



the bridge:

**how the politics of the future will link
the vertical to the horizontal**

Uffe Elbæk & Neal Lawson





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The world of big institutions is unravelling before us. Knowing everything everywhere is putting the many ahead of the few. The implications for how we do politics are profound.

In 1956, Samuel Shenton, a British sign writer by trade, created the International Flat Earth Society. 58 years and much derision later we are just discovering how prescient Samuel was, but not in the way he meant. Because it wasn't God or the cosmos that created the flat earth we increasingly experience all around us but technology. The internet combined with the ubiquity of smart phones and the social and global media they have spawned is producing a world in

which the vertical institutions of old are giving way to horizontal platforms. People now talk peer-to-peer and many-to-many, they don't receive top to bottom. The earth is becoming flat and nothing, and we mean nothing, will be the same again.

Humankind is going through one of its rare but profound paradigm shifts. And as ever it's driven by technology. From the Stone Age to the Iron Age, from farming to Fordism, how we make and do things has always impacted on how society operates. Marx may have been overly deterministic in his analysis of the effect of the economic base on the social superstructure but the link is real. As Marx himself wrote 'the windmill gives you society with the feudal lord: the steam-mill, society with the industrial capitalist'.¹ So what does the age of the smart phone give us?

It gives us Mark Zuckerberg, Bill Gates and Eric Schmidt, it gives us Google, Facebook and Twitter. But it gives us something, potentially at least, much more. It gives us informed, enabled and empowered citizens precisely because they can talk and act together to solve the critical challenges our society faces; the poor getting poorer, the planet burning and

¹ 'The Poverty of Philosophy', 1847

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a crisis of democracy caused by the fact that politicians seem unable to reverse inequality or climate change.

Today the world and our ability to influence it is literally in our hands. We can criticise, disrupt and dispute at the touch of a few buttons. A Twitter storm is instantaneous and costs nothing. State and corporate secrets become impossible to keep. Sharing and collaboration become feasible and desirable in huge numbers via geographic and virtual communities. Transparency rules. We rule. But only if we change the way we do politics.

The old vertical institutions, where knowledge was power, are corroded from within and without. No one takes orders anymore. No one can command because no one is in control. Power is dispersed. Complexity abounds. All that is solid melts into air. The old clunking icebergs of the state and corporation dissolve into a sea of people who can think, talk and act for themselves. But in this permanent state of fluidity action only becomes meaningful in concert with others. The waves of change demand interconnections to flow. The vertical and the solid are giving way to the horizontal and liquid.

1989

The decisive year, which triggered this new epoch, was 1989. Two moments are key. In March, Tim Berners-Lee wrote the protocols that would make possible the full functioning of the worldwide web. On the 9th of November citizens of Berlin, later known as the Woodpeckers, came out with sledgehammers and picks and started the demolition of the Wall that had divided their city for the previous 27 years. A full quarter of a century later the death of actually existing socialism and the unleashing of individualistic consumer capitalism, combined with the rise of the internet, and now smart phone technology, has rewritten the rules of how we think and behave.

The new rules bode well for anyone who wants a good society; one that is much more equal, sustainable and democratic. Because on a flat surface

we all talk and participate as equals. This is unlike the post 1945 social settlement which could never hold because it was built on hierarchical institutions. The NHS, full employment and cradle to grave welfare provision were all done to people by well-meaning but elitist technocrats. Democracy was something you did for a second once every four years and participation was the silent receipt of whatever you were 'lucky' to get. Such elitist means could never sustain egalitarian and democratic ends. And so the counter-revolution of neo-liberalism of the late 1970s took hold against the daily grind of state socialism.

The cultural shift on a flat earth could become permanent because equality and democracy have become both means and ends.

This doesn't deny the need for struggle. The big corporations will try to commercialise these flat planes. The state will push surveillance. And it's hard to start a protest through Tumblr if you can't afford to top up your phone credit or co-produce a public service when you're hungry. Social media can isolate as well as connect. And as the old top-down certainties evaporate a new authoritarian populism swaggers into town whipping up fear of 'the other'. The moment is not without real danger. But here at last, is a terrain

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that can be genuinely and authentically contested by radicals because of democracy and equality are what we struggle with and what we struggle for.

This isn't just about politics. Both in the UK, in Denmark and around the globe we see the big old institutions struggling; the banks, the media corporations, old political parties, the state itself, all

are left reeling. Often the managers, technocrats and planners respond to the crisis of hierarchies by trying to control even tighter. But it's counter-productive. And instead of just complaining and boycotting people are setting up their own alternative structures for the things that really matter to them, like peer-to-peer lending in finance or local energy schemes. In communities on and off line people are becoming their own experts, they are sharing and collaborating, innovating and experimenting. Take the media, until just a decade ago the model was one of a few professional journalists and editors writing many articles for many people. Now that model is flipped with the many now using the likes of the Huffington Post to reflect on and influence their world. Or go to the website Yelp! which has the usual gamete of restaurant and hotel reviews but now lists reviews of prisons by former inmates. The Panopticon of Jeremy Bentham, the ultimate ability to see all and control from a nerve centre, has been turned on its head by this user voice revolution. We know that all of us are smarter than any one of us and irrepressibly we are finding ways to join up and take control of our lives – by doing it together.

The revolution has started

This paradigm shift is not a prediction, it's not a vision. It's real and it's happening now - and it will go on happening. Kickstarter, Wikipedia, Open Source, Mumsnet, the People Who Share and Thoughtworks are some of the first movers in a future that is being co-produced. And it means our singular identities as either consumers or producers are merging. We are becoming fully rounded citizens.

And the biggest challenges and opportunities come in the sphere of politics. Here the implications of this flattening process are truly profound. For over a century democracy has been focused around the election of representatives from parties who we entrusted to do everything for us. They promised, we voted and they did. It was by definition, elitist. This

worked in a vertical, top down, command and control world where levers within national borders could be pulled and promised outcomes largely delivered. The simplicity of that old order has given way to a world that is both complex and global. Floods, financial flows and immigration are beyond the power of any politician to control. Around 60 of the world's 100 biggest economies are multinational corporations, not countries run by governments. And yet simultaneously people now have the growing ability to think and act for themselves. Traditional politics is being eroded from above and from below.

The results are increasingly explosive. The Danish Government recently sold off parts of the National Electricity Company to Goldman Sachs giving them huge influence over a strategic sector despite the company's dubious involvement in the financial crisis and its recent botched sale of Royal Mail in the UK. In Denmark the Government's engagement with Goldman Sachs triggered a network-based movement resulting in huge demonstrations, with more than 200,000 signing a declaration against it and polls that showed 80% of the people objected to the sale. Yet it still went ahead. But partly as a result one of the government parties, the Socialist People's Party, is now crumbling as its MPs were in total conflict with each other. The party has left the Government. The Finance Minister, Bjarne Corydon, who before this debate was one of the most powerful politicians, is now ranked as the second most disliked Minister in the Government. The old politics could not contain a decision about what should be owned by the public and what should be in private hands. The cycle of frustration and anger deepens and either the old parties will transform themselves or they will die and new political formations will take their place.

It's not only in Northern Europe that traditional political power is irreversibly declining, this mobilisation by the people for the people has taken off everywhere. It takes its form in widespread disenchantment with existing political processes, with leaders who rhetorically make a big noise but in reality offer little and do even less. No one is fooled. In the absence of anything better a bare majority still vote but with the heaviest of hearts and the lightest of crosses. That old

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game is up. A politics that infantilises all of us must give way to a politics for grown-ups.

Liquid democracy

So it's not just that representative democracy needs saving – it needs to be positioned alongside other sources of democratic energy and legitimacy on this new flat earth. In this everything-everywhere world direct democracy will become more potent and more popular, as will deliberative styles of democracy in which smaller but representative groups of people build a consensus on key issues. Then we will get to mash up different types of democracy – representative, direct and deliberative - in what is being called 'liquid democracy'. Here you have a vote that you can keep and cast yourself directly, or lend it to a representative and take it back whenever you want or you can join up and collaborate with others on an issue-by-issue basis. Technology and the death of deference allows all this and more. People will stop being the occasional consumers of politics and instead its permanent producers.

It's not just the structures of democracy and politics that will be transformed but the culture too. In the old 20th century world vertical political parties battled each other in an adversarial war of tit for tat. But the image of one army lined up against another is impossible to conceive in a complex, dispersed world of many-to many networks. Instead of a zero sum game, politics will become the art of ensuring you make the fewest possible enemies because on the next issue you don't know who you might need to forge an alliance with. So instead of enemies there will be people who have not yet seen this future in which tolerance, respect and empathy are key. Speaking to, and more importantly listening to, those you disagree with will become a vital political art.

Because the big and successful transformations in values and attitudes we all know about like support for gay rights, greater gender equality and the end of apartheid only take place when the overwhelming majority see change as common sense. If a 'good society' is achieved by even a metaphorical big stick then that stick will go on being used in that so-called

'good society'. Means always shape ends. A genuine politics of transformation must prefigure the world it is trying to create. These new times demand that we have to be 'the change we wish to see in the world' as we do unto all others as we would be done to. So if you want to be a rebel, be kind.

In this new world political leadership is not about the strength to pull the levers to deliver for 'your side' against 'theirs'. Rather it is about the constant negotiation and renegotiation of shifting alliances and coalitions. It is about building the capacity and the platforms for the most equal and participatory forms of engagement possible – in politics, in the workplace and in our communities - the places where we can share and collaborate. Increasingly what will matter will be the protection and promotion of the public spheres and common resources so that we can all know, think and do. In this emerging networked world data will rival land as the prime source of capital. This makes the work of people like the Open Data Institute so vital.

Importantly, in a world where what matters is not what you own but what you do and create, the seeds of an alternative to a turbo-consumer society are already being sown. Increasingly our identities will be fashioned from the values we have and remade through the alliances we forge and the way we behave – not through owning things we didn't know we needed, paid for by money we don't have to impress people we don't know. A good life will be about creating the world, not consuming it. So the beginnings of a world that is sustainable can be glimpsed too.

Beppe Grillo in Italy and Syriza in Greece, Tahrir Square and Occupy, global networks like Avaaz, national variants like 38 Degrees in UK and OmstillingNu (Change Now) in Denmark and a myriad other community and special interest campaigns are just straws in the wind of the deep democratic revolution starting to sweep through us.

But in this rush to celebrate the potential of the new we would do well to remember the importance of some elements of the old. Given the rampant levels of inequality and the blackmailing might of global

corporations, not to mention runaway climate change – the state and the interlinking of states across regions and the globe will become ever more important. But only if those states and those who inhabit them, learn to let go and see their job as equalising resources and power so that what is already happening in the flat earth revolution can be scaled up and joined up. As the journalist John Harris said at the recent Change: How? (Un)Conference “you can’t redistribute income sitting in a tent outside of St Paul’s”. The state is essential to these ‘new times’ as the only big resource with public legitimacy to act and invest but only if it is democratically accountable for participatory ends.

Parties as open tribes

So these new times won’t negate the role of political parties. Indeed they become even more necessary but as a ‘Bridge’ between the remnants of the vertical world we will still need to organise and influence through a democratic state and the new horizontal movements and forces that are bubbling up and allowing people to become the authors of their own collective destinies. After everyone assembles in Tahrir Square or someday soon Trafalgar Square – what next? Someone has to stand the candidates, cohere the manifesto, set the budgets and establish the policy basis for letting go and platform building. There will still be political tribes but like any successful tribe they must be open to adaptation and development. Otherwise they will die.

The successful party will now act as the Bridge between the horizontal and the vertical. In the UK Compass is trying to prefigure this role – showing Labour and other progressive parties what is possible if you join up and open out. In Denmark the Alternative is leading the way as a radical ‘open source’ party, reaching out to those political individuals and groups that are deeply involved in network-based politics but until now have been rightly disinterested in traditional “top-down party-politics”. In this world of ‘triple power’ the individual, the movement and the party must work within rich and sometimes contradictory relationships

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where they can be both for and against each other. None are subservient to the others. In these uncharted waters, the key political culture will be one of innovation and experimentation where what matters is how quickly you fail so that new lessons can be learned.

Because we had better get it right fast. However much this flat earth lends itself to people who believe in equality and democracy, it is also ripe for a different future – one based on authoritarian populism. A world with no singular authority, where everything is up for grabs is as wonderful for some as it is frightening and bewildering for others. When life is already anxious and insecure the lure of simple answers, the return to a golden age of elites who know best, can be as beguiling as it is now impossible to actually deliver. But that won’t stop some trying and meeting with support. Such a threat, like that of climate change or another finance crash, should only serve to make us more determined to find a new way of making politics work.

A new world

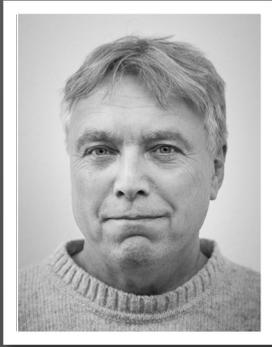
For the first time in a long time, radical egalitarian democrats face a future in which there is hope, real hope. The advances made in the last century were secured through bureaucratic and top down structures that were at best remote, and at worst, elitist. A good society was never going to be constructed through them as means clashed with ends. As such they simply paved the way for the free-market revolution in the closing decades of that century.

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Today and tomorrow we build in a different way. We start with human beings and our infinite capacity for love, empathy and connection. Instead of trying to fit people to a bureaucratic state or a free market we bend this increasingly flat world to our values and ourselves. We are all particles in the wave of the future. If we get it right, modernity can again be on our side.

To paraphrase Marx 'we make history, but not in conditions of our choosing'. The context of our

actions strongly influences the effect of those actions. But the context for those actions has never been better aligned with our beliefs. As the earth is flattened, the prospects for a good society rise. So we stand at a threshold – an era in which means and ends can be united – the more democratic and equal society, which we desire, is being made feasible by democratic and egalitarian behaviour. The future is ours to make. **Because we can.**



Uffe Elbæk

Uffe Elbæk, Entrepreneur, educator, activist, writer and Member of the Danish

Parliament. In 1991 Uffe Elbæk founded The KaosPilots – International School of New Business Design & Social Innovation. And was the principal of the school from 1991 to 2007.

In November 2001 and again in 2005 Uffe Elbæk was elected to the City Council of Aarhus (Denmark's second city) for the Danish Social-Liberal Party. He stepped down as city counselor in Aarhus, when he was hired by the City of Copenhagen as the CEO of the World Outgames 2009, a position he held from 2007 to 2009.

In July 2010, Elbæk founded the consulting company Change The Game with focusing on leadership training skills, political campaigning and social innovation concepts. Elbæk serves as the special advisor to the leadership team at the KaosPilots and as an academic

adviser for the HKICC Lee Shau Kee School of Creativity in Hong Kong.

In the spring of 2010 Uffe Elbæk accepted to run for the Danish Social-Liberal Party in the upcoming national election for the Danish Parliament. One year later Uffe Elbæk was voted in to The Danish Parliament and was Minister for Culture from 2011 to 2013. In the fall of 2013 he founded the new entrepreneurial green party The Alternative.

Uffe Elbæk is also on the board of several Danish and international organizations, and has over the years received numerous honors and awards, ranging from his appointment as ambassador for the local premiere league football club AGF to Knight of the Dannebrog. He lives today in a big old apartment in the heart of Copenhagen, together with his partner Jens.



Neal Lawson

Neal is Chair of the good society pressure group Compass and was author of All Consuming (Penguin,

2009) He serves on the Boards of UK Feminista and We own it!, is a Contributing Editor of the social democracy journal Renewal and is a Associate Member at the

Bauman Institute at Leeds University. He writes regularly for the Guardian and the New Statesman.

In the past he worked as a trade union researcher, an advisor to Gordon Brown and Peter Mandelson and ran a communications company.



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