

## The Melancholy Search For The Political

“All politics is quarrel, and power is the ordering such quarrel sorts out: that much is general. What is not general is the nature of the quarrel or the shape of the ordering.”<sup>1</sup>

### The rare essence of political life

In *Promises of the Political*<sup>2</sup>, Erik Swyngedouw synthesizes a series of arguments that have helped to stabilise a veritable paradigm for the critical analysis of de-politicization, post-politicization and post-democracy in urban, regional and environmental fields of inquiry.<sup>3</sup> Accounts of the post-political and post-democracy can be described as ‘supply-side theories’ of political life.<sup>4</sup> They suggest that governance arrangements that include market mechanisms, private sector actors, and technocratic expertise are designed to insulate decision making from participation and contestation by citizens. From such a perspective, all sorts of phenomenon - the rise of populism, or Brexit, or Trump’s election, or Corbynism, or the latest episode of public protest - are attributed to popular disaffection with the diminished supply of opportunities to engage in agonistic democratic contention.

At the core of *Promises of the Political* is a somewhat generic account of the concept of ‘the political’, presented as the idea that there is a fundamental dimension of irreducible antagonism and contestation that is both constitutive of yet also repressed by mere ‘politics’. This way of conceptualising the political – with the strong emphasis on the definite article - informs the fascistic conservatism of the Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt, the retro-Stalinist chic of Alain Badiou, the Lacanian know-it-all-ism of Slavoj Žižek, various forms of revived liberalism (e.g. the work of Claude Lefort) or civic republicanism (e.g. Hannah Arendt’s work), and best known in and around GeographyLand, various post-Marxist theories of radical democracy (e.g. the work of Chantal Mouffe or Jacques Rancière). Different variations on the concept of the political often share a scholastic disdain for everyday life, the empirical, the methodological, for science (and especially social science). Which raises interesting questions about the validity of the styles of analysis that this form of theory supports in self-consciously empirical fields such as human geography, urban and regional studies, or political ecology.

In *Promises of the Political*, there are three logical steps in the elaboration of the concept of the political, laid out most clearly in Chapter 2 and 3 of the book.

First, political life is conceptually split into two parts, separating ‘politics’ off from ‘the political’. This splitting is mapped onto a specific interpretation of Heidegger’s account of ontological difference, which refers to the distinction between what there is and the fundamental being of what there is, or between the ‘ontic’ and the

---

<sup>1</sup> Clifford Geertz, 1995, *After the Fact: Two Countries, Four Decades, One Anthropologist*. Harvard University Press, p. 39.

<sup>2</sup> Erik Swyngedouw, *Promises of the Political: Insurgent Cities in a Post-Political Environment*. MIT Press, 2018 (pages references in brackets refer to this text).

<sup>3</sup> See also Dikeç, M. 2005. Space, politics and the political. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 23, 171-188; Purcell, M. 2013. *The Down-Deep Delight of Democracy*. Chichester, Wiley-Blackwell.

<sup>4</sup> See Clarke, N., Jennings, W., Moss, J., and Stoker, G. 2018. *The Good Politician: Folk Theories, Political Interaction, and the Rise of Anti-Politics*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

‘ontological’. In the theories of the political of the sort favoured in *Promises of the Political*, it is assumed that the ontological is a kind of layer that in some sense has priority over the merely ontic; by extension, the political is presented as a more fundamental layer than politics. The same hierarchical, derivative interpretation of two layers is also sourced from Lacan’s vocabulary of the Symbolic and the Real.

Second, once the conceptual priority of the political over politics has been established, the essence of the political is then defined in terms of conflict, contestation, hostility, and struggle. In this paradigm, properly political action takes the constitutive framing of politics as its target: “The political arises when the given order of things is questioned” (p. 52). It is supposed that the action of questioning constitutive orders is a discrete moment set-off against more mundane forms of political action that apparently take the ordering of things for granted.

And finally, democracy is then defined as the form of action in which the very essence of the political is itself given expression, if only fleetingly. If the essence of democratic politics is to express the political in its proper sense, it is therefore best expressed in the constant contestation of the boundaries of political life itself.

If genuine democracy is meant to be all about contestation and disagreement over the very meaning of political life, then any example of a politician or an institution or an organisation making a rhetorical appeal to the common good, to consensus, to shared national interests, or to humanity automatically serves as evidence of post-political trends. Likewise, any example of decision-making that involves managerial structures, technocratic expertise, bureaucracy, or market mechanisms will always already be found to be de-politicizing in its tendencies. Governance-beyond-the-state (Ch. 1), or techno-managerial practices (Ch. 2), or climate change (Ch. 5), or urban and regional policy initiatives (Ch. 6) can all easily be made to confirm the basic theoretical propositions of this paradigm because, by definition, any and all forms of action that are oriented to binding decisions, to mobilising scientific knowledge to inform action, or to building legitimacy across social cleavages will always contravene the constricted definition of what counts as proper politics and real democracy.

### **Catching sight of the political**

The strands of thought to which *Promises of the Political* appeals are certainly not, it should be stressed, concerned with just re-affirming the ‘relative autonomy’ of the political (p. 24). Their shared concern is to identify a non-reductive principle of undetermined autonomy that can define the object of political thought. A theoretical commitment to avoid the reduction of political action to a mere representation or refraction of other realms - such as the economy or the social - leads to a stark conceptual spatialization of the political, and to the celebration of the rare forms of seemingly spontaneous action through which it is contested and re-instituted. Both of these features are evident in *Promises of the Political*.

Throughout the book, various recent examples of urban-based protest – Turkish protesters in Taksim Square and Gezi Park in 2013, the ‘umbrella movement’ in Hong Kong in 2014, the Occupy movement, rioters in the Parisian *banlieue* – are invoked as proof of the emblematic status of urban insurgency as the medium in which the stultifying consensus of our otherwise post-political age is interrupted and democracy is enacted, however temporarily. The presentation of exemplary spatial manifestations

of political insurrection as the very purest expression of democracy reflects a mode of theorizing in which the political is simultaneously disclosed and foreclosed by a spatial movement: an excluded or marginalised figure is the point around which systems of power are closed and secured; in turn, these same figures are understood as the pivots around which those same systems might be pried open and re-made.

There is no good reason to hold to such a melodramatic, bivalent picture of the relationship between instituted orderings of power and their political contestation. The best lesson to be taken from ruminations on the concept of the political is straightforward enough – it is simply that the content and form of political life is historically and geographically variable. In short, the concept of the political is best approached genealogically, rather than ontologically.<sup>5</sup> Far from thinking of fields of governance, policy implementation, or decision-making as examples of post-democratic ‘police’ administration, we would be better advised to think of myriad practices of administration, government, management – of *rule* – as always involving claims and counter-claims and therefore perfectly capable of generating a dynamic of democratization.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps we should follow Michel Foucault in affirming that it is in arenas focussed upon the ways in which society is actually governed that one finds “political problems in the strictest sense.”<sup>7</sup>

The vocabulary of ghosts and spectres with which *Promises of the Political* concludes inadvertently reveals the degree to which ontologies of the political remain backward-looking: diagnoses of our post-political present rely on images of what politics used to be like - in certain places at least - and it can only ever seem to recognize new forms of political action when they take on familiar guises (street protest, basically). This is a paradigm that is shaped above all by a recurring failure to work through the loss of faith in models of politics that reigned over critical thought for much of the twentieth-century. The ontological interpretation of the political is, after all, always articulated in a melancholic register. It provides a theory of political life that remains stubbornly attached to something that has been lost – to a concept of totalitarianism that is hardly adequate to contemporary forms of illiberal democratization; or to an image of total social change that can only now be affirmed as a fleeting intimation of the sublime amongst the mundane orderings of the everyday. To properly appreciate the political dynamics of the world as it is now requires us to work harder to live unburdened by the weight of expectations that have not just been misplaced or repressed but which are lost, for good.

---

<sup>5</sup> See Barnett, C. 2017. *The Priority of Injustice: Locating Democracy in Critical Theory*. University of Georgia Press.

<sup>6</sup> See Chatterjee, P. 2004. *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on popular politics in most of the world*. New York, Columbia University Press.

<sup>7</sup> Foucault, M. 2010. *The Government of Self and Others. Lectures at the Collège de France 1982-1983*. London, Palgrave Macmillan, p. 159.