



Conversation with Matt Prewitt

Ashley Hopkinson

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Ashley Hopkinson: Can you introduce yourself, share a little bit about your background and tell me a little bit about RadicalxChange?

Matt Prewitt: My name is Matt Prewitt. My background is in law, specifically antitrust law. I was a plaintiff's side antitrust litigator. And through that work and other things, I became interested in power and the concentration of power in society and the way that systems like technology and economic structures facilitate it. Over the course of my litigation career, I became interested in thinking about other ways of dealing with power concentration. You can sort of think of antitrust law as one of the more interesting mechanisms in society for undoing power, concentrations of power, but it doesn't always work that well, and there are many problems it doesn't specifically address.

[This] led me down an intellectual journey where I got interested in these problems of institutional design that led me to RadicalxChange. We're a nonprofit and what we do is think about really, really deep questions about the structure of institutions, about how economic systems work, how really basic institutions such as a property and ownership work, how systems like voting work and how the structure of these kinds of institutions can tend to automatically tilt things towards really extreme concentrations of power.

So if you observe that, then it's like, "Well, what can we do at the level of the really basic institutional design to create economic systems and democracies that don't do this?" So we ask questions like that. We ask these pretty big questions, and we sometimes think about abstract problems relating to institutions, but we try to take some of these insights that we arrive at or some of these hypotheses that we form and take them out of that abstract realm and bring them into the space of experiments. We look for these little hooks, the beginnings of traction that you can find in terms of taking big ideas

about how to restructure very basic things and seeing how they work, thinking about how they could actually be integrated into the institutions that matter in society. That's the crux of it.

Ashley Hopkinson: Most organizations start to solve a problem. Coming from a litigation background, would you say the problem you're working to solve through the organization is about concentration of power and ways to shift that? Taking things from ideation into things that can be implemented?

Matt Prewitt: Yeah, absolutely. The way I would put it precisely is that the problem is that power begets power. The problem is that it takes money to make money, and that if you have more power at time one, then you can have more power at time two, and you can have more power at time three. And it exponentially compounds. This problem of compounding power, to me, is the problem of problems. It's like the mother of most of the problems in our society. So that's the sort of meta frame in which I approach RadicalxChange's work, but if you look at it, if you kind of take a microscope to different pieces of what we're doing, then it looks like, "Oh, we're working on creating fairer property structures or we're working on creating better collective decision and voting systems."

Ashley Hopkinson : One of the things that caught my attention on the RadicalxChange website was in describing the work I saw the phrase “deliver on technology’s true potential.” What does that mean? What is the true potential of technology?

Matt Prewitt: What we're tapping into with that language is the idea that technology tends to undermine and work at odds with democratic institutions and a fair society, but that isn't necessarily written into the nature of technology. Technology doesn't necessarily have to have that dysfunctional relationship with our institutions. At the same time, I think it's quite undeniable. This is putting it a little strongly, but it's quite clear to my eyes that it does, and that the development of technology does have kind of a distorting effect on the distribution of wealth in society, the distribution of power in society. So, we have this sort of dysfunctional thing going on, where the technology gets better and the social problems get worse, and that's terrible.

You can't stop technology. So how do we remind ourselves about what we're actually trying to do when we make technology better, or what we should be trying to do when we make technology better? It's possible to imagine our increased mastery of information and machines leading to a more reasonably fair society. Why isn't it doing that?

Ashley Hopkinson: Is that where the concept of “data dignity” comes into play, this idea that power concentration over data is overdone and this is course correcting? Is that one of the reasons that theory came into play with the work you’re doing at RadicalxChange?

Matt Prewitt: Data information is one of these areas in which extreme concentrations of power form very easily, because the more that you know about someone else, the more you can control them. The amount of data out there in the world creates sort of a vulnerability for manipulation and exploitation. And when lots and lots of information is public [...] it makes it easier for the most powerful actors to gain more power. Our work on data dignity mostly concerns, trying to answer the question of how groups of people can exercise more shared control over information. In other words, how can groups of people organize around information, get the fair value of the information that they're contributing to big systems?

As more and more information gets out there, basically the most well-resourced actors are able to know a bit more than everyone else, which creates a distorted power dynamic, no matter how much everybody is benefiting from the information in other ways. And I think, the only way I really see of counteracting that dynamic is through things like what you might call data coalitions or data unions or data cooperatives. Whether it's tomorrow or whether it's in 10 years, at some point we're going to have to understand that these kinds of institutional structures are a vital counterweight to the highly concentrated dynamics that emerge in a data economy.

Ashley Hopkinson: Since RadicalxChange is about bringing groups together and convening people to think about big systemic issues. I’m wondering, even when it seems like people already agree and are working on a particular systems issue because let’s say they believe in democracy and fair elections, how do you go from we’re in a room together and agree, to this is what we can do outside the room?

Matt Prewitt: I guess I would answer it in two ways. One is that a lot of times I don't feel that getting everyone to agree on what we should do is necessary or even the goal. I think that a lot of the work that we do, I know that not everybody is going to agree that it's interesting or good or whatever because of the nature of it, because it's complex. It touches on emotional issues, it touches on genuinely difficult questions. It would be shocking if I could get everyone to agree that, here's how we could structure property rights better. That's not going to happen. What I can do is get a coalition of people together to talk about it and raise some questions and raise some doubts in everyone's mind. And having a few people come together with a deeper agreement about, here's something we can try. Here's a way we can move something forward. That's my definition of success.

RadicalxChange brings people together in convenings. We bring people together in projects. So there's sort of two different things. [When] we're bringing together people in a convening. My goal there's not going to be agreement, partly because we go out of our way to try to bring people into the room who we know are going to disagree. We are trying to have difficult conversations that bridge across intellectual, social, cultural divides. So in our convenings, when I think about bringing people together, the only agreement is that there's a question. That's all you need and then, you can have the disagreement. It's fine, as long as it's productive. I think you just move the thinking forward of people who are doing important work. Then I feel really good when that happens. I feel that that's a really meaningful contribution.

And then when you bring people together in projects, what we hope happens then, in addition to people having their thinking challenged and their minds opened a bit, is that people will get together who have a deeper shared vision and try to make a project happen. And then, that project might demonstrate the efficacy of a new institutional structure. It might open up the thinking of other people who interact with that project. So it's just this process of slowly unfolding a broader understanding of what our institutions could be, what they do, why they don't work the way we want them to, and how we might be able to fix them?

Ashley Hopkinson: What do you think it takes to demonstrate the value of this work? I view it as scaffolding for a building. Visible but also invisible.

Matt Prewitt: I don't know. I mean, if I'm talking to somebody who is housing the unhoused or something, I may have trouble convincing them that what I'm doing is as important as what they're doing. And they may be right, I don't know.

There's also a way in which if you understand the problems in our society as systemic as I do, then you can have an epiphany that we'll never keep up with the problem. We'll always be sort of spinning our wheels until we work on the sort of systemic dimensions of the problems in our economy and our democracy. We'll always be behind. We'll always be three steps behind the problem, and that's the worldview that I have.

Ashley Hopkinson: For RadicalxChange, who would you say is benefiting from the work? Is it the organizations that are coming together that typically wouldn't, and you're having these really dynamic conversations that lead to these ideas? How would you describe it?

Matt Prewitt: Yeah, a lot of the most important work that we're doing is bringing together organizations and helping to develop projects and agendas and framings of ideas around the work

that needs to be done. It's not our institutional capacity to be on the ground, helping people who are in the most need in the most immediate way. We're not really doing that. The work that we're doing is helping other organizations and institutions that are doing that work, understand the sort of big issues in the economy and in the digital ecosystem and in democracy to help pull alliances together and get the work that needs to be done.

Ashley Hopkinson: Has RadicalxChange produced a tool, a program or a practice or something that you feel like is making a change or impact? I read about quadratic voting, does that example fit here or something else that has opened the space for conversation or change?

Matt Prewitt: Yeah. I think that quadratic voting is one example, in the sense that, it's been picked up and used by lots of different organizations and governments and institutions that are: a) using it to reach better decisions and b) it's also having this kind of secondary effect in all of the places that are using it, in kind of opening something up in terms of how people think about what's going on in democracy or opening up something about how the institution of voting goes from the background to the foreground. You noticed something that was just unnoticeable before.

I think that kind of focal shift has all kinds of really good consequences, for the way that democracy is practiced, the way these institutions work. So quadratic voting is one thing. It's like a long game. People start thinking about better ways of voting. People start mulling over the insights about group decision making that quadratic voting kind of suggests. And I believe that in the long run, in an insanely immeasurable way, I think that that is a good thing for our society and our culture.

There's also quadratic funding which is a system of public goods funding by which large groups can support public goods. Quadratic funding can be used as a kind of a redesign of basically all kinds of charitable giving systems and Patreon type support systems etc. Some of the bigger examples of it. There's a company called Gitcoin, G-I-T Coin, that runs these quadratic funding rounds by which communities of open source software developers support open source projects that they think are good for the community. And it's kind of a powerful democratic way of creating funding sources for projects that otherwise, just wouldn't get that much funding.

Ashley Hopkinson: What is quadratic funding and quadratic voting? Can you define it just for the purpose of this conversation and someone reading who doesn't have the background.

Matt Prewitt: I can define it, but then I'm going to have to say a little bit more about why anyone should care. So first, the definition, quadratic voting is a way of restructuring a vote. So that when voters are deciding on many different issues at the same time, instead of just kind of voting once on

each issue, they get sort of a pool of voting credits that they can spread out between the different issues to signal how strongly they care about the different issues in relation to one another. But it has a little twist. Instead of just having your pool of votes you can spread out however you want, what makes it quadratic, is that if you want to vote once on a particular option, you put one voting credit on it. If you want to vote twice on a particular option, you have to put four voting credits on it. You vote three times on a particular option, you put nine voting credits on it.

So in other words, you can express a stronger view about things that you care more strongly about, but there's a very steep cost to expressing a very, very strong view on anything. What that does is it encourages the participants [in an electoral process] to think very carefully about what they really care about. And then, it's a very nuanced way of prompting people who are participating in a democratic process to be thoughtful and honest about what they really care about and what they don't actually care about that much. This enables groups to find much more nuanced, meaningful compromises about what the collective action should be. As you can tell from that description, it's a little bit annoyingly abstruse, a little bit technical, but it's actually kind of a simple thing, and it's just very powerful. It opens up a whole sort of space of design for democratic institutions.

So that's quadratic voting and should I talk about quadratic funding?

Ashley Hopkinson: Yes. I want to know about quadratic funding, especially that you mentioned Patreon. How do you describe it?

Matt Prewitt: Quadratic funding is ... again, I'll describe it in a little bit more cut and dried, what it is and then I'll talk a little bit about why it's interesting. Basically, quadratic funding is a way of redesigning a matching fund. When NPR says, "Oh, donate a dollar now and it'll be matched with \$2 from another donor or whatever." That's a matching fund. So quadratic funding is a way of redesigning a matching fund system. So the way that it works is that you've got a matching fund, and the matching fund can be allocated to a bunch of different causes or a bunch of different projects that could get funded. Then, the way that it works is that, then you could have a public process in which the public decides, "Okay, which of these causes, or which of these projects do I want to fund?"

And then, the projects that the public decides they want to fund, those funding decisions are sort of counted like quadratic votes to then allocate the matching fund across the different projects. What that does, is it means that, projects that get a little bit of support from many, many people get a much bigger share of the matching fund than projects that got a lot of support from one donor.

It encourages a more democratic flow of resources in funding systems. So yeah, the most dry way of describing it is it's a better way of doing matching funds, but more richly than that, it's a way of making matching funds part of a really dynamic democratic crowdsourced process for deciding what is in the public interest.

Ashley Hopkinson: What would you say is the biggest insight or sort of lesson that you've learned from the convening, the partnerships that you feel like somebody else could take on and learn something from?

Matt Prewitt: The stuff that we want to do, the places in which our work is underutilized and under-understood are places like community land trusts. People doing work with community currencies. People doing work with unions and mutualist networks and people doing that kind of work. I think we have a ton to contribute to the work of people who are doing really, really great on the ground institution building in those categories.

I think that some of our work on funding, on land use rights, on data and so on, have really important implications for community land trusts for unions. So, I think these are the kind of areas in which our work can and hopefully will in the next five, 10 years, make really meaningful differences in people's lives. And how on the ground problems get solved. So that's where the rubber meets the road, and that's where I want our work to meet the road even more. The big insights to me just have to do with the way that our institutions are essentially designed to strengthen the strong and to cause power to compound. We need to just take that problem before our eyes clearly and rethink the way that our institutions are structured in order to remedy that.

Ashley Hopkinson: What is the greatest challenge that you face in the work that you're doing now, with RadicalxChange, and how do you manage it? What is the gap that you see that is needing to be filled?

Matt Prewitt: Well, the biggest challenge is that our work is hard to understand in two minutes. So that's a real challenge. I mean, I think some of the stuff you were alluding to earlier is a real challenge that we live in a very polarized kind of intense society in which people have really strong opinions, including really strong, well-intentioned opinions coming from about nine different directions. Our work is not really in a tribe.

The minute you think that our work is a progressive project, you'll be like, "Wait a minute, is what Matt just said actually like a progressive economics thing," I don't know. And then similarly, on the other

side, I can describe the work that we're doing in language that makes sense to free market people. Then again, it's not going to completely make sense to them either.

So that's one example of a divide and another example of a divide is like these tensions between what we were talking about earlier, helping people very concretely, very on the ground, contributing to this cause or that cause or this struggle or that struggle. We're thinking about deep causes, and it can be hard for people like us to fit in with all of the different framings that people have for the problems in society. It's not a complaint. It's just the nature of our society, and it's the task that we have. It's hard to do this kind of work and any kind of work in such a complicated, troubled society.

Ashley Hopkinson: Given the right support, is there something that you think would prioritize reducing that power concentration in a way that would be better for communities and our wellbeing?

Matt Prewitt: I think that given the right amount of support, you could create demonstrations of alternative systems of land ownership and/or alternative currency systems, which would prove themselves to be both morally more fair and also, even just economically more efficient than the systems that we have now. I think if you had a trillion dollars to do an experiment with land, or not even a trillion, a few billion dollars to kind build a really robust alternative currency structure that could kind of demonstrate some of these things. I think you could show that systems other than the ones we're using now, work better in such a way that people would be inspired to participate in them. People would want to participate in them more than they would want to participate in the sort of power grabbing systems that we have now.

Such an experiment, if done at the proper scale, would kind of morally invalidate the way that we're currently doing things, because if you could see an alternative that was working better than, for example, the land ownership system that we're using now, it would become more clear to everyone that the way that land ownership works now is morally abhorrent. And I think that that could create a major shift in society and in people's thinking. So those are some of my big dream sort of things.

Ashley Hopkinson : That's good Matt, 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.*