

TARA MAHONEY

# Art, Culture and Systemic Change

## *An Interview with Astra Taylor*

*Astra Taylor makes films about philosophy, writes about politics, organizes the indebted, and plays music with the Neutral Milk Hotel. Watching her films Žižek! and Examined Life will make you want to read more critical theory. Her book, The People's Platform: Taking Back Power and Culture in the Digital Age, will make you re-think what the Internet should be for, and her work with the Debt Collective will show you how much impact a small group of writers and organizers can have on a problem as seemingly impenetrable as a trillion dollars in US student debt. And if you ever get a chance to meet Astra, her kind-heartedness and quick wit will leave you wondering how she makes such hard work look so easy.*

*Having followed Astra's work for years, I was delighted at the opportunity to interview her as part of Demos: Life in Common research residency. Her work knits together threads of art and politics in ways that effectively address complex societal issues by keeping them relatable and grounded. During the Occupy Wall Street movement, Astra helped to create a digital newsletter and broadsheet called Occupy! An OWS-Inspired Gazette. Since then, she has helped to spearhead the Rolling Jubilee, a project that crowd-sources funds to buy debt for pennies on the dollar in order to forgive it. More recently, her work with Strike Debt and the Debt Collective brings together a national coalition of debt resisters to call for debt cancellation and tuition-free higher education.*

*Of particular interest to me is the connection she draws between her own creative practice and strategies of collective empowerment. I am interested in finding out what new modalities of political participation are emerging from the cultural realm, and what forms of cultural production support democracy. With such a powerful political strategy, I am curious about what political theories guide a project like Strike Debt, and what Astra sees as the role of artists in creating new spaces for political engagement.*

*Astra's answers highlight how perhaps the most powerful thing art can do is remind us of our collective stake in building more just and democratic communities.*

TARA MAHONEY (TM): Could you describe some of the projects you're currently working on?

ASTRA TAYLOR (AT): I'm working on a new documentary about democracy, produced by the National Film Board of Canada. As a political organizer, I'm working around the issue of indebtedness, specifically via an organization I co-founded called the Debt Collective, which is a sort of twenty-first-century debtors' union. For example, we've been working on a pilot campaign around student debt and trying to get / help(?) people understand their huge monthly loan payments as a political problem rooted in the lack of free universal education. Our efforts are inspired by traditional labour organizing, but focused on mobilizing people around indebtedness as opposed to the wage, because people are not identified with their jobs or they're students or they're unemployed. Fewer people are in stable jobs in which they can be unionized, so debt can be a way of getting people to think about their financial situation and form bonds of solidarity with others who are in similarly precarious, indebted circumstances. Ultimately, the goal is for people who have different kinds of debt to make connections and to become politically active. They can then put pressure on the creditor class and on the state to provide for the public. And as always, I'm doing a bunch of writing and journalism.

TM: What do you see as the relationship between contemporary culture and art, and contemporary political movements and political organizing?

AT: I oscillate. Sometimes I think they are two very distinct things, and sometimes I feel more attuned to the connections between them. It depends what kind of mood I'm in and what I'm railing against. When Occupy Wall Street first started, I was excited that there was a political opportunity in the United States, that there was a social movement focused on capitalism, inequality, and class with some real momentum. My initial sense when I started to get involved in Occupy was that I was going to put my art-making aside and just do political organizing. I was frustrated by the way artists often frame their work as political, but the horizon of their politics is raising awareness or affecting the imagination. In our culture, everybody's raising awareness all the time, we're all registering our opinions all the time, we're all commenting on articles on the Internet. There's so much opinion-making, there's so much awareness raising—it just seems to feed into the power structure. We're all so busy registering our opinions that nothing happens; we're all so busy raising awareness that nothing ever changes.

I wanted to break out of that mode and somehow be a part of something that focused on action as much as awareness. But that was a bit of a naive perspective, because as I got more involved in trying to organize around debt, first through a project called the Rolling Jubilee and then through the Debt Collective, I realized that to get people to join our debtor's union we had to excite people and convince them on an emotional and imaginative level that it's worth their time. So that means I put a lot of my more creative skills to use in terms of making videos, creating imagery, conceptual frameworks that are compelling, a lot of writing, sloganeering—all these communicative skills are now in service of a project that is ultimately about building a tactical organization. I'm not interested in doing the communicative stuff if it's disconnected from a specific strategy and specific vision of building power, but this doesn't mean that it isn't a key aspect of politics today.

TM: What do you see as the connections between the organizing that you're talking about (blending cultural production and strategic political action) in the context of systemic change?

AT: Creating systemic change is hard. I mean, that's the goal we have as organizers—you don't just want to ameliorate some symptom but get at the disease. Depending on what you're organizing around, it could be a specific policy. Right now we're organizing with students over predatory for-profit colleges so that systemic change can happen at different levels. In some sense, our recent campaign already achieved systemic change. We pressured the Department of Education to create a new federal standard and process by which people who have been defrauded or misled by their educational institution can seek cancellation of their student loans. Thanks to our efforts there's a new rule that applies to all student borrowers regardless of what kind of school they attended (whether it was University of Phoenix or Harvard). Another systemic change for us would be the federal government changing a policy called the 90/10 rule, which says that for-profit colleges can get 90% of their funding from federal tax dollars. That's the policy that feeds this whole for-profit college machine in the United States, because they are able to just get unlimited state subsidies and put billions of dollars straight into the bank. An even deeper level of systemic change would be to finally have free public universal education for all—better yet, free public education and open admissions. As an organizer, you have to ask what level is within your reach—can you go for one and open more doorways to others. The challenge, of course, is figuring out how to pull the levers of power, because they are buried in bureaucracy and far out of reach for regular people. And somehow you have to keep the people you are organizing with engaged and mobilized.

What I like to do is work on projects where there's something we can grasp, something in the here and now, something that connects people, but where I can see a series of pathways to systemic issues. This mix of urgency and radical critique is why we've chosen indebtedness: it's a very personal experience of struggling to pay your debts every month that can be reconceptualized as a deeper political problem. It's a way for people to viscerally understand financialization, neoliberalism, capitalism, however you want to frame it. You, as an American citizen, have medical bills because you don't have universal healthcare—individual struggles and challenges take people from the personal to the political, from the concrete to the universal, and from the particular to the systemic. We have to really look for those things, to articulate over and over the systemic aspect of real immediate problems people face, because what the media loves is to make it seem to be a random case of fraud or a few "bad apples." That's how they framed the financial crisis, for example. We need to correct that thinking, to make the systemic dimension palpable and relevant. I think political organizers and artists need to constantly remind people, over and over again, about the bigger picture.

TM: Do you think making art is an empowering way to engage in politics?

AT: Not always. A lot of artists I know aren't into politics. I think art can be empowering, but I don't think that empowerment is always politically useful in the way that I'm talking about political change or building political power. A lot of art is about personal expression: it's about the individual, their experience, their emotions, and what they have to say. Individualism is part of the

status quo that I'm challenging. I'm trying to get people to think in the collective mode as opposed to the individual mode. I'm far more interested in solidarity than self-expression. There's a way in which the arts and the figure of the artist reinforce the individualistic aspect of our culture. I'm trying to combat that and emphasize collectivity, collective power, and collective expression. I think that's a tension when people try to do creative activism. As I see it, protest is not personal expression. Your art is not political if it's just you in isolation, if you as an artist are being empowered but are not empowering the community around you or the collective. I challenge artists to be more political in their work and not assume that simply being creative (whatever that even means) is somehow a political act. Silicon Valley, venture capital, business and capitalism in general, all love creativity. What we need more than anything is collectivity and strategy.

TM: Why do you think some artists shy away from overt political expression or organizing?

AT: Because they are as marinated in our individualistic culture as everyone else, and they benefit from that mythology of the isolated genius. Look, it's really hard to be an organizer. As someone who's done both, I think it's harder to be an organizer than to be an artist. Because collective bodies don't let you sign your name next to them. If you're an artist, chances are you're also someone who likes to put your name on things or to be recognized for your personal expression, and protests just aren't authored in the same way. Organizers are often invisible—you're doing invisible labour for the collective. Having one's personal labour subsumed by a bigger cause is more like being in the audience or the crowd as opposed to being in the band on stage. I think there's a tension there. I think there's also a common idea that art shouldn't be political, it shouldn't be didactic—it should be more "open" and evocative as opposed to prescriptive. I push back against that. To me, art should be ethical, it should be outraged, it should challenge people, it should make people uncomfortable. Those are all feelings politics should evoke, too.

TM: What are your thoughts on the electoral process in general?

AT: Electoral politics hasn't been a big part of my life because I'm a Canadian living in the United States, so I can't vote. But I've always participated politically in civil society. That said, I'm totally happy that other people vote. A lot of radical people say, "It doesn't matter who you vote for, the parties are same." I don't think that's true, even in the United States. The party that is in power shapes the political horizon, whether we like it or not. When George W. Bush was in office, progressives and leftists spent so much time attacking him as a person, making fun of him. It was such a dead end. Whereas once Obama took the helm, people started going further and social movements flourished, at least compared to the Bush years; there was Occupy, there's been a big environmental justice movement, there is Black Lives Matter. (Notably and unfortunately, however, the anti-war movement has diminished under the Obama administration, though national security and specifically surveillance remain major issues and points of contestation.) If you look at the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, it happened in the context of a liberal administration. Or look at the 1990s and the global justice protests. There's a way in which having a Democrat in the highest office reveals that the social problems we face are structural.

Generally speaking, I think it's good for social movements to have a Democrat in office, which is an argument for voting. But, again, I've personally gone the more outsider, civil society route. Policymakers need to be pushed from the outside, so that's a mode of civic engagement where I've channelled all my energy. Any time we're mobilizing people to vote but we're not also trying to mobilize them to be a big pain in the ass after the elections, we're wasting an opportunity. What we really need are radical political organizations and associations that fill the space between electoral contests and street protests, which is why I am involved with trying to build the Debt Collective into a force to be reckoned with.

TM: Do you think there's opportunity for cultural producers to change the culture around voting?

AT: Voting needs to be more of a duty more than anything else. Are cultural people the people to convey that? I feel like it should be mandatory that we vote. Again, we need to make political engagement bigger, more sustained than just one election. The problem is that voting is taken as this isolated thing you just do on this one day, and often you don't win or you don't like who the candidates are. It's so severed from all other aspects of political engagement (the civil society political movements I'm talking about).

And so much organizing for voting, like 'rock the vote' or whatever it is, is kind of politically neutral. They're like, 'We don't care who you're voting for, just vote.' To me, as a leftist, I hate that. Vote because you believe in something and speak to that, and also mobilize people to be part of that bigger thing. That just seems more exciting. I'd rather focus on getting people I agree with to vote while also mobilizing them toward other forms of political engagement.

TM: How does the dynamic of refusal and creation factor into your work?

AT: The idea of refusal is something the Debt Collective team is really interested in. Over the last 40 years, wages have flatlined and social provisions have been gutted, and credit has been used to mask these problems. As a result, regular people have gone deeply into debt for basic necessities like health care and education, to put food on the table, or put a roof over their head. We're trying to say that any debt incurred just to secure the basic necessities of life is illegitimate, and that there are moral grounds to refuse them. Especially when you look at the broader economic landscape—when you look at the way debt leveraging and unearned income is a major part of what's driving the concentration of wealth worldwide. The 1% are using debt and financialization to increasingly extract resources from everyone else; meanwhile, the poor end up paying a lot more for credit. The poorer you are, the more expensive credit is, and the harder it is to get out of the hole.

We're trying to help people understand the broader economic conditions while also saying that they are actually entitled to education and health care, and that therefore the fact that they're in debt for these things is illegitimate. If you are in debt because you got cancer and can't pay your medical bills, that debt is not your fault, it's not something you should be ashamed of—it's illegitimate, it's immoral, and you shouldn't have to pay. 'I can't pay, I shouldn't have to pay, I won't pay' is a position to be embraced. Some things should be public goods; our economy should be structured in a different way. In our organizing, and in the student debt strike we organized last year

and which is ongoing, we are committed to making the act of refusal a moral act; a principled act.

The first step is to recognize something deeply unfair is going on. The next step is to figure out how we come together to recognize our collective power. The step beyond that is envisioning what a new system would look like. What would it look like if our economy was non-extractive? If, instead of the profits from this system going to the pockets of the sickeningly rich, the profits were invested in the community? What if credit was socially productive as opposed to predatory? What if there were public goods so people didn't have to be driven into debt? There has to be a creative, cooperative aspect on the other side of the critique. The debt organizing, then, is operating on two fronts: 1. the union, the immediate collectivity in the here and now; 2. a vision of a more cooperative, less extractive, less predatory economy, that we could make together. But refusal is the first step.

TM: What are you optimistic about?

AT: I'm optimistic about a lot of things: the divestment movement, and the fact that people are connecting climate change and capitalism in a way that seems so necessary and yet never really got traction before; with our debtor organizing, there's a very small number of us organizing it and we have gotten surprisingly far. There are now hundreds of people on strike; there are thousands of people that are part of our broader strategies; over 1300 people are threatening to strike in solidarity and they're from totally different walks of life. We forced the government to admit complicity and to provide unprecedented debt relief—well over one hundred million dollars worth and counting. That's not to say we're happy with what was offered, and it's not to say that we're satisfied, but it's proof that it doesn't take much to have an impact.

If you're someone prone to thinking abstractly, the problems we're facing seem so big. If you want to create systemic change, to challenge capitalism, it can be hard to know where to begin. I think that means we need to just start doing stuff and make the road as we go along. I think we'll find that there's a lot more potential to have an impact than we might have thought. I've been surprised throughout this whole process, how much traction we've gotten, and how it isn't necessarily as hard as I made it out to be in my head. The moral I'm taking away from the last few years since Occupy began is: find some friends and raise some hell, and you'll be really surprised how ready people are to join you and how easily people in power can be pressured. That makes me hopeful. It makes the current order seem less all-powerful. There are some really horrible things and some huge forces that we're up against, but it is made of people, and people can be pressured and people can be changed.

Movements of the past overcame much more incredible odds. I'm reading this amazing book called, *Bury the Chains*, about the abolitionists in the early days of the slave trade.<sup>1</sup> A small group of abolitionists in the UK basically forged all of the social justice techniques we use today—petitions, letters to the editor, stickers supporting a cause, you name it—and they won in a remarkably short period of time. The fight they were up against seems bigger than anything we could imagine. Basically, things have changed in the past, and that gives me hope. Studying history, that gives me hope.

TM: Why do you do what you do?

AT: I need to mix intellectual inquiry with pragmatic experimentation, and if there's just one or the other I feel very dissatisfied. If it's all just a theoretical intellectual enterprise, it doesn't feel full, it doesn't feel fleshed out, it doesn't feel like I'm testing any of my hypotheses. It's just air, and it can become bullshit. And then if you're just slogging it out on the ground as an organizer, it's so reactive, you're reacting to whatever the latest bad news is or whatever move your enemy has made on the political chess board, and that's really exhausting. I can't be in that mode all the time or else I get really zapped. I want to combine those two modes of being and that's where I'm happiest, where I'm testing my ideas in the real world and they're evolving and I'm learning things. If I'm interested in politics and I want to test my political ideas, then I have to go out into the world and somehow enact them, however imperfectly.

There are other motivations, which are that our world is deeply unfair and I can't bear to just simply complain about it. I have to try to do something at the same time. And it's kind of fun. That sense of experimenting, challenging power, there's also something gratifying about that work. I meet other people I wouldn't normally meet in my normal professional life. I also don't know where it's going to go next. I had no idea when I showed up at Occupy that four years later I would be part of the group that was causing the Department of Education to admit that it was propping up huge corporations that were, as they eventually admitted, "bringing the ethics of payday lending into education." The fact that I don't know where the story is going is a motivation to me.

#### NOTES

1 Adam Hochschild, *Bury the Chains* (London: Macmillan, 2005).