



POLITICS AND THE POLITICAL

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Introduction

The global uprisings of the last two years (the Arab Spring, the occupations of public space, the protests against the financial crisis and austerity measures, and various experiments of direct democracy, have opened up the political in remarkable ways. They have introduced new tactics, new claims, and a sense of the future as radically different from a present understood as unjust and authoritarian. Politics as we know it – top-down and wedded to fixed procedures – has reacted by rejecting direct democracy, especially at ‘home’. The more the theatre of the political expands, the more the theatre of politics closes down.

In the liberal democracies, which are the focus of my talk, formal politics, whether left or right, has been reluctant to question the presumptions of market society, individualism, representative democracy, and rule by experts. Anything challenging these presumptions, both substantively and procedurally, has been judged to be at best a distraction and at worst dangerous. History in the making is being forced, like sand in the egg timer, through the strictures of tried and tested political forms, framed in public culture by a powerful coalition of vested interests, including big parties, corporations and the media as anomalous. The result is that while the terrain of struggle is becoming more plural, autonomous, and counter-hegemonic, this is not how it appears in public culture. If the political tools are becoming hybrid, this is not how the political establishment wants it.

The enemies of ‘official’ politics are acutely aware of this contradiction but generally unperturbed by it, believing that further agitation can only weaken an authoritarian order that stands on its last legs, strengthen horizontal politics, and make more visible a plural future in the making, run by communities, social movements, informal organisations, and the like. The tide of history is turning. I am not sure this is true as far as the institutionalisation of social justice and well-being is concerned, for the victories of the insurrectionary movements remain fragile and fragmented (though not their

affective and symbolic ones), and the politics of the old order is anything but on its last legs, ready to concede, eviscerated. It is still very much in control of the distribution of wellbeing, the formation of public opinion, and framing the future as catastrophic if not returned to the status quo (with some concessions on the margins). The strictures of the egg timer are very real.

Surprisingly, the organised left – in or out of power – has been largely invisible amidst the developments of the last two years. Too timid, weak, or arrogant, established social democratic or socialist forces have kept away from the grass-root developments, seeing them as marginal or misplaced. They have neither allied with the insurrectionary forces at home, nor sought to learn from them. Instead, locked in tradition or inertia and blinded by the power of corporations and media culture, the organised left has assumed that the only way forward is a politics of the status quo. Agitation, the politics of social transformation, explicit commitment to the equal and just society, and the critique of vested power are nowhere to be seen in its repertory, only electoral appeasement, the pursuit of power for its own sake, and weak defence of redistributive capitalism.

Does this absence matter? Not much to the protagonists of direct democracy, either out of suspicion of top-down politics or because they feel that agitation in its own right will lead to change. I wish to argue the opposite: that without the involvement of the organised left, the chances of a politics of social transformation able to deliver tangible outcomes will remain precarious because the many fragmented and transient beauties of the counter-culture require legislative and institutional protection to deliver lasting benefits, and because the forces of maintenance of the status quo are powerful and require a similar organisational counter-weight, one that the official left can lead in mobilising. I am acutely conscious of the unpopularity of my argument among those of you committed to the politics of direct democracy.

But if it helps, I am about to make myself unpopular with the organised left too. I do not see the solution as that of an unchanged left – major parties and unions – throwing its weight behind the grass-root struggles. Quite the opposite. As Nigel Thrift and I propose in our recent book *Arts of the Political*, at a time of near extinction in the liberal democracies, the left needs to thoroughly reinvent itself by becoming a protagonist – in the way that the experiments of direct democracy have and in the way that the

Latin American left initiated ten years ago – in refashioning the goals, modalities and instruments of politics.

The official left needs to become much more ambitious, a force with world-making intention, carried forward through new political arts capable of disarming the politics and ambitions of the status quo. This is, of course, asking the nearly impossible, but consider the possibility that without such renewal, the left will wither in any case, given the colonisation of the social worldwide by neoliberal corporatism and consumer capitalism. Consider that in its formative years – late 19th century Europe, the anti-colonial 20th century, and diverse struggles against dictatorship – the left gained traction by radically altering the prospectus and its means.

Formative Arts

Let me dwell briefly on the late European late 19th century when the left first emerged. The years between 1880 and 1914 in Europe tell us something significant about the passage from agitation to radical reform through an overhaul of the ground of politics. This was a period when against the grain of generalised misery, oppression and political closure, the reformist and revolutionary Left came into being, managing to both change hearts and minds as well as secure lasting material and institutional gains. Many were the transformational struggles and achievements of the time, from the rise of the labour movement and socialist, social democratic or pragmatist diagrams of wellbeing and community, to campaigns for alternative lifestyles such as vegetarianism, the great outdoors and sexual liberation, along with the first stirrings of agitation against imperial colonisation. It was an extraordinary period of mass mobilisation and political inventiveness, but let me settle on two brief examples to illustrate the claim I want to make.

The first example might be described as the ‘Pragmatic Marxism’ of the German Socialist Party (SPD). The SPD was formed in 1875 amidst considerable uncertainty about its direction and reach. Led by the two towering figures August Bebel and Karl Kautsky, the party quickly rose to dominate the European socialist movement, but importantly it developed a significant presence in Germany (1 million members by 1912,

and 35% of the vote in the Reichstag). The well-known factors behind the SPD's success at a time of open jostle between nascent industrial interests, waning aristocratic power, Bismarckian autocracy, and highly differentiated and divided mass concerns include the power of ideology, strong leadership, and organised discipline. But there was more.

Firstly, the SPD managed to project a radically different future around a small and emerging industrial proletariat as a credible future for all. These first socialists 'invented', as Donald Sassoon has argued, a new political subject and a vanguard actor – the 'working class' and the 'new model worker' – out of a poor, desperate, fragmented and downtrodden working mass. This was an extraordinary political invention for the time, made tangible, secondly, by the ability of the SPD (and 'free unions') to win significant practical reforms at the time (better wages and working conditions and welfare protections for members). Thirdly, the SPD was able to clothe the movement with the 'beauty of a thousand stars' as the Austrian socialist leader of the time Julius Braunthal put it, with the help of new media including popular books such as Bebel's *Women and Socialism*, pamphlets, newspapers, social gatherings, and cultural and recreational societies playing out the dream.

While the German example illustrates the power of a politics of pragmatic utopianism, the British women's movement during the 1910s is interesting for its overhaul of politics itself as a landscape, technology and field of actors. This movement was not only about winning the vote for women but also about redefining the actors and beneficiaries of collective life – more specifically, about questioning public culture as a masculine arena, separate from the private in which women played a particular role. British feminism altered the meaning of both – the public and the private – and in the process, brought a host of hidden injuries, concerns and desires into the public realm. But to gain traction, it had to invent new arts to prise the political away from established politics, subsequently diminishing the latter.

Three 'ontological' expansions stand out. The first is mobilisation around the figure of the 'new woman' after 1890, who, debated across a wealth of books and magazines, helped to expand a force until then fighting for the vote into one campaigning for radically new meanings of womanhood (e.g. equality within the family, the right to divorce and practice sexual freedom, presence in economy and voice in public and po-

litical life). The second is the projection of the woman as a collective subject, particularly as the campaign for women's rights in the workplace grew, linking feminism to the burgeoning labour and socialist movements and also bridging working women and middle-class women at home attracted by the 'new woman' cause. Feminism joined a broader struggle for equality and justice. The third expansion is the overhaul of the tools of a political cause, especially through the inventions of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) under the Pankhursts: its military organisation, clamorous journalism, cultivation of the car, banner and book as signs of being modern, its songs and plays, public confrontations and prison spells, and highly visible protests and disturbances. All of this enabled new formats of agitation politics to force their way into public consciousness and the rules of political conduct.

Contemporary Implications

Clearly, such a selective, post-hoc, and decontextualised reading of the history of Left political achievement is fraught with all the pitfalls of comparative research. But, I think a general point can be made. This formative Left proved to be influential – by design or default – because of its world-making qualities. It thoroughly changed the meaning of the political and its subjects by: (a) designing credible utopias and imaginaries of emancipation out of existing injuries and hidden interests; (b) building affective desire and surge through new technologies of representation, combat and identification; and (c) converting claims into practical gains through effective organisation and institutionalisation.

My thesis is that the organised Left today needs to recover this capacity by making something out of the very many injustices and counter-currents that our societies confront. For example, as this slide/sheet shows, there is no shortage of counter-organisation in the face of capitalist entrenchment, inequality, environmental destruction, and technological proliferation. The organised left could make these experiments its cause, explicitly committing to a politics of transformation, rather than slavishly pursuit of the status quo.

Figure 1. Counter-hegemonic Experiments

Challenges	Experiments
Market Fundamentalism	Negative taxes, basic wage, employee ownership, cooperatives, social enterprises, not-for-profit foundations, fair trade/ethical trade, new forms of market regulation, ethical consumption (from packaging to supply chains), profit sharing, non-monetary exchange, competition law, corporate social responsibility and transparency, micro-finance, low-cost housing, socially useful commodities, workplace democracy, gifting, land borrowing
Financialisation	Socially enabling credit and money, ethical pension funds and ethical investment, Islamic finance, non-intermediated forms of payment, social accounting, slowing down transactions (e.g. circuit breakers), public ownership, risk sharing, financial transparency, limits to pay differentials and dividends, shareholder activism, tax profiling, anti-monopoly
Global inequality	Tobin tax, women's empowerment, alternative trading blocs, neglected diseases, open access patent banks, paid schooling for under-aged workers, affordable basic provisions, consumer boycotts, anti-slavery/people smuggling campaigns, expanded rights agendas, human security measures, rights of displaced peoples, indigenous peoples movements, anti-violence legislation
Climate Change	Carbon trading, new forms of ecological identity, reproducible farming, environmental justice for the poor, low-energy forms of technological acceleration, sustainable lifestyles, deliberative environmentalism, planetary responsibility, sustainable cities, environmental audits, alternative energy, protecting the commons (e.g. forests), sensing of nature using technology, slow food
Human Being	Genetic distributive justice, anti-profiling in insurance and health care, access to new technology for the poor, equal access to human augmentation, intelligent environments available to all, democratic forms of human mapping, techno-democracy, treatment against unequal bodily life chances, animal rights and trans-human initiatives, new forms of empathy made possible by technology (e.g. bringing distant humans and nature up close), immersive environments

* Source: Amin and Thrift (2013)

But, from what I have said earlier, embracing the counter-hegemonic alone will not suffice, for it adds no traction. The organised left needs to become involved in transforming the political terrain itself in ways that disarm expectations and routines, introduce new political technologies and actors, render corporatism and exaggerated consumption anomalous, and work on new affects of care and responsibility. How does it do this? By attending to the arts of traction, but in ways that alter public understanding of itself, political possibility, and future possibility.

This is not a question of visualising the house on the hill and the journey towards it, or predetermining the quantities and qualities of the equal and just society, but instead, one of building imaginaries, sentiments, projects and political tools that are experienced – and desired – as the foothills of a hitherto unimagined new world, that show that the status quo is deficient, that more is less of what we already know or have.

I see the challenge, in short, as one of developing world making capacity by making injuries, injustices and alternatives visible, building momentum and sentiment around them, making their politics contagious, ensuring institutional traction and real reform. Some of the detail of what this means in the context of the five global challenges mentioned earlier is shown in figure 2. The sum of this kind of amplification would be a gradual alteration of the landscape of political opinion and expectation, with so much more added in terms of possibilities, rights, responsibilities, deliberative audit and decisional power that the politics of action by the few for the few starts looking distinctively anomalous and unacceptable.

The left today is some way distant from this kind of politics of renewal. Instead, when it is not appeasing global elites, markets and the citizen as consumers, it engages in the purity of manifestos, for example, a new social democracy of income redistribution, collective ownership, public goods, the social state, market controls, basic income, pro-poor development, social enterprise, job-sharing, sustainable consumption, environmental stewardship, and so on (c.f. Pianta and Gerbaudo, 2012). However, the strength of support for these kinds of exercises is weak, not because the need for such reforms does not exist, or the public has been fetishised, or the guardians of the status quo are invincible, but because the theatre of political possibility has closed down. The tangibility and palpability of another world, so different from our own, has become unthinkable beyond the corridors of autonomous communities, viral events and vir-

tual environments. A return of the left to a politics of world-making, where its labour focuses on the ground on which manifestos might land, would be a step in the right direction.

Figure 2. Arts of Left Mobilisation

Challenges	Political Arts				
	Disclosure	Affects	Contagion	Organisation	
Market Fundamentalism	Markets as not invisible Markets that are regulated and do actually work as social markets	Positive uses of anxiety New forms of justification and worth	Build on success of ethical consumerism 'Viral campaigns'	Politics of design (active construction of ecologies of worth)	Redefining exchange (e.g. barter, auctions) Social economy Social tag to market relations (e.g. showing origins of products)
Financialisation	New legal structures The multiple networks of finance Salaries and bonuses	New means of tracking market sentiments Dissipating greed and instant gratification	Filters, e.g. panics as less challenging (trading moratoriums) Press regulation to stop panics and booms	Global regulatory structures More surveillance of settlement Tracking trading models and practices	New forms of currency New market and regulatory structures Nationalisation
Global Inequality	Quasi experience of the harms of inequality	Fairness, building on behavioural dispositions Satisficing and sharing	Action against child labour, minimum wage, sexual slavery, trade in body parts	State welfare Global Glotaxationalism powerment	Social Economy New deal Tobin tax Living wage Social service and public goods
Climate Change	Experience global warming closely New notions of hazard and risk End of the world	Care of place/ earth Futurity Mobilising trauma of ecological meltdown	Capacity for metamorphosis and mutability New kinds of ecological habitat and ecological living	Public controversies and unfamiliar shapes of organisation Making new ecologies fixed and demanding	Individual and subcontracted responsibility (e.g. eco-homes) Local energy companies and distributed energy Making carbon markets work Reworking notions of closeness
Human Being	Revealing the material composition of the body in new ways (e.g. imaging) Environments where humans and nature co-exist	Making the hybrid normal Affinity	Replication of new technologies that radiate circles of communication and community Shared global thresholds	New forms of sorting/ software Welfare extended and protected	Bio-art/body art Prosthetics and technologies for life

*Source: Amin and Thrift (2013)

