respect to increasing diversity of representation in the public sphere is worthy of consideration.

Any further entrenchment of free trade and neoliberalism in Canada, however, (perhaps in the form of the looming ratification of free trade agreements with China and the EU) may jeopardize the likelihood of achieving electoral reform in favour of PR. Additionally, as Cusack, et al. (2007) argue, there is a persistent tendency towards the reproduction of majoritarian electoral systems where a tradition of consensus-based negotiation is not already established. Because PR systems are, by definition, redistributive, a party in power, so long as they are able to appeal to the median-voter, will observe an incentive to maintain a majoritarian system. Following their theory, even when more left-leaning parties come into power, by virtue of their need to maintain broad appeal, electoral reform that favours redistribution is rarely ever seriously considered.

Any notion of a transition in Canada should also be tempered by the observation attributed to Lundberg (2012) that existing political divisions can either foster or limit the consensus-based negotiation that PR ideally requires. Lundberg notes, in comparing Scotland and New Zealand, the enhanced difficulty of consensus-building in the former nation-state. Where two significant cleavages of class and of the centre-periphery (developing out of Scotland's position within the UK) are present in the Scottish example, the case of New Zealand exhibits merely the former tension. This suggests, therefore, that the existence of multiple cleavages may serve to limit the efficiency of the PR model where avenues toward consensus are continually obstructed by one division or another. In Canada, a similar division is noted in the case of Quebec and the Anglo-Franco cleavage, but whether any political hindrance emerging out of this schism would further alienate voters from politics remains up for debate. Nevertheless, the future of Scotland's case will undoubtedly prove informative, and, in the meantime, we may find a much more compelling

subject in the examination of the very *possibility* of provoking any real and significant change.

Nagel's (2004) analysis in the case of New Zealand illustrates that, while there are certain structural patterns built into the reform movement, "the infrequent triumphs of radical reform depend on *contingent* factors–human agency and historical circumstances" (p. 123). Of particular interest in the case of New Zealand is the success of reform in the face of a considerably aggressive counter-campaign financed by the corporate sector (Nagel 2004). In contrast to the model maintained by Cusack, et al. (2010), typical of the early adopters, the adoption of PR in New Zealand appears to have been less characterized by partisan self-interest and more by a sense of public-spiritedness as the public rallied against elite interests. Record low turnout in the most recent election, however, does not signal a recapitulation.

Understanding the decline in political mobilization as a consequence of a capitalism that must actively engage in oppression and atomization to survive is therefore, I argue, a prerequisite to meaningfully addressing our democratic deficit. That solidarity is a threat to the capitalist regime, which currently thrives on inequality and accumulation by dispossession, is without question. Meaningful change, which will only ever be accomplished through collective action, must be fought for then, at every step, against the atomizing forces of capitalism.

That the social institutions of liberal democracy have in some way been shaped by the reign of capital and, in turn, serve to reproduce its memes, places a distinct emphasis on the significance of our social interactions in combating atomisation. We cannot expect that mere structural changes will engender a proliferation of the worldly dispositions necessary for the opening-up of a public-spiritedness.

To this end, a narrow conception of human nature, solely characterized by a self-interested rationality, must be exposed as the divisive, viral meme it is. When we engage with others as atoms, we reproduce and reaffirm the assumption that we

exist, 'in reality,' as atoms. We must first learn then, to recognize the human subject behind the Other and recreate the cultural image of human nature as one that substantiates our interdependence and social natures. In doing so, we break down the divisions fortified by atomization. Our crisis of democracy will only ever be resolved through a constant struggle against this pervasive framework of understanding. In this way, the individual, conscious of her or his social nature, becomes the fount of meaningful action against the indifferent world of capital.

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