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Towards a geography of tolerance: Post-politics and political forms of toleration

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A B S T R A C T

This paper argues for a closer inspection of how tolerance and politics interact. Within geography and beyond there is rising concern about post-political situations, whereby potential disagreements are foreclosed and situated beyond the remit of political debate. This is conceptualised as a process of de-politicisation that operates 'much more effectively' than alternative ways in which politics can be and has been disavowed (Žižek, 1999: 198). While Žižek associates liberal tolerance with the post-political condition, however, theories of tolerance are at odds over whether it represents an everyday enactment of the political. Although some authors have indeed associated tolerance with a depoliticising tendency (Brown, 2006), others insist that certain types of tolerance are capable of nurturing simultaneous recognition and disagreement, which directly contradicts the conditions of post-politics (Forst, 2003). We therefore ask, contra Žižek, whether certain forms of tolerance can be an antidote to the post-political practice of foreclosing politics, and offer a set of considerations pertinent to the geographical analysis of this issue.

Introduction

The political landscape is changing rapidly. A new political generation raised during the 2000s has witnessed two wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, multiple scandals involving the political elite, and unprecedented public funds utilised to bail out the most privileged economic classes during the financial crisis, often with little regard for political opposition. At the same time, high levels of voter apathy among young people indicate that many are increasingly turning their backs on traditional political parties.

These developments would seem to confirm recent theorisations of the post-political (Swyngedouw, 2011; Žižek, 1999). Here, debate between substantially differing ideological visions of the world is replaced by an apparently objective management of various issues wherein the parameters of political debate are carefully patrolled. We might witness disputes over how to most effectively control borders, for example, but without ever opening the debate to whether *any border controls at all* are desirable. Or we might see right- and left-wing political parties disagree about the most suitable level of defence spending without considering the possibility of no military expenditure whatsoever. The concern of various scholars of politics is that this sort of meta-consensus around the limits of disagreement itself is become more common (Rancière, 2004a; Žižek, 1999).

Recent events however, demonstrate that post-politics is far from complete. Various occupations, for example, from Wall Street to the steps of St. Paul's cathedral in London, offer examples of 'spaces of hope' (Harvey, 2000). Such protests are examples of a politics which refuses to be designated by the consensual language of party-political bickering, and instead operates at a 'distance from the state' (Abensour, 2011 (1997); Badiou, 2005a; Critchley, 2007). Elsewhere, more worrying signs of fundamental political disagreements are discernible, such as the rise of far-right organisations, which have capitalised on the current political malaise in various European countries to appeal to disgruntled voters. Often these groups have been one of only a few political forces who have vocalised a challenge to taken-for-granted processes of globalisation (Mouffe, 2000).

What such protests and flashpoints illustrate is the inability of genuine political alternatives to be completely foreclosed (Rancière, 2004a; Swyngedouw, 2011). Post-politics is thus a partial process, unevenly distributed. We might therefore productively talk of a post-politicisation – that may or may not be underway but is by no means completed – in particular political environments and among particular social groups. This move brings the consideration of politics back from the realms of high ontological theory to a more worldly, grounded view of political deliberation. According to this view, contestation is an ordinary process. Worrying too much about

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the ontological status of politics may risk causing us to overlook its everydayness and forget to empirically describe its contours (see Barnett, 2012). This nuance seems to us critical in preserving the space and possibility of political moments that rupture the established order, and invites us to geographically map the process of post-politicisation carefully. Ultimately, this is a key contribution political geographers can make to the post-political debate although as we shall see, this argument draws upon disparate philosophical traditions in a way that some (we would argue purist) theorists may object to.

As a concept, tolerance has had a mixed press in academic terms. Wendy Brown (2006) for example, has been overtly critical of the way in which tolerance functions to shore up asymmetric relations of power in Western societies. This article, however, argues for a nuanced understand of different forms of toleration, some of which may provide resources that can aid in limiting the post-political and providing for the 'traces' of the political that 'ruptures' the settled political consensus. This is not to overlook the ways in which liberal democratic tolerance can be hypocritical and act in part to strengthen exclusionary logics (Brown, 2006; Žižek, 1999). Nevertheless, we seek to raise the possibility that specific forms of tolerance might provide the conditions for disagreement between mutually recognised adversaries, which is precisely the situation that post-politics threatens to foreclose. In particular, some forms of tolerance seek to recognise an expanding array of political claims and identities as legitimate and to engage with them on their own terms, thereby bringing more groups into the frame of politics by questioning and undermining the outer limits of the existing consensus. This does not necessarily guarantee 'genuine' political moments (which, as Rancière (2004a) argues, are difficult to theoretically derive), but may at least remove some of the barriers that systematically preclude them.

In making this argument we are motivated by two sets of debates within political geography. First, the literature about post-politics, within geography and beyond, has drawn attention to the ways in which consensus is produced and policed (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2009, 2010, 2011; Metzger, 2011; Swyngedouw, 2009, 2010). According to this literature, an increasing proportion of political issues are now the subject not of genuine debate and disagreement, but narrow, technical deliberations about how best to tackle an agreed-upon problem (Rancière, 2004a; Žižek, 1999). For Rancière, genuine politics involves a disruption of the established order of things and is, and always was, rare, precarious and fleeting, but remains far-preferable to the watered-down, self-satisfied politics of the middle ground that is in evidence today. This causes Rancière to describe in detail the various ways in which politics has been disavowed. Žižek's concern, however, is that the post-politics that we are presently witnessing allows the dominant order to no longer concern itself with the disavowal of politics. Rather, these post-political mechanisms are capable of foreclosing political moments before they ever develop into claims that require anything other than a managed, technical response.

In this paper we examine the degree to which the logic of certain types of tolerance may undermine this insipid mechanism. To do so we introduce conceptual arguments that draw upon a very different philosophical lineage to the post-structural, radical philosophical tradition most associated with Rancière and Žižek. We draw upon strands of Critical Theory that have begun to contribute towards a 'revitalization of pragmatism' in the social sciences (Barnett, 2011: 247). At times this causes our arguments to jar with the presuppositions of the authors we are in debate with, but we think it is worth persisting on the basis that we are not seeking to establish definitive conclusions regarding the relationship between practices of tolerance and the political, but to begin what Braun and Whatmore (2010, xii) refer to as a process of 'harnessing the frictions' through exploring the relations between approaches which do not usually share the same pages.

Second, geographers have recently engaged with the concept of peace, while very little has been said of tolerance within geography. And yet, as we shall argue, some forms of tolerance provide a partial counter-weight to the suffocating logic of the post-political. It is through tolerance – grudging, 'gritted teeth tolerance' (Dobbernack & Mohdood, 2011, 30) – that adversaries in a political struggle are simultaneously recognised and disapproved of: exactly the conditions for an inclusive, and yet dissensual, politics *within* liberal democracies (Mouffe, 2000). Hence, our interest in tolerance is not driven by exclusively empirical concerns (who is more or less tolerant, for example) nor even in order to develop a methodological approach. More fundamentally than this, we seek first to explore tolerance as an everyday practice (see Wilson, 2011, for an account of the materially embodied contingencies of tolerance), as a complementary analytical perspective to that of peace, and in certain forms as an antidote to post-politics, understood here as the practice of limiting political disagreement to specific questions within the overall order of things.

This argument is developed in four sections. In the first and second sections the paper reviews the literature dealing with post-politics as a specific mechanism of depoliticisation, drawing out the key argument that radical post-structural theorists of democracy make repeatedly: that depoliticisation is avoidable. To this extent we agree with their views. Not only this, but, for them, it is never fully present or foreclosed – there is always a political moment of possibility. Given this insistence in the literature, we ask whether tolerance as a concept can help us to understand these traces of the political, these possibilities, in more detail (and it is here that our thinking begins to diverge from the radical post-structuralist thinkers, although where possible we relate our arguments to the terms that they use in order to generate productive debate rather than simply talking past them). We suggest that there is an empirical imperative to establish where the post-political consensus is most and least firmly established – its 'heartlands and ... zones of extension' (Peck & Tickell, 2002: 381) – and that thinking about some forms of tolerance might help us to achieve this. This is not, to reiterate, to claim that where there is tolerance there is automatically genuine politics in the form of the disruption of the police order (for Rancière 'the police' describes something broader than its ordinary usage, namely 'an established form of governance with everyone in their 'proper place' in the seemingly natural order of things' (Dikeç, 2005: 18)). But it is to claim that where certain forms of tolerance exist the post-political condition is troubled.

In this vein, in the third section, a case is made for a geography of tolerance, or more precisely geographies of tolerance given the distinction between various forms of toleration. While not denying the institutionalisation of consensus, both as an outcome *and* as an objective of some vested interests, the section responds to Gibson-Graham's (2008) call for a less paranoid geography. 'Most theorising is tinged with scepticism and negativity', they argue, 'which is not a particularly nurturing environment for hopeful, inchoate experiments' (Gibson-Graham, 2008: 618). Taking this critique on board, our argument takes seriously the need for a hopeful (Harvey, 2000), peaceful (Megoran, 2010, 2011) and more empirically-driven engagement that attends to the gritty pragmatics of politics that are often preclosed in overly ontological approaches to the political. Our intention is thus to avoid the perversely 'seductive' allure of moments of violence and disorder (Williams & McConnell, 2011: 927) while simultaneously moving 'beyond oppositional critiques' (Megoran, 2010: 382) that offer little more than a detailed and complete description of misery. In this section we therefore outline how tolerance – a complex phenomenon that combines the