



Interrogating post-democratization: Reclaiming egalitarian political spaces

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ABSTRACT

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There is now an emerging body of thought on the dynamics of de-politicization, the 'disappearance of the political', the erosion of democracy and of the public sphere, and the contested emergence of a post-political or post-democratic socio-spatial configuration. I situate and explore this alleged 'post-democratization' in light of recent post-Althusserian political thought. I proceed in four steps. First, I discuss the contested configurations of this post-politicization and the processes of post-democratization. In a second part, I propose a series of theoretical and political arguments that help frame the evacuation of the properly political from the spaces of post-democratic policy negotiation. This diagnostic is related to a particular interpretation of the distinction between 'the political' and 'police(y)/politics'. In a third part, I argue how emancipatory-democratic politics can be reclaimed around notions of equality, and freedom. In the concluding part, perspectives for re-vitalising the political possibilities of a spatialized emancipatory project are presented. The crux of the argument unfolds the tension between politics, which is always specific, particular, and 'local' on the one hand and the universal procedure of the democratic political that operates under the signifiers of equality and freedom on the other.

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"Western democracies are only the political facades of economic power. A facade with colours, banners, endless debates about sacrosanct democracy. We live in an era where we can discuss everything. With one exception: Democracy. She is there, an acquired dogma. Don't touch, like a museum display. Elections have become the representation of an absurd comedy, shameful, where the participation of the citizen is very weak, and in which the governments represent the political commissionaires of economic power" (Saramago, in [Saramago & Jacob, 2006](#), p. 144 – *my translation*).

On 6 December 2008, 15 year old Alexandros Grigoropoulos was shot by the police on an Athenian square, an event that triggered weeks of violent urban protests throughout Greece.¹ A recurrent slogan of the insurgents was "Merry Crisis and Happy New Fear". Less than two years later, on 5 May 2010, three people were killed during riotous protests in Athens in the aftermath of the draconian austerity measures the Greek socialist government (PASOK) had to take under the policing eye of the European Union and the International Monetary Fund to restore budgetary rigour and to save French and German Banks overexposed to Greek sovereign debt ([Hadjimichalis, 2011](#)). On 17 July 2010, Grenoble was set on fire in a clash between rioters and the police. With the emblematic moment of the French urban rebellions of the fall of 2005, the

retaking of the streets by protesters swept from Copenhagen to Rome, from London to Riga, from Brussels to Athens. Tunis, Cairo, Madrid, and Algiers, among many other cities, have been theatres of rebellion and revolt too in recent months. Despite their extraordinary differences and the contingent specificities of their unique geographies, the insurgents share a commitment to universalizing principles of equality and demand their voices to be heard on a footing equal to those that constitute the 'police' order (see [Swyngedouw, in press](#)). These forms of insurrectional, and often violent, political activism that target the instituted order stand in stark contrast to a growing body of thought and analysis that argues that the past decades or so have been marked by processes of de-politicization, the erosion of democracy and of the squeezing of the public sphere (see [Badiou, 2008a](#); [Brown, 2005](#); [Crouch, 2004](#); [Rancière, 1998, 2006a](#); [Springer, 2010](#); [Staeheli & Mitchell, 2008](#)). This paper will explore the relation between the disappearance of 'the political' and emergent insurgent activities.

Although 'democracy' is firmly and consensually established as the uncontested and rarely examined ideal form of institutionalized political life, its practices seem to be reduced to the public management of what Badiou calls the 'capitolo-parliamentary order' ([Badiou, 2008a](#)). An emerging body of thought has begun to consider the suturing of 'the political' by a consensual mode of governance that has apparently reduced political conflict and disagreement to either an ultra-politics of radical and violent disavowal, exclusion and containment or to a para-political

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inclusion of different opinions on anything imaginable (as long as it does not question fundamentally the existing state of the neo-liberal political–economic configuration) in arrangements of impotent participation and consensual ‘good’ techno-managerial governance (see, among others, Agamben et al., 2009; Brown, 2005; Crouch, 2000; Dean, 2009; Hermet, 2009; Marquand, 2004; Mouffe, 2005; Purcell, 2008; Rosanvallon, 2008; Swyngedouw, 2005; Žižek, 1999). However, this consensualism in policing public affairs is paralleled by all manner of often violent insurgent activism and proliferating manifestations of discontent (such as the *indignados* in Spain or the *αγανακτισμένοι* (the indignants) in Greece) as well as the immense success of insurrectional literature like *The Coming Insurrection* (see Merrifield, 2010; *The Invisible Committee*, 2009; Toscano, 2009).

Colin Crouch and Jacques Rancière, among others, described and analysed this process of de-politicization as ‘post-democratic’. In this contribution, I concentrate on the contested *gestalt* of this alleged ‘post-democratic’ frame. I shall proceed in three steps. First, I explore briefly the contours of post-politicization and the process of post-democratic institutional formation. In a second part, I propose a series of theoretical arguments that permit framing the evacuation of the political from the sphere of post-democratic policy negotiation. This diagnostic is related to a particular interpretation of the distinction between ‘the political’ and ‘police(y)/politics’.² I maintain that the theoretical and conceptual distinction between ‘the political’ and ‘politics’ casts new light on our understanding of the ‘post-democratic’ and opens avenue for thinking and practicing new forms of ‘re-treating the political’ (Lacoue-Labarthe & Nancy, 1997). The latter will be the theme of the third part. There, I explore how emancipatory-democratic politics can be reclaimed around notions of equality and freedom, and discuss perspectives for re-vitalising the political possibilities of an emancipatory project, articulated around the work of Jacques Rancière, Alain Badiou, Etienne Balibar and Slavoj Žižek. The crux of the argument unfolds the tension between, on the one hand, politics, which is always specific, particular, and ‘local’, and, on the other, the universalizing procedure of the democratic political that operates under the signifiers of equality and freedom.

Post-Democracy?

A consensual politics, but ...

In recent years, political scientists have lamented the decline of the public sphere, the ‘retreat of the political’ or ‘the colonization of the political by the social’ (see Lacoue-Labarthe & Nancy, 1997). David Marquand, for example, argued how the public domain of citizenship has been under attack in the United Kingdom, “first from the market fundamentalists of the New Right, and then from their New Labor imitators, resulting in a hollowing out of citizenship, the marketization of the public sector; the soul-destroying targets and audits that go with it; the denigration of professionalism and the professional ethic; and the erosion of public trust” (Marquand, 2004, p. 172). While the formal envelope of democracy survives, “its substance is becoming ever more attenuated” (Marquand, 2004, p. 4). Pierre Rosanvallon insists how politics is replaced “by widely disseminated techniques of management, leaving room for one sole actor on the scene: international society, uniting under the same banner the champions of the market and the prophets of the law” (Rosanvallon, 2006, p. 228). The erosion of democracy has been noted in geography too, particularly in debates over the privatization of public space (Purcell, 2008; Staeheli & Mitchell, 2008), the transformation of the spatialities of public encounter (Barnett, 2004), the heterogeneity of struggles over the

private/public nexus (Low & Smith, 2005; Staeheli, Mitchell, & Attoh, 2010) and possible strategies for recapturing space for emancipatory purposes (Featherstone, 2008; Springer, 2010; Staeheli, 2008).

In a landmark publication, Colin Crouch defined this emerging new regime as ‘post-democracy’, a condition he describes as follows:

“While elections certainly exist and can change governments, public electoral debate is a tightly controlled spectacle, managed by rival teams of professional experts in the techniques of persuasion, and considering a small range of issues selected by those teams. The mass of citizens plays a passive, quiescent, even apathetic part, responding only to the signals given them. Behind the spectacle of the electoral game, politics is really shaped in private by interaction between elected governments and elites that overwhelmingly represent business interests... Under the conditions of a post-democracy that increasingly cedes power to business lobbies, there is little hope for an agenda of strong egalitarian policies for the redistribution of power and wealth, or for the restraint of powerful interests” (Crouch, 2004, p. 4).

Richard Rorty associated post-democracy with the rapid erosion of democratic rights and values, and offers an even more chilling vision: “[a]t the end of this process of erosion, democracy would have been replaced by something quite different. This would probably be neither military dictatorship nor Orwellian totalitarianism, but rather a relatively benevolent despotism, imposed by what would gradually become a hereditary nomenklatura” (Rorty, 2004). Jacques Rancière defines post-democracy as consensus democracy, “a political idyll of achieving the common good by an enlightened government of elites buoyed by the confidence of the masses” (Rancière, 1998, p. 93). For him, this post-democratic order revolves around a consensual arrangement in which all those that are named and counted take part and participate within a given and generally accepted and shared/partitioned social and spatial distribution of things and people. While there may be conflicts of interest and opinion, there is widespread agreement over the conditions that exist and what needs to be done (Rancière, 2003a, p. 2).

Geographers have begun to argue and show how post-democratization processes unfold in and through socio-spatial, environmental and scalar transformations. Phil Allmendinger and Graham Haughton (2010), Guy Baeten (2008), Alan Cochrane (2010), Mustafa Dikeç (2007), Gordon MacLeod (2011), Ronan Paddison (2009), Mike Raco (in press), and Kevin Ward (2007), among others, documented how recent transformations in urban governance dynamics mark the emergence of consensual modes of policy making within new institutional configurations articulated around public-private partnerships operating in a frame of generally agreed objectives (like sustainability, competitiveness, responsibility, participation, etc...). Oosterlynck and Swyngedouw (2010), and Swyngedouw (2007b, 2010a) have argued how environmental debate and policing restructures spaces of governmentality in post-democratic directions (see also Bridge, 2008), while Jim Glassman has advanced similar arguments in his work on Thailand (Glassman, 2007). Some have also argued how the flipside of post-democratization forecloses politicization such that outbursts of violence remain one of the few options left to express and stage discontent and dissensus. Urban violence, in particular, has been foregrounded as a socio-spatial marker of post-politicization (Dikeç, 2007; Diken & Laustsen, 2002; Kaulinfraks, 2008; Swyngedouw, 2011; Žižek, 2008a).

The emergence and characteristics of this process of post-democratization combines a series of interrelated dynamics (Mouffe,

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