Conversation with Jack Henderson
Ashley Hopkinson
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Ashley Hopkinson: Can you introduce yourself? Tell me a little bit about yourself.

Jack Henderson: I am director of research and development at RadicalxChange Foundation, which is a nonprofit dedicated to improving the basic institutions of democracy and markets and in general, working to accelerate innovation in our institutions, especially to keep pace with all of the innovations in technology and thinking about how those will affect one another moving forward.

Ashley Hopkinson: Can you tell me a little bit about the RadicalxChange origin story? How did you get involved?

Jack Henderson: My background's in economics. I was a senior at Princeton in the fall of 2018 when I took a class from a visiting lecturer who just came out with a new book called Radical Markets. The author was Glen Weyl, who is an economist by background, but no longer identifies as such. He works at Microsoft under their special projects division, and I took his class because he was collaborating with someone I admired, Vitalik Buterin, Creative Ethereum, and together they were writing interesting things about quadratic voting, which was Glen's initial idea, which was kind of an improvement on a basic institution in any democracy, which is the idea that a citizenry should all have the right to vote and that each person should have one vote and that sort of majority rules.

Glen came up with an improvement on that called quadratic voting, which is exciting and has kind of taken on a life of its own. And that was just one chapter in his book, Radical Markets. He had other chapters on thinking about data as labor. He was very early to suggest that, and that's also taken on a life of its own. And there were other chapters as well. The first chapter was on property, which is sort of the foundation upon which our work and RadicalxChange (operates) today. It's all around that idea

that is proposed in that chapter in the book. That book came out in 2018 and there was a real emergent community around it that was excited about the ideas and looking for kind of a compelling vision for the next generation of political economies that didn't just take our institutions like how we vote and how we own things and the value of our data in our increasingly digital lives. Not just taking those things for granted, but seeing them as things that we can improve on and examine and upgrade and renovate.

RadicalxChange Foundation was formed to create a container for that movement and that work. And today we're a small staff of five people, but we have a network of community chapters around the world, and we have monthly community calls and put out research with community members and try to create a network of researchers and practitioners and artists and policymakers who can all kind of take on different elements of the work. That's going to be necessary to take on this ambitious project of improving our social institutions in the same way we think about improving our technologies.

Ashley Hopkinson: Can you tell me a little bit more about the property work? What is the goal with the work and how are you seeing some of the things realized right now with the vision for that work?

Jack Henderson: Right now we've been working for a little over a year with a couple other organizations, Dark Matter Labs and a small research team at Stanford led by a political philosopher Professor Margaret Levy. And with them, we've been undertaking a project to create a container for a network of organizations and individuals who are looking to reimagine and reconfigure institutions of ownership in different domains. So to give examples of domains where ownership is relevant in the modern world […] we think of land and housing, but ownership transcends that. It covers ideas. If you think about intellectual property, the value of a patent or a trademark or copyright. Our institutions of intellectual property are now getting challenged by technology with generative foundation models, training on copyrighted material and thinking about who owns artificial intelligence and things like that.

So that's increasingly relevant. If you think about the power of corporations today, ownership affects the way that we work together economically. We own corporations in the form of corporate shareholding, and some people may own it while others are merely a stakeholder with no ownership rights. We can also think about labor as a place where ownership affects the way that we work.

Historically, not everyone has had ownership over their own labor dating back to all of the problems with slavery. It's not simply a binary into free empowered labor. There are all kinds of problems with just the modern state of labor rights around the world, everything from fishermen in Southeast Asia to industrial workers in the West, and if anything, giving them stronger ownership rights over their own labor as well as empowering organizations to collectively bargain for their labor rights.

Across all of those four domains and others, ownership is both creating problems, but also if we see those problems and those crises as actually opportunities to shift institutions of ownership, then we think that's an interesting way to go about solving some of those challenges. So part of the work of this project is getting people to see how ownership does cut across all of those different contexts that we don't always think of as related as a way to kind of chart a path forward.

Ashley Hopkinson: So the idea is really to broaden how we think about property. So not just land, which is the first thing that comes to mind for me when I think about the word property, but intellectual property, what it means when it comes to labor and our workforce, what it means to sort of corporate ownership and shareholders. But then also broadening that umbrella, inviting other groups in so that you can continue to iterate and have these conversations that are a little bit more dynamic, right?

Jack Henderson: Yes, exactly. For instance, one really complementary perspective that our partners at Dark Matter Labs have been bringing is a lot of environmental work and thinking around rights of nature and indigenous thinking. Our radical xchange comes from a perspective of improving our institutions of ownership, where they may make sense through systems like what we've been working on called partial common ownership. But for Dark Matter Labs and their work around different natural resources they actually would argue that institutions of ownership no longer make sense and we should move beyond institutions of property and ownership so that a forest can own itself, and that there can actually be rights of nature that are not owned by humans, but are simply stewarded by humans or really just left alone. And so that's just one example of how there are really complimentary viewpoints about what to do moving forward around ownership.

Ashley Hopkinson: That's great. It's sort of having these systems of ownership pillars as a foundation to work from. What would you say has worked out best so far from this kind of collaboration with Dark Matters Lab, Stanford and Radical Xchange? Is it the ideas coming together that are really innovative or would you frame it another way?

Jack Henderson: I don't want to say it's too early to tell. I would just acknowledge that a lot of things are emerging since we're just putting this community together, but some exciting sort of seeds that maybe have been planted already. One thing that RadicalxChange worked on last November was a conference in London with an arts gallery and art organization called The Serpentine, which is a prestigious gallery that has a team called the Serpentine Arts Technologies team. We put on a conference with them on Beyond Cultures of Ownership, which has really taken on a life of its own and is kind of a subnetwork of this larger project. The container for that is the idea that the arts and cultural space, the cultural spaces that are engaging with technology and experimenting with its affordances, offers a compelling arena for experimenting with new ways of sharing assets and thinking about reconfiguring ownership.

We've really worked with the Serpentine team on engaging with cultural and artists leaders on trying out our system of partial common ownership. So we've been developing infrastructure in the art market for new artworks that are put out by individual artists or even artist collectives to be kind of shared and stewarded in a more attractive way. It's an interesting strategy. It's a different [and] complimentary theory of change. I mentioned the idea of crises and how they open up windows of opportunity. This is kind of another one, which is working through the cultural sphere as a way to build legitimacy around these things. If a new system of ownership can develop a kind of cultural legitimacy and be experimented with in a cultural space, then it can kind of prove to be a testing ground for that system to be redeployed in other contexts.

So we've been developing digital infrastructure, technical infrastructure for this in the art market. The first collaboration is going to be with Tomas Saraceno, who's an Argentinian artist, and that's going to be published and announced in July. Beyond that, we have big plans to redeploy the infrastructure and start experimenting with it in other domains such as in the context of land. You could think about community land trusts, start to use this infrastructure to share plots, parcels of land and share the profits that may come from that. We can think about collective organizations that are holding data and intellectual property, sort of sharing their data sets and pooled data in responsible ways with trusted third parties.

Ashley Hopkinson: I think it's important to have that cultural component. I love what you were talking about in terms of the Stanford research and that work that is going to be something that appeals to a very particular segment of the population, and you have a group of people that are going to get a lot of what they get through cultural lens, whether that's a film they watch or a gallery opening they go to. Any other initiatives you can share?

Jack Henderson: Yes, totally. We are learning how valuable it is to do these cultural explorations and we just want to keep doubling down on it. A couple other examples of cultural work that we're doing is there's a documentary and possibly a biopic being made about one of our board members, the Digital Minister of Taiwan, Audrey Tang. And there's also a book that's being written in a very interesting and relevant way by Audrey and Glen Weyl, who's the founder of RadicalxChange called Plurality, which is kind of articulating the latest vision around these ideas and connecting all of these technological affordances of AI and Web3 and so forth around a attractive, compelling social philosophy of plurality, which is this idea of a diverse array of social groups being able to live in the ways that they want, but also cooperating across those differences. They are sort of arguing that that's a compelling social philosophy and that technology can be designed with that in mind.

Ashley Hopkinson: That's great about the book. Can we revisit the partial common ownership conversation. Can you share more?

Jack Henderson: So basically to say a bit more about partial common ownership and where it comes from. It has some influence from this old political economist from the late 1800s, Henry George, who was writing about land and the way in which it gets value. If we think about the conventional ownership of land, if you own a plot of land, then you can exclude everyone else from using it indefinitely. And then even if you don't use the land in any way, you can still sell it at a profit. And if you think about it, Henry George was one of the first to think about it, and there are many people who identify as sort of Georges today with the same vision. That profit isn't really fair or sensible reward because much of the increase in value of that land had nothing to do with you owning it. It was the result of a lot of networked complex things happening around the piece of land, others developing physical infrastructure, cultural infrastructure, engaging in commerce, making it an interesting place to live or work that gave it value.

And if we just use conventional private ownership, none of that gets recognized. In fact, that gets excluded and it just kind of messes with the dynamism that's natural when people come together, for example, in cities. And so that's sort of the basis of partial common ownership, is this idea that we should split apart conventional ownership into two different assets. One is a sort of temporary use license, which we call a PCO, partial common ownership license, which entitles its holder to act as a kind of steward or a sort of owner for a period of time of that asset. And that temporary use license is subject to community governance as well as sort of self-assessed fees for every period of time of the license.

And then the second asset where most of the value would be held is in a sort of partial common ownership residual as we're calling it at the moment, which would be held by all of the assets

stakeholders. So for a parcel of land, it would be the people who work and live around that piece of land who have an interest in how it's used and help give it value. So those people who hold that residual would be entitled to certain governance powers over the asset. They'd also be entitled to receive some of the fees that come from that temporary use license. So for a community land trust, they already sort of have that residual element in mind, that idea that communities of people, networks are what give assets value such as land. So they are already an aligned organization, well suited for this, and we're hoping to engage with them. We're inviting a lot to Oakland to think about basically how to empower organizations like those. From RadicalxChange's perspective, we have this one idea around the use of temporary-use licenses to allow community land trusts to determine how their resources should be used at any point in time, but in general, they're just a really compelling kind of organization to do the work.

I could say a bit more on patents and intellectual property. There's an interesting sort of false divide that we recognize when it comes to thinking about what to do around patents and ideas and who owns ideas.

Ashley Hopkinson: Yes, can you elaborate on patents and intellectual property?

Jack Henderson: On the one hand, patents are important for the same investment efficiency thing I was talking about a minute ago where if you don't allow someone to exploit a new idea by giving them a patent around it, a monopoly on that idea, then no one has incentive to develop new ideas and invest in R&D. So you have to reward them with a patent, which gives them the exclusive right to exploit that idea for maybe up to 20 years, and then maybe they could get it extended and so forth. It does come from a good place, which is that you have to reward innovation and so forth and creativity, and I get that, but it has all these problems.

And on the other side, you could try to address those problems by making everything open source. There are huge benefits to open science and to sharing things publicly in the public domain and allowing people from all over the world to collaborate. The issue with that is that usually if you just share things out into the open, the most well-resourced, the most well-capitalized firms are in the best position to hoover up all of that open data and exploit it for their own interests. So you actually need ways to create boundaries around ideas so that the communities from which those ideas come are able to steward them and not let them kind of get appropriated by others and so forth.

Partial common ownership tries to articulate a way to transcend that false binary where the residual is the community from which an idea may come, and they are empowered to steward that idea and determine how it can be used and who can use it. And then these temporary-use licenses are a way for

that community to share the idea with someone who is well positioned to use it, but with certain guardrails around it, such as what it can be used for and so forth. And for that license to reward that community, to pay a small fee that gets recycled back to that community to continue rewarding or encouraging new ideas.

Ashley Hopkinson: Economics is this really in-depth topic, and because of that, it can feel far removed from the day to day when really it's connected to everything. So as a researcher, how do you feel like your work is contributing to more conversations that relate to the tangible aspects of economics, the things that people feel like, okay, I can touch this. I understand land and housing because I understand gentrification, but I don't understand all these other theories. So how as a researcher, do you see your work moving to bring these conversations more to the surface in an everyday way?

Jack Henderson: It's a constant challenge, because usually people just go about their lives not thinking about why the world is the way it is, and they shouldn't have to. They should just get to enjoy the life that they want to live, but these things do affect society and communities, and they affect the way we can live, and there are lots of people interested in them, and this is one way to be politically engaged in a radical sense. It's not just getting people out to vote or something like that. It is doing something a lot harder that is a lot less legible to see the benefits of, but hopefully some of these outputs in the cultural space and maybe in some of these work that we may do with community land trusts, for example, can help , we can put a flag in the ground as there's interesting work being done here because they do affect us every day.

If we think about what buildings we can't use or walk into, if we think about the way that we use money to buy things, and we have interesting thoughts about the problems with money from everything from the US dollar to some of these cryptocurrencies, they're all universal. Their attempts at a universal currency, which we actually think is the wrong way to go. We think there should be more community currencies to protect the value that gets created in these networks that I was describing, and that when you have a universal currency, it allows the value to be extracted from that community and moved elsewhere. There should be more boundaries put around those communities, so the value stays in them.

So we think about money, we think about the use of resources and what you can't use. All of the ride-sharing platforms and Airbnb and all of these things began to open up the use of space that would otherwise just be held exclusively and privately. But we think we could go much more radical than that, much less capitalist, and not just for land, but for ideas for companies. Not all of it will make

sense to most people, but some of it we hope will make sense to everyone and we want to have many different entry points.

Ashley Hopkinson: So RadicalxChange is kind of like this incubator. Here you guys are having all these radical conversations, and then one output comes in academia, the other output comes in culture. The other output comes through community land trusts, and before you know it's in the conversation, it's in the zeitgeist. But it takes time because it has to move through that channel of first having these kinds of convenings, these conversations, bringing different people together before a lot of this stuff can really come out in a way that I guess the everyday person is like, yeah, that is kind of connected to my money.

Jack Henderson: 100%. That's exactly right. We don't have all of the answers. We have ideas about compelling positive directions to move into, but we don't want to be this technocratic thing where we have the right system and we're going to implement it through policy from the top-down. We really want to encourage and take this from a bottom-up experimental cultural approach that makes sense in different contexts and can be reconfigured to make sense for different communities, and that can bubble up into something that makes sense more broadly through storytelling.

Ashley Hopkinson: What would you say has been one of your greatest insights, takeaways or teachable lessons from doing this work with RadicalxChange?

Jack Henderson: I guess a teachable lesson is that I'm extremely grateful to be in a position to do this work. I don't necessarily feel like I'm the only one who can do this work. I kind of stumbled my way into it, and I would just encourage people that it's very easy to get to the frontier of knowledge and where there aren't that many people at the frontier, you can get there pretty quickly. It's just about finding who else is at that frontier with you and thinking about the same thing and connecting with them to work on things together. And you're not that far away from the change that you want to see. It just takes being a bit bold, doing something unconventional, and finding others who are on a similar path and finding fellow travelers. I know that's vague, but I have been surprised by how quickly you get to the place where you don't actually know what the next step should be, but you are holding hands with others who are looking at the same horizon and thinking about how to get there together. It's the only way to do it.

Ashley Hopkinson: I love that RadicalxChange works in partnerships and collaborations. Is there anything specific that you're implementing that makes this work? What do you think is happening that Dark Matter Labs is coming along, Stanford is coming along, the Serpentine work

is coming along? What do you think it is that is making those collaborations move forward? Because you guys are from very different worlds.

Jack Henderson: It's a great question. We're all complimentary in different ways. We come from this mechanism design background, which is really useful because mechanisms are imperfect. They're a formalization of something else, but they're really powerful and they matter. And if you can make an improvement upon them, like a different way to vote or a different way to own things, that's really useful. But that Radical Markets book could have been written and then handed to policymakers, and they could have tried to implement it, but that's not how we went about it. We connected with artists, we connected with community leaders and activists, and very slowly we found our ways to partners like Serpentine and Dark Matter Labs, and they bring similar things or complimentary things. Serpentine is a place ripe for cultural experimentation with these mechanisms. Dark Matter Labs is this sort of design architecture and thinking studio, thinking in very parallel ways about these questions and putting out their own compelling experiments that all of these can learn from each other.

Ashley Hopkinson: That sounds good, thank you.

Ashley Hopkinson is an award-winning journalist, newsroom entrepreneur and leader dedicated to excellent storytelling and mission-driven media. She currently manages the Solutions Insights Lab, an initiative of the Solutions Journalism Network. She is based in New Orleans, Louisiana.

* This conversation has been edited and condensed.