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Ambiances of the new in contemporary politics: resisting the post-political

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Abstract. *How can we rethink social transformation in the conditions of post-political neoliberal governmentality? James C. Scott has traced political breakthroughs back to the 'hidden transcripts' which are nourished in partly autonomous zones of everyday conflict and struggle. Richard Day captures a mode of social reconstruction which is detached from revolutionary events and is attached to the creation of alternatives in present tense. Today, such 'ambiances of the new' are crafted by social movements which pursue a 'horizontalist' activism seeking to foster plurality and openness. They cultivate thus particular ethics, affects, habits, mentalities, modes of organisation and spaces, which enable more democratic forms of collective action and help to put together large collective fronts in the interests of the many.*

Keywords: *post-politics, structural renewal, horizontalist movements*

Since the turn of the century, the global neoliberal hegemony has brought about an authoritarian shift towards an oligarchic regime of post-political biopower. The newly emerging regime can be designated as a system of post-political biopower. This is a broad-ranging machine of political power, which weaves together a post-political technocratic 'pragmatism', the state of exception and its sovereign rule, a biopower which exerts itself directly on the naked body and soul of society, and the construction of a 'society of control.' Governance is post-political insofar as it is being entrusted to unelected technocrats who turn government into 'expert administration' and do not uphold the autonomy of political decision-making. Political authority is subordinate to international centres of power and economic force. It does not shape the co-ordinates of fundamental policies and social relations through its independent decisions, seeking rather to manage and manipulate social 'data' in the service of pre-given aims and predefined recipes which are not subject to public contest and debate (see Crouch, 2014, Lazzaratto, 2011, Agamben, 2005, Kioupiolis, 2014).

However, in the midst of a post-political desert, what keeps alive and kicking the 'political' in the mode of radical intervention, deep antagonism and reversal of hegemonic closures is the locus classicus of democratic agency: diverse popular mobilisations and civic initiatives which re-order social relations in the economy, in education, art and various other fields and perform different ways of doing politics, reclaiming the power of the people to govern themselves on a footing of equality.

How can we rethink social transformation, historical ruptures and the rise of the new in the conditions of post-political neoliberal governmentality?

The endeavour to re-think the creation of the new through 'acts' and 'events' occupies center stage in some quarters of contemporary political theory, with the work of Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou being perhaps the most salient examples. However, these efforts to salvage in thought the possibility of revolution have come in for various criticisms which take issue with their implausibly decisionist, absolutist or paradoxically passive conception of political agency (see e.g. Hallward, 2003: 267–268, 286–289, Bosteels, 2011: xi, 146, 168, Marchart, 2005: 119–121). In Žižek's case, the implausible resurrection of an autonomous modern subject which is absolutely sovereign is paradoxically wedded to a conception of agency which is fundamentally passive and incapable of self-determination. The act acquires thus explicitly the status of a miracle which cannot be deliberately decided and produced (see Žižek, 1999: 376, Žižek, 2013: 56–57, 98–99, Žižek, 2014). The impasses of impossible agency in Žižek's act come into sharp relief in Badiou's construal of new creation. The surging forth of the new in an event is a 'brutal contingency' (Badiou, 2006: 110) which cannot be predicted and catches us 'unawares with its grace' (Badiou, 2003: 111). Far from being the outcome of a deliberate effort and choice, it is 'not an effect of decision. The decision is uniquely to be faithful to the transformation' (Badiou, 2004: 173).

Responding to such aporias, contemporary thought has increasingly stressed the importance of ongoing critical reflection, ideal projections and local experimentation to lay the ground for political ruptures and transformative action. This move betokens a renewed interest in the conditions of the unconditional: the conditions that may enable the rise of the new which breaks with antecedent clauses. Such a concern may enhance the practical efficacy and critical reflexivity of political thought which construes the political as unanticipated emergence, and it chimes with an alternative, 'conditional' understanding of political acts in contemporary theory.

James C. Scott (1990: xi-xiii, 7–9, 14, 16) has traced 'charismatic acts' and political breakthroughs back to the 'hidden transcripts' and the dissonant cultures which are nourished in partly autonomous zones of everyday conflict and struggle. Under various oppressive circumstances, subordinate social groups articulate discourses critical of dominant powers, dream of violent uprisings, envision new, inverted social orders and perform 'infrapolitical' acts of inconspicuous resistance in social times-and-spaces which are relatively out of sight and protected.

Everyday discourses of anger at injustice and domination, utopian beliefs, millennial images and backstage performances of minor transgression operate as mobilising forces. They prepare, energise and give shape to large-scale uprisings and unexpected acts of defiance, even if the exact moment and the favourable circumstances for their eruption cannot be predicted with certainty (Scott, 1990: 20, 80–81, 189–190). Rebellious political acts are conditioned, but they transcend their conditions insofar they are never fully determined. '[W]e are not able to tell easily under what precise circumstances the hidden transcript will storm the stage' (Scott, 1990: 16). Yet, agents can attend to such facilitating conditions, intervene and draw sustenance from them as they seek to empower transformative agency. If we wish 'to grasp potential acts, intentions as yet blocked, and possible futures that a shift in the balance of power or a crisis will bring to view, we have little choice but to explore the realm of the hidden transcript' (Scott, 1990: 16).

Speaking for a kindred alternative stream – the socialist utopian, anarchist and post-structuralist idea of a ‘structural renewal’ that is pursued here and now, in the gaps of hegemonic systems – Richard Day (2005: 9, 19, 92) captures a mode of social reconstruction which is detached from any past and future revolutionary event and is attached to direct action and the creation of alternatives in present tense. This approach focuses on ‘small-scale experiments in the construction of alternative modes of social, political and economic organisation’ which are supposed to offer ‘a way to avoid both waiting forever for the Revolution to come *and* perpetuating existing structures through reformist demands’ (Day, 2005: 16).

Such creative undertakings are facilitated by several conditions. First, they are carried out again by partly deviant persons and communities in partly autonomised spaces, in the fissures of ruling regimes (Day, 2005: 127, 183). Second, they are guided by common ethical commitments and political logics of non-domination and non-exploitation. These add up to an ‘*affinity for affinity*, that is, for non-universalising, non-hierarchical, non-coercive relationships based and mutual aid and shared ethical commitments’ (Day, 2005: 9). But such guiding principles and ideals are no dogma. They provide a vague and general impetus which is variously interpreted, according to the variable circumstances and decisions made by different communities (Day, 2005: 19–20). Third, the formation of new, non-hegemonic social relations on the micro-level of everyday interaction is driven by a spirit of bold enterprise and practical experimentation, which responds directly to ‘the evershifting problem-solution spaces offered by modern western societies’ (Day, 2005: 127). This spirit works through empirical search, trial and error, creativity and improvisation, dismissing reliance on any preconceived overall plan. Finally, the ‘solutions’ furnished and the new egalitarian and autonomous communities are always diverse, open and incomplete, foregoing the vision of any final and total event of emancipation. An ongoing process of experimentation, contest and reconfiguration is thereby mobilised, enabling the re-emergence of new figures of life (Day, 2005: 19–20, 210–211).

Hence, the new and the extraordinary are resituated in a world of immanent gaps, contradictions, oppositions, germinations and emergent possibilities. This picture of things can help to overcome the ‘impossibility’ of enacting the impossible new by directing our attention towards available resources of transformation along with diverse pragmatic experiments undertaken here and now.

Today, such ‘ambiances of the new’ are crafted by movements of opposition and construction which pursue an ‘horizontalist’ activism (such as the *Occupy* movement, civic mobilisations in Spain after 2011, and others) that seeks more specifically to foster broader social transformation in the direction of plurality and openness. They cultivate thus particular ethics, affects, habits, mentalities, modes of organisation and spaces which enable more democratic forms of collective action and help to work through a plethora of political sites, actors and interests so as to put together large collective fronts and to advance the interests of the many.

Diversity and openness became themselves the principle of unity in horizontalist mobilisations such as the Global Justice Movement at the turn of the century and Occupy Wall Street more recently (see Kingsnorth, 2012, della Porta, 2005, Harcourt, 2011). The motto ‘One No, Many Yeses’ captures emblematically the value placed on open plurality as the very foundation of cohesion. This motto pits a variety of forces, ideas and models of organisation against a common enemy (global capitalism), and it

envisions a world in which many worlds can fit (Kingsnorth, 2012, Haiven and Khasnabish, 2014). Likewise, Occupy Wall Street identified itself as a 'resistance movement with people of many ... political persuasions' (Harcourt, 2011).

In the spirit of hegemonic strategies, the foregoing struggles sought, indeed, to overcome sheer dispersion and 'spontaneity' by welding together broad coalitions which aspired to large-scale transformation (Dixon, 2014: 4,-5, 118–119, 140, 221, Dean, 2012: 207–250, Giovanopoulos and Mitropoulos, 2011: 274–340). But their mode of co-ordination was inflected by a strong commitment to diversity which counters tendencies towards homogeneity and closure. Far from remaining a mere slogan, open pluralism has been persistently pursued through a multiplicity of norms, ethical practices and organisational choices.

The construction of *open spaces of convergence* for collective deliberation and coordination is a key practice for the promotion of diversity insofar as public platforms invite the participation of the many and dismiss a priori exclusions (Juris, 2005). Again, the *Indignados* and the Occupy in 2011 offer telling examples. Their popular assemblies in squares and streets, which were accessible to the public at large, intended to function as 'a really big tent' where individuals and groups can operate autonomously 'while being in solidarity with something much broader and far-reaching ... [which] connects all those struggles' (Klein and Marom, 2012). As a result, the squares became 'a magnetic furnace where strangers that once walked anywhere alone meet, mix and melt' (Dhaliwal, 2012: 259). Moreover, the assemblies forswore ideologies and strict programmatic definitions in order to appeal to all citizens in their diversity (Dhaliwal, 2012: 265, Harcourt, 2011).

Openness and plurality in communities of action are further nurtured by a certain *political culture* which is deliberately cultivated in anti-hierarchical organisations and spaces of activism in our times. This culture foments tolerance, critical respect for differences, civility, generosity, a relaxed atmosphere of debate, and an affective politics which nourishes relations of care and love among diverse people who struggle in common despite their differences (Dixon, 2014: 90, 228–229, della Porta and Rucht, 2015: 206, 211).

The *network form* which is widespread among democratic militancy today is also crucial for fostering diversity, openness and decentralisation. Hardt and Negri have made much thus of the 'distributed network' of the multitude (see Hardt and Negri, 2004: xiii-xv, 288, 336–340). *Pace* Hardt and Negri, however, most actual network formations are not fully horizontal. Usually, in extended networks a number of highly connected 'hubs' is surrounded by long chains of other nodes with decreasing connections and impact.

Distributed network-systems are not ruled by solid hierarchies or a single leadership. They are subject to an ongoing internal differentiation and they attain flexible, varying combinations of dispersion and unification in different ways, such as swarming and diverse parallel tactics. As hubs can increase and decrease and new hubs can appear, centralisation remains relative, distributed, contestable and mutable. Present-day organisations such as the *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca* in Spain illustrate how a more coherent organising core can tie up with a loose group of diverse agents who participate in different degrees, making up an open 'network system' which allows for plurality and resists strong centralisation and fixed hierarchies (Nunes, 2014: 29, 31–33, 39, 43, Tormey, 2015: 110–115).

Finally, in horizontalist schemes of collective confluence, *pragmatism* facilitates forms of convergence and common identity which uphold diversity and openness. A heterogeneous assemblage of agents and practices can more easily cohere around strategic wagers and practical objectives rather than around group identities and definite political programs or ideologies. Collective action can avoid thereby both the fragmentation of ‘identity politics’ and the conflicts which tend to erupt among closed identities that assert themselves. Moreover, sustained interaction which advances shared objectives beyond persistent differences can build a community of practice and, thus, a practical identification which does not rest on common dogma or a collective tradition. Such communities of action can help to minimize exclusions and can offset pressures towards homogeneity (see Hardt and Negri, 2004: 86-87 222–223, 350, 337–340, Nunes, 2014: 42–44, Haiven and Khasnabish, 2014: 239–240).

The experiences of World Social Forums and Latin American radicalism over the last two decades recommend a more specific spirit of pragmatism which can underpin ‘depolarised pluralities.’ Constructive pragmatism involves here an understanding of major political issues as complex and admitting of diverse practical responses. Relevant actions and organisational forms should be equally complex, plural and flexible enough to accommodate variation according to context and divergent judgments. Political experiences in different situations are rich and varied. They are not therefore ‘susceptible to being reduced to a general principle or recipe’ (de Sousa Santos, 2008: 266). This pragmatic spirit treats big and divisive issues, such as the relation between the state and grassroots movements, as open questions which should be tackled contextually, variously and practically rather than uniformly and abstractly. Recent history shows, for example, that confrontation or collaboration with the state or maximum distance from it can variably constitute the best option in different situations (Haiven and Khasnabish, 2014: 81, de Sousa Santos, 2008: 266–267). Open-mindedness, acceptance of empirical ‘messiness’ and hybridity, a flexible approach oriented to concrete problem-solving and a reluctance to take universal, dogmatic positions make up a pragmatic outlook which can ‘depolarise’ strategic choices, overcoming stubborn differences and nurturing broad pluralist assemblages. Hence, respect for differences, a feel for complexity, an affirmation of impurity, an affectivity of care and love compose ambiances that are deliberately fomented today among the ranks of various ‘horizontal’ activists across the world in order to create another democratic politics to come.

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