Episode 3 - Activism

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SPEAKERS

Philip Loring, Ricardo Levins Morales



Ricardo Levins Morales 00:09

Activism is about taking what isn't right or doesn't feel right, and making some change so that it does. The problem is that people are doing activism, which is changing the world in whatever scope they can, but only in the limits of where they feel powerful. And we're taught to feel that power is only within our reach on a very small scale. And that power to change the world in larger ways is just, you know, that's just somewhere out there. Leave it to the experts, because little all of us can't do anything like that. Right? And that's one of the narratives that we need to shift.



Philip Loring 00:51

How can we make sense of protest and activism in a time that seems so polarised that feels like a haystack waiting to be lit on fire? Does direct action work? Is it working? Welcome to the Second Transition Podcast. I'm Phil Loring. This podcast is about radical change. It is based on a simple premise: that a radically changed future may be closer than we think. Today we get to dig into the promise of activism and the role it plays in social change with trixter artist and activist, Ricardo Levins Morales. Ricardo, who is based in Minneapolis, Minnesota, uses his art as a form of political medicine to support individuals and collectives facing and fighting oppression. I first encountered Ricardos work in the form of an illustrated pamphlet that he produced on social action, titled, Tending the Soil. It exhibits such a consilience among its textual content, which includes lessons on power and tactics and organising with its beautiful design and illustration. It also insinuates deep parallels between ecological health and regeneration with social action, organisation and liberation. I spoke with Ricardo about radical change about hope, tricksters, and the problem with building bridges. This conversation changed how I think about my own activism. So let's dig in. Today on the Second Transition, I am really excited to speak with trickster artist and activist Ricardo Levins Morales, Ricardo was born into the anti colonial movement in his native Puerto Rico, and was drawn into activism in Chicago when his family moved there in 1967. In addition to his amazing art, Ricardo also leads workshops on creative organising social justice strategy and sustainable activism. And he mentors organisations working to advance radical change. Ricardo, thank you so much for joining me.

- Ricardo Levins Morales 02:50
 My pleasure.
- Philip Loring 02:51

Thank you, Ricardo, as you know, this show is about envisioning radical change, about drying up the very real possibilities in the bold ideas that many people think are too radical or too naive. I've always felt like change starts with having a sense of vision, about being able to really see what one is fighting for, and that it matters. Can you talk a bit about how you came to your unique niche of blending art and activism? What have you learned about vision and social change? Well,

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I'm kind of stuck on that idea of naive. Right. And I think a lot of my work is flipping the script on that. That, in fact, naive is believing that if you organise society around greed, and separation, fragmentation of the person, separation from nature, and so forth, that somehow there'll be good outcomes. Right. So a lot of even a specific organising that I get involved in really is about reframing those narratives. Right. And I think I mean, for me, I think the real basis for how I think about organising and change, and this has also filled itself out in the way I do art is, you know, the fact that I grew up playing in the forest. Right, and um, a subtropical forest, and I'm Puerto Rican mountainside. Were, the stories that I was picking up from my environment are all about cycles and lag times and tipping points, depletion and replenishment. And although I had no way of knowing that at the time, that's what I was able to later realise it's the basis for how I think about making change.

Philip Loring 04:35

So you saw lessons in the world around you for how we can better make change or how we can better live or maybe a little of both.

Ricardo Levins Morales 04:43

If you watch a scorpion and a lizard in combat, or if you watch of hawks diving after songbirds, or monkeys going after lizards, there's a lot of conflict in nature. There's a lot of competition, but it there's no narrative Have good guys and bad guys you can fit that into. So that really prepared me for when I landed in Chicago in the late 60s, to be able to look at conflict in a different way. In conflict that's not in that sort of good guy, bad guy. Binary, right. So even now in my art, even when dealing with sharp issues of conflict and making clear distinctions in analysis on colonialism or whatever, it's not about demonising anyone. It's not about that simplistic narrative that there are, there are evil people in there good people, because that

doesn't serve us well. And any organism, you know, in the forest, or anywhere else needs to have an accurate and nuanced information about what's going on around us around in our environment. And false narratives just don't make us safe. So,

Philip Loring 05:51

You know, you're making me think of my own research on conflict over natural resources, were one of the biggest problems that really gets in the way of people's ability to work collectively towards a common goal relates to the false narratives that people have constructed, or that or buy into about heroes, victims and villains.

R Ricardo Levins Morales 06:12

And there are differences to in the way conflict plays out in different situations, and competition so that under capitalism, the purpose of competition is to destroy your competitors, and corner a market. Where as in an ecosystem, very often, the other plants or animals you're in competition with, you also absolutely depend upon for your survival. So again, it is that kind of choreography, of, you know, protecting your own ability to thrive. But you don't actually want to destroy all the other creatures that are occupying the same space and looking for nutrients. Because that just doesn't work that way, in nature.

Philip Loring 06:53

What you just said, reminds me of something written by author Daniel Quinn, who often said, compete to the best of your abilities, but don't wage war.

R Ricardo Levins Morales 07:02 There you go.

Philip Loring 07:03

You know, a premise that I'm exploring with this show is that radical change is closer than we think, which can seem really hard to believe, because it seems like people are waging war on one another. There's so much factionalism in the world. And in many ways, it seems as though all of the evidence is pointing towards a backslide in major social change around women's rights, racial issues, and so forth. But the notion that I want to explore is that change may just be under the surface. And I think it would be interesting to hear you talk about this with respect to one of your pieces of art, it's on the back cover of tending the soil, and it's entitled volcano, it reads, power comes from below, from the hidden places where it gathers until discovering itself, it blazes into view, lighting the sky and reshaping the landscape, sweeping away barriers, it seemed, would stand forever. That is so beautifully worded. And so I wonder, can you tell me about the inspiration behind these words? There's a lot of optimism in them. And I feel like at least some of it must come from hands on experience.

R Ricardo Levins Morales 08:04

Yeah, well, it really, I think comes from taking the long view. Right. So I became an activist when I was in my early teens, you know, which is a good entry goal, right? And I've been I've been around for this, but that means I've experienced periods of mass movements, and insurgency and periods of, kind of, you could call political dormancy, right. And there's still things going on during those periods, but they're not as visible. And, you know, the space is dominated by enemies of justice, right? So it's like a seasonal thing. You know, sometimes it's warm, and sometimes it's just cold and frozen, and nothing's moving. And so it's actually during one of those periods that I was thinking about this, that for me, when in a time when it seemed like competition had one out greed had one out short term thinking that people wanted to go to the mall and just buy crap that they could then throw away a week later, rather than thinking deeply about change. Rather than thinking as some of the sort of more liberal activists are inclined to think, Oh, well, we kind of lost how do we adapt to where people are at? To me the question was, where has the hunger for authentic relationship, real sustainability and satisfying relationships gone? Where are the deep aquifers where that has gone into hiding, so that we can create the narratives that containers, the Organising forms, so that when it bursts out again, we'll be able to make the best use of it and make the most progress with that energy and that power? So that poster really is kind of an expression of what's happening, the invisible is often a more important place to pay attention to them the visible, right, there's so much going on under the surface. So So many, the tectonic shifts that are happening in a culture, for example, and they don't happen in, you know, just sort of, at an even pace. They can accumulate, accumulate just like a volcano or an earthquake fault. And then when it first First you say, oh, that's been accumulating all along, I thought nothing was happening.

Philip Loring 10:25

So what is the scaffolding look like that you have to build up to be ready for that when it does emerge?

Ricardo Levins Morales 10:31

Well, a number of things. I mean, I'll speak as a cultural worker as an artist, right? You from the perspective of the work that I do. And there it's really a question of the tidal pools, I'm switching metaphors here. Suppose, when the tide goes out, you know, if you live near a sea coast, what remains are these little tidal pools among the coral reefs and the rocks that are on shore, where a lot of the creatures sort of survive and maintain and, you know, tell each other stories until the tide comes back in again. So the the organisation that I helped to found the Northland poster collector, we started in 1979. Some guy named Jimmy Carter was president, if anyone can remember that. So we've been able to survive during these different periods, these different waves of history, and maintained basically our basic rhythm of truth telling that partly because we made the decision not to get grants not to go the nonprofit funder route, we never had to make work that pleased funders. So we could be a place where the historical narratives were, were retained and maintained. And, and what I found is when periods of movement emerge again, people are very hungry for that kind of story, and turn to the people who have kept the flame going during those dark cold years.

P Philip Loring 12:06

So Ricardo, I wonder if you can talk a bit about why so many people don't seem to connect with activism, you know, activism and direct action really work. And I think, for example, right now have a recent report that showed that indigenous activists through direct action are having tremendous success at stopping or slowing fossil fuel proliferation. But people still seem to act like activism is on the fringe, you don't solve real problems or big problems by direct action through strikes through walkouts by creating blockades. And, and, you know, we see a lot of criticism in the media about activism, activists and protests. And so what what do you think, why do you think people don't connect with something that is so powerful?

Ricardo Levins Morales 12:53

Well, I think the first thing they misunderstand, is not realising that they're doing it all the time. Right activism is about taking what isn't right or doesn't feel right, and making some change so that it does. I want to read you a beautiful little quote from a neuroscientist, right, that speaks to this, please. Stanley Hines is a neuroscientist who studies the migration and the navigation really, capacities of insects. And he says, one of the main functions of all brains is to take sensory information, use it to generate an estimate of the current state of the world, and then compare it to the desired state of the world. If the two do not match, compensatory action is initiated, which is what we call behaviour. Now, where does that come from? How is it that a dung beetle and a deer and a human all have some kind of internal map and it starts with basic needs, we want to be safe, we want to be fed, we want a temperature around us that's comfortable, we want to rest when we need to rest, right? All of these basic animal organic needs. And when those aren't being met, we move toward a place where they will be met, or we make some kind of change so they will be met. That's called activism. So it's the same instinct that causes me to stretch my leg or scratch my arm, if I feel cramped or have an itch, or to call a meeting, if you know patriarchy is messing with my head, or to call a strike, you know, when we're not being given sufficient safety equipment to deal with a pandemic. Problem is that people are doing activism which is changing the world in whatever scope they can, but only in within the limits of where they feel powerful. And we're taught to feel that power is only within our reach in a very on a very small scale and the power to change the world in a larger way. It's just, you know, that's just somewhere out there, leave it to the experts, because little old us can't do anything like that, right. And that's one of the narratives that we need to shift.

Philip Loring 15:09

You know, I spoke on the first episode of this podcast with Elin Kelsey, who wrote a book titled "Hope Matters", and I wonder hope has to come in here too, right?

Ricardo Levins Morales 15:19

People used to ask me or sometimes ask what keeps you hopeful? Or what makes you hopeful? And for a long time, I found the question confusing. And finally, I realised that, to me, hope is sort of the organic heritage of all living things, that when a chipmunk sits out in the forest, or lizard or whoever, depending on your forest, in search of bugs to eat, or seeds, or whatever,

that hope, right, they're moving towards something that they want to correct a condition that they don't like, which is hunger, right, or whatever it is that they're looking for. So hope is, in fact, what keeps us moving forward and breathing from moment to moment. The real question is not what makes some people hopeful. But what it has, what blow has been so devastating, or what oppression so heavy and chronic, that is it is suppressing this natural inherent instinct of all living things. Right. And that shifts the attention to environmental conditions and the injuries that they have caused, because lack of hoping for problem, it's the obstacles that are put in its way.

Philip Loring 16:36

So you describe your art as political medicine, what is the medicine for hopelessness?

Ricardo Levins Morales 16:43

Well, it's, I think, the process of overcoming paralysis. I mean, my organising mantra is that the soil knows how to heal itself. The body knows how to heal itself. The community knows how to heal itself, that there are inherent processes in living systems, to restore themselves to a condition of viability, right, if we've been injured, and that's basically what resilience is. And I think that it's really a question of contracting the toxins that keep each of these systems paralysed and supporting the inherent resilience, it's there. So one of the ways in which that becomes somewhat more practical is the idea of how do you communicate with people? Right? This somewhere around 20 years ago, unions and prophets and community organising groups discovered something called messaging, right? It's like how do you you got to pay attention to people if you want to communicate with but the way that's practised have come to make a distinction between messaging and truth telling. Messaging is how you figure out where people are at so you can get them to do something. truth telling is, how do you figure out what they hunger for, so you can light them on fire? Right, if those deep cravings, you know, that, that are unmet, that people don't believe are possible, that people suppress because it's just sort of pie in the sky. You know, crazy shit, right? It's, it's not what responsible adults indulge themselves with, right. Now, once you have identified what are the hungers in play, then you have to figure out the message. You have to figure out the container to deliver it. But messaging without that truth telling, inevitably, inevitably becomes toxic, because then you're just pandering to whatever coping mechanisms people have figured out to survive. And those tend to be fairly individualistic, self indulgent, wasteful, and so forth. Another way to look at that is the connection between wisdom and cleverness. The the sound of the brilliant innovation of capitalism is to separate to break apart cleverness from wisdom. cleverness is the ability to examine things closely, make things happen, put them together, so that you can get something to happen. Wisdom is the understanding that everything is connected and interdependent, by breaking those off from each other. Capitalism is extraordinary in extraordinarily innovative, but only in a very narrow way. And in a way that also happens to destroy the world as a side effect. Part of our work is a core part of our work is actually reconnecting cleverness with wisdom. So that wisdom tells us that the power of the sun can mean To all of our needs, but you still need cleverness to design a solar power.

Philip Loring 20:05

Bringing up cleverness makes me think of your biography and you identify as a trickster artist,

as an anthropologist, the Trickster is a very complicated character. And I'm really curious what the Trickster means for you.

Ricardo Levins Morales 20:22

Well, trickster stories are generally about your trickster character, outwitting, defeating getting the best of some figure who's much more powerful. You can't arm wrestle them, right? If they're a lot stronger than you are, you need to understand them. So you need to be able to do your homework and have knowledge and notice where their vulnerable points are, where your strengths are, and use those to your advantage. So you end up victorious. And we even when we study our own histories, right, when we look at successful struggles, what was it that allowed people who are in a disadvantaged position to emerge victorious in strong position, and it's generally the trickster. It's using what we have the strengths that we have to understand and act on that understanding.

P Philip Loring 21:21
Do you have an example?

Ricardo Levins Morales 21:24

So when I arrived in Chicago, it was in 1967, okay, during the period of the emergence of organisations like the Black Panther Party, and the Young Lords, and, and so forth, the Organising being done by Fred Hampton, and Bobby Lee and other leaders of the Black Panther Party really, has been imprinted in my organiser DNA. But the the Trickster part of that is the Organising they did in what they called the Rainbow Coalition, right? A story that's starting to become better known now. And I'm very glad of that. But they organised with the lords who were Puerto Rican St. King had become radicalised in the struggle against gentrification. And the young patriots, a white working class gang made up of kids out of a migrant stream from Appalachia, who were Confederate flags on their jackets and, you know, had relatives in the Klan and use white supremacist lingo, right. And we're also treated very badly, who lived in rat infested homes had few job prospects, and were mistreated by the police, right? And encountering these folks that the Panthers organising question was, hey, how do we isolate these, you know, FOB, right, and keep them from spreading their poison. It's why these people are hurting. Why in a system set up to privilege white people, are these white kids lashing out the way they are right? And they build relationships with them. Right. But as the coalition developed, they shed the racist language and framework and and Confederate flags, and set up breakfast programmes on the Panther model, organise joint forums on police brutality, and marches with the elders of all three communities against City Hall to demand safe housing. So there's that trickster element. And it also leads me to a dilemma that people are facing a lot today is how do you reach people who conceive of themselves as our enemies? Right? How do you build bridges? I'm not a fan of building bridges. You know, building bridges means you take the young patriots with a racist narrative, the Black Panthers with their black power narrative, and you compromise you find a halfway point. That's part racist and part liberatory. And then everyone's supposedly happy. That's kind of the sort of the Democratic Party model. Where I'm interested is where where do we go down below the level of the chasm, that the bridge is built over? What is the bedrock that we have in common, and in the case of the Panthers and the

Lords and the young patriots, it was class. Related to that my own personal understandings of that was my life as a hitchhiker. In my teenage years, mostly where I travelled when I travelled anywhere it was by hitchhiking like the poor people's railroad system. This army colonel who picked me up who had a anti immigrant, homophobic, super patriotic, and racist worldview. It took some probing to figure out that what's going on is that he wanted his kids to grow up in a better world than he grew up in and he wasn't seeing and that the things that he grew up to believe are sacred, were being discarded, as though they didn't matter than the narratives that he understood about the greatness of his country, right. And his children are struggling to meet their mortgages. And that's got to be the fault of these brown people flooding over the border so that the conflict wasn't on the level of values. It was on the level of narratives.

Philip Loring 25:26

That is a really interesting example, Ricardo, thank you for that. As we wrap up, I want to ask you one additional question. And it's a question that my listeners know I ask everyone, what is the most radical change that you would like to see in your lifetime? And how close are we

Ricardo Levins Morales 25:45

I don't know that there's really an endpoint. I think what I most want to see is the integration, of grounding and knowledge, in historical perspective, among the movements for change. That's what would give me the most confidence. It's not any one particular reform. But it's knowing who we are, right? There's no formula for how you make change in the world. But we do know a fair amount of women need to become in order to make change in order to be able to see those opportunities. Right. And that is grounded in ourselves and each other understanding the interrelationships of things becoming wise essentially, and then the rest can unfold from there.

Philip Loring 26:31

This episode of the second transition podcast was produced on the traditional lands and territories of the Washoe people in what is now known as Northeastern California. Funding for this podcast comes in part from the Arrell Food Institute, from the University of Guelph and from VoicED radio. My guest today was Ricardo Levins Morales. His new 2022 calendar is out and it is beautiful. You can find information about his work in the Episode Notes. Thanks for joining us.