Prologue

It's the hubris of every generation to think that they have arrived at the best way of living. That their laws, norms, and conventions are natural, inevitable, even obvious.

But all the things we now take for granted, all the modern wisdoms we hold to be self-evident, were once derided as dangerous or foolish radical thinking. When the liberal philosopher and Member of Parliament John Stuart Mill sought to amend a clause in the 1867 Representation of the People Bill from 'men' to 'persons', it sparked a furious and mocking response. English masculinity would be threatened, said opponents. His proposed amendment would debase women. Mill was roundly defeated. 'Mr Mill might import a little more common sense into his arguments,' said one Member of Parliament at the time.

Sixty years later, and thanks to the efforts of another group of radical campaigners – the Suffrage movement – the 1928 Representation of the People Act finally granted women equal voting rights to men in the UK. Anything else now seems as ridiculous and dangerous as Mill's proposed amendment had appeared in 1867.

We live in an age of unprecedented progress and achievement. We have on average never been richer, healthier, or lived longer. Yet we are simultaneously faced with a daunting series of problems. Nation-states'

ability to raise money and deliver services, enforce law, and maintain a border is facing unprecedented strain. Globalisation – essentially the free mobility of goods, services and labour around the world – has created winners, but plenty of losers too. Settled communities have been transformed, and in some places limited public services have struggled to keep up. Income inequality has risen markedly in every liberal democracy for the last thirty years, and many people are no better off than their parents. Climate change is irrevocably damaging our planet. Levels of depression, anxiety, and unhappiness are at all-time highs. That's not to mention the thousand smaller problems all bubbling under these mega-trends: struggling public services, ageing populations, housing shortages, misogyny, racism, religious fundamentalism, and on and on.

Then there is the internet, cheerleader and amplifier of disruption. It has made production of, and access to, new ideas and movements – both good and bad – easier than ever. It has created new, difficult to control sources of information and brand new centres of power. Representative democracy – slow, unresponsive, full of compromise – suddenly feels absurdly slow in a world of instant gratification. The flood of digital information – data and facts and charts and memes and hashtags and thought-pieces and infographics and retweets – is not making us more informed and thoughtful. It's making us more susceptible to nonsense, more emotional, more irrational, and more mobbish. And although we have more information, fast computers and clever analysts to understand these problems, we seem less and less capable to predict or affect any of them.

In most Western democracies there's a broad consensus about the best way to order social, economic and political life. A set of received

wisdoms about how to deal with the challenges we face. There are disagreements on the details and implementation, of course, but since the Second World War the main questions have been practically settled: a nation state with a single legal system, managed by officials and professional political parties elected through representative democracy, who determine what its citizens can see, do, buy and put in their bodies. An economy based on private ownership and free (but controlled) markets and public services funded by forced general taxation. Human rights protect citizens, who are free to practise whatever religious beliefs they wish as long as those beliefs and practises do not harm others.

This set of ideas is sometimes called the 'Overton Window', or the broad ideas that the majority of the public accept as respectable and normal. It was named after the American political scientist Joseph Overton, who described the range of policies that both left- and right-wing politicians needed to support if they wanted to get elected. Superficial deviations are fine: but anything outside that Window is too unusual, unworkable, unrealistic to be accepted by the public. Too radical.

The Overton Window has barely moved for years. When I started this book in late 2014 there were signs that it was beginning to widen. Fewer people were voting, and those who did bother were drifting away from the centre-right and (especially) centre-left parties, towards the edges. There is even a word for this collapse of the centre: 'Pasokification', after the once dominant Greek social democratic party Pasok, whose public support fell from 45 per cent to 4 per cent in 2015, a pattern mirrored in several other countries. According to various surveys, citizens' trust in elected officials, parliament, the justice system and even democracy itself had been falling steadily for years and

was at record lows. People born in 1980 were far less likely than those born in 1960 to think of living in a democracy as 'essential'.

It appeared that a new political space was beginning to open up. People were starting to look for change. They were beginning to listen to those who did not agree with the accepted consensus. They were beginning to listen to radicals.

Radicals is a term used to describe people who advocate fundamental social or political reform. The word 'radical' comes from the Latin *radix*, meaning root. It describes those who think that something is desperately wrong with modern society, and believe they know how to fix it. Today, radical ideas and movements are on the rise. In streets, halls, fields, chat-rooms and even parliaments, more and more people are trying to change the world. And for the last two years, I've tried to find them.

Life on the political fringes can be difficult and sometimes extremely dangerous, but it's also exciting. I've been across California campaigning with a 'transhumanist' running for president, invaded and shut down the UK's largest coal mine, been attacked by Danish anarchists, marched the streets and pubs with anti-immigration activists on a Europe-wide jaunt, joined the Psychedelic Society in a search for 'oneness', sat in mosques and listened to Imams rail against Islamic State, and got within a few watery metres of stepping foot on the world's newest and freest country, before the Croatian police attempted to capsize my boat. I've discovered why free love is the route to world peace, tackled the absurdities of setting up a new political party, and learned what my chances are of living to be a hundred and fifty. I now know the exact difference between 'aggravated trespass' and 'trespass', between psilocybin and LSD, and between anarchists, anarcho-capitalists and crypto-anarchists.

Prologue

Radicals is an effort to explore how and why new political groups and ideas emerge and gain currency. Of course the distinction between radical ideas and mainstream ones is not always clear. Received wisdoms always change over time, and what passes for political consensus exists in a mild state of flux. But that process is quickening. By the time I finished this book in early 2017, the difference between 'radical' and 'mainstream' was less clear than when I started.

There are hundreds of movements that merit inclusion in this book. I couldn't follow them all, but some groups were omitted through choice. I've limited myself to movements in Western liberal democracies, because radicalism has a very different meaning depending on the context (and especially in places where there is no freedom of speech or assembly. A liberal democrat in Saudi Arabia is certainly a radical there). Anti-capitalist movements like Occupy are only mentioned in passing because there are plenty of books written about them, and although important, they don't have a monopoly on the channels of frustration.* Movements that mobilise on identity markers – sexuality, race, gender – are absent because I wasn't sure I could do them justice in these few pages.

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* For further reading on the anti-capitalist movements and their prospects, see for example: Sarah Jaffe's *Necessary Trouble*, Paul Mason on *Why It's Kicking Off Everywhere*; Chris Hedges' *Wages of Rebellion*. Manuel Castells and Clay Shirkey are two examples of the optimistic social media school. Authors who write about anti-capitalism movements assume the future surely belongs to heroic anti-capitalist protestors who'll rise up and use technology – especially social media networks – to overthrow the system. Perhaps that's because people who write books tend to come from a similar milieu (university educated, technologically literate, socially liberal and economically well-off) as the people usually involved in anti-capitalist movements.

But I've tried to follow a wide variety of contemporary radical thinking I think is both interesting and important.

I approached each group with the intention of assessing them as honestly and objectively as I could. To listen to their ideas and immerse myself in their worlds in order to tell their stories as faithfully as possible. But I also tried to retain a degree of scepticism. Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. This book is not an effort to carefully critique every idea, nor an argument either for or against certain political arguments. Do not expect dense political theory or a carefully worded manifesto for the future. Politics is an unpredictable, chaotic system: how precisely ideas shift from the fringe to the mainstream is an inexact science. More modestly, this is an attempt to understand why and how politics is changing: not from the viewpoint of the nervous mainstream, but from the perspective of those trying to change it. The Overton Window is under unprecedented strain. Western democracies are entering an age of radicalism. The election of Donald Trump or the United Kingdom's decision to leave the European Union are just early skirmishes of a more significant realignment, in which assumptions about what is the political 'normal' will change. This book, although certainly not a comprehensive guide to the political norms of tomorrow, is at least an introduction to some of the ideas and trends that may shape these changes. As far as possible, I leave it to you to draw your own conclusions. But if this book loosens even slightly the grip of prevailing thought on what you think is possible, then it will have succeeded.

Radical ideas are a powerful force: they can stir millions to action. But where they lead can't be predicted. Because radicalism often demands

fundamental, disruptive change, it can be as destructive as it is productive. The same year that Mill proposed his amendment to the Representation of the People Act, Karl Marx published *Das Kapital*. It too presented a radical and bold idea: that capitalism would inevitably and inexorably strangle and enslave the workers. It predicted a violent class struggle. The book's ideas spread across the world. In Russia, worried censors decided against banning it on the grounds that no one would read it. But thousands did, and an underground movement inspired by his theories began to grow.

Today's radicals are not all pioneers, idealists, brave heroes, and not all (if any) will one day be seen in the same light as John Stuart Mill, or Marx. But neither are they all fundamentalists or fools. Because they reject common wisdoms, radicals are routinely misrepresented or ignored by the media, and their ideas are dismissed. But, for better or for worse, the lesson of history is that today's radicals often become tomorrow's mainstream.

Whether you agree with them or not, radical ideas change society. Even when they fail, or are destructive, they force us to think – and to think again. Our present way of organising society is neither inevitable nor permanent. The world of tomorrow will certainly be very different from that of today. This book is a journey to discover what that world might be.