

## **Where is the political?**

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“Western democracies are only the political facades of economic power. A façade with colours, banners, endless debates about the 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 commissioners of economic power” (Saramago 2006).

“In fact, historical faith has changed camps. Today’s faith seems to be the prerogative of governors and their experts. ... Proclaiming themselves to be simply administrating the local consequences of global historical necessity, our governments take great care to banish the democratic supplement. Through the invention of supra-State institutions which are not States, which are not accountable to any people, they realize the immanent ends of their vary practice: depoliticize political matters, reserve them for places that are non-places, places that do not leave any space for the democratic invention of polemic. So the State and their experts can quietly agree among themselves” (Rancière 2006a: 81-82).

## **Political Passions and Antipodean Desires**

The history of critical and progressive (radical) geography, as documented in Antipode’s 39 years of successfully publishing radical scholarship, has been marked by a fidelity (to use Badiou’s notion) to a politics of emancipatory transformation and to the creation of socially just (after Etienne Balibar’s call for *égaliberté*) geographies. In this sense, the appearance of Antipode in 1969 signalled an event, an intervention in the existing state of geography that reframed and transgressed the geographical ‘state of the situation’.

Implicit and occasionally explicit reference to normative notions of equality, justice, and freedom motivated the impulse of both editors and contributors to further the formation, both theoretically and practically, of a genuinely humanising geography. Of course, the

epistemological and ontological parameters of what constitutes proper and properly radical critical emancipatory enquiry and politics have changed and shifted over the past decades. Indeed, many of the theoretical and philosophical foundations of critical emancipatory thought have been examined, re-examined, re-formulated and often radically changed as an early emphasis on class was gradually extended to include (and occasionally replaced by) a wider range of other, often competing, theoretical accounts and political claims. Surprisingly enough, relatively little critical reflection has been devoted to what constitutes the proper political domain, to what and where is 'the political'.

In most of geography's critical theoretical apparatuses, the political is usually assumed to emerge from what I would call a broadly 'socio-spatial' or 'socio-environmental' analysis. Put simply, a critical theory of the 'social' (despite the wide-ranging dispute over what exactly constitutes 'the social') is considered to be the foundational basis from which a politics can (or will) emerge, both theoretically and practically. It is the social condition, the state of the situation, however theorised, that gives rise to the political, that striates the political subject. Substantive critical social theory, whether Marxist or post-marxist, structuralist or post-structuralist, essentialist or non-essentialist, centred or decentred, opens the terrain for proper political intervention and action; the debate usually focusing on how exactly one or the other epistemological framework constitutes the foundation for a more or less empowering, emancipatory and/or transformative politics. And every twist and turn in the meandering of critical theory over the last decades announced its own transformative political subject with its geographically constituted and spatial tactics: the figure of the proletarian for Marxists, woman for

feminists, the creative class/cosmopolitan multitude for liberal neoliberals, the subaltern subject for post-colonial theorists, heterogeneously networked human/post-human assemblages for Latourians, the decentred subject for Lacanians, etc.... From these perspectives, the political is seen as an emergent field that derives from substantive analysis: politically correct tactics flow from theoretically correct analysis and critical social theory proposes the location of the properly political. Emancipatory politics will arise out of proper substantive analysis, of grasping the contours and dynamics of the states of the situation. In sum, from this vantage point, the political is not constituted as a proper domain of intellectual engagement; it is derivative, its content and practice 'derive' from processes operative in other domains.

In contrast to the above, I maintain in this paper, after Slavoj Žižek (Žižek 2006), that there is a parallax gap between (political) subjectivity and the political, between 'politics' (*la politique*) and 'the political' (*le politique*). While politics refers to the interplay of social, political and other power relations in the shaping of everyday policies and procedures, the political is the space for the arrangement of public encounter of heterogeneous groups and individuals (Marchart 2007). In other words, the sphere of the political is not and can never be sutured or exhausted by the social – the political needs to be theorised as a proper 'autonomous' field. This means that a political sequence cannot be theorised from processes of subjectivation, from the dynamics of the social.

In recent years, a series of political philosophers have begun to re-examine 'the political', whether it can be thought and, if so, what does constitute a proper political space and a properly democratic political sequence. For Alain Badiou, for example, socio-economic

“analysis and politics are absolutely disconnected”: the former is a matter for expertise and implies hierarchy; the latter is not. An absolute separation has to be maintained, he argues, between “science and politics, of analytic description and political prescription” ((Badiou 1998: 2); see also (Hallward 2003a)). A generic or axiomatic politics affirms “the political capacity of all people, the principle that “everyone can occupy the space of politics” (Badiou, in (Hallward 2003a: 225)). This means that for Badiou, the political is not a reflection of something else, like the cultural, the social, or the economic. As Claude Lefort argues, the place of power in democracy is ultimately structurally vacant (Lefort 1994), it is a site open for occupation by those who call it into being and claim its occupation, irrespective of the ‘place’ they occupy within the social edifice.

This paper seeks to problematize ‘the political’ in the context of the transformations of the democratic-political condition over the past 30 years or so. Democracy is indeed -- as José Saramago pointed out -- sacrosanct these days. Political democracy has become an empty signifier: it is beyond question and critical enquiry. While considerable intellectual effort goes into excavating the practices of instituted policies, very little attention is paid to what constitutes political democracy as a political configuration associated with a particular public space (Marchart 2007: 36). There seems to be general consensus that, after 1991, history is genuinely over as most of us now live in properly instituted democracies. Political democracy is not any longer interrogated as to what it is or might become. Although considerable intellectual effort has been mobilised to think around ‘what to do’, ‘how to do it’ and ‘what constitutes the proper entry point for being political’, relatively little attention was given to what is properly ‘political’, what is

properly emancipatory, what are properly equal and free democratic public spaces. In other words, where is the political?

The aim of this contribution is to re-centre political thought again by exploring the views of a series of political philosophers and interlocutors who share the view that ‘the political’ needs urgent attention, particularly in an environment that is sutured by a view of the ‘end of politics’ and the consolidation of a post-political and post-democratic condition. In the first part of the paper, I shall briefly consider the reduction, accelerating rapidly over the past few decades, of the political terrain to a post-democratic arrangement of oligarchic policing. The latter refers to the domination, to the attempted suturing of social space, by an instituted police order in which expert administration (a science/technology-management-policy assemblage), the naturalisation of the political to the management of a presumably inevitable ordering, and the desire for ‘good governance’ by an administrative elite in tandem with an economic oligarchy has occupied and increasingly tries to fill out, to suture, the spatiality of the political. In other words, the space of the political is increasingly colonised and saturated by the spaces of policies. In a second part, I shall attempt to re-centre the political by drawing on the work of a range of political theorists and philosophers who have begun to question this post-political order. Despite significant differences among them, they share a series of common understandings about what constitutes the domain of the political. The theme of the final section will be to consider the contours for reclaiming political democracy. I shall argue that democracy and democratic politics, and the spaces for democratic engagement need to be taken back from the post-political oligarchic constituent police order that has occupied and filled out the spaces of instituted democracy. It is in these

political spaces that utopias as concrete political interventions germinate. The sort of utopia that Žižek argues is urgently needed today: “[t]he true utopia is when the situation is so without issue, without a way to resolve it within the coordinates of the possible that out of the pure urge of survival you have to invent a new space. Utopia is not kind of a free imagination; utopia is a matter of innermost urgency. You are forced to imagine it as the only way out, and this is what we need today” (Žižek 2005).

### **The Post-Political and Post-Democratic Condition**

“There is a shift from the model of the *polis* founded on a centre, that is, a public centre or *agora*, to a new metropolitan spatialisation that is certainly invested in a process of de-politicisation, which results in a strange zone where it is impossible to decide what is private and what is public” (Agamben 2006).

Pierre Rosanvallon, in his search for a renewed political democracy, laments the recent obsession with (good) ‘governance’ as the new name of a government that would be sufficient for everyone, that would encompass, suture, the social order. For him, this replaces “politics 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 law” (Rosanvallon 2006: 228). These arrangements of ‘good’ governance relate to those who embrace “the development of a new type of civil society that would finally substitute for the world of politics. On this front one finds the naïve representatives of NGOs – leftists who have re-invented

themselves as humanitarians – and the executives of multinational corporations, all of whom commune together today in a touching defense of an international civil society. The utopias of the one, alas, are hardly different from the hypocrisies of the others” (Rosanvallon 2006: 228). Slavoj Žižek defines such ‘governance’ as post-political arrangements that focus on the administration (policing) of environmental, social, economic or other domains: “The ultimate sign of post-politics in all Western countries”, he argues, “is the growth of a managerial approach to government: government is reconceived as a managerial function, deprived of its proper political dimension” (Žižek 2002a: 303). This post-political frame reduces politics to the sphere of governing and polic(y)ing through allegedly participatory deliberative procedures, with a given distribution of places and functions, one that excludes those who are deemed ‘irresponsible’ (see (Raco 2003);(Baeten 2008);(Swyngedouw 2008a)). It is policy-making set within a given distribution of what is possible and driven by a desire for consent within a context of recognized difference. The stakeholders (i.e. those with recognized speech) are known in advance and disruption or dissent is reduced to the instituted and institutional modalities of governing, the technologies of expert administration and management, to the dispositifs (see (Agamben 2007)) of ‘good governance’:

“In post-politics, the conflict of global ideological visions embodied in different parties which compete for power is replaced by the collaboration of enlightened technocrats (economists, public opinion specialists ...) and liberal multiculturalists; via the process of negotiation of interests, a compromise is reached in the guise of a more or less universal consensus. Post-politics thus

emphasizes the need to leave old ideological visions behind and confront new issues, armed with the necessary expert knowledge and free deliberation that takes people's concrete needs and demands into account." (Žižek 1999b: 198) "The political (the space of litigation in which the excluded can protest the wrong/injustice done to them), [is] foreclosed ... It is crucial to perceive ... the post-political suspension of the political in the reduction of the state to a mere police agent servicing the (consensually established) needs of the market forces and multiculturalist tolerant humanitarianism" (Žižek, 2006: 72).

This post-political condition takes the scandalous proposition of Marx that the state is the executive branch of the capitalist class as literally true: identifying politics with the management of capitalism is no longer a hidden secret behind the appearance of formal democracy; it has become the openly declared basis for democratic legitimacy.

Maximizing the enjoyment of the people can only be achieved by declaring the inability or incapacity of the people (as a political name) to arrange or manage themselves the conditions of this maximization. The power of post-political democracy resides, in other words, in the declaration of its impotence to act politically (Rancière 1998: 113).

Moreover, any denunciation or any struggle against this tactic of depoliticisation is regarded as going against historical necessity. Once again drawing on a populist and perverted Marxism, those protesting are deemed to go against the grain of history and belong to an outdated social group embracing transcended ideologies. The irony is indeed how depoliticisation is effectuated by a certain return to Marx (Rancière 2005b: 95).

The post-political in its instituted democratic form, of course, elevates the ‘scandal of democracy’ to new heights. This ‘scandal’ refers to the democratic promise of the identity of the state with the people, a promise that must, of necessity, annul the constitutive antagonisms that cut through ‘the people’. While the place of power in democracy is structurally vacant (as it is liberated from the god-given location on which pre-modern state power was legitimized – (see (Lefort 1994)), yet is metaphorically filled with ‘the people’ as sovereign, those who occupy the place of power and democracy must suture the social order, contain the inherent antagonisms of the social order by suturing social space; the totality of the social is presented in the body of the state. This impossibility, the rupture of the democratic condition from within, is exactly where Claude Lefort (but see also Hannah Arendt from a slightly different perspective (Arendt 1973)) locates the totalitarian kernel of democratic forms (Lefort 1986). Democracy’s dark underbelly resides exactly in how its identification with the people can drive towards a position where the occupation of the place of power identifies with the whole of the people, disavows the constitutive conflicts within the social order and the gap between the place of political and the social ordering of the people. Post-politics is caught in this tension: the disappearance of the political as the space for the enunciation of dissensus (see below) and the suturing of social space by the post-political order harbours authoritarian gestures (see (Swyngedouw 2000)), exactly by foreclosing the possibility for the political to emerge.

In sum, post-politics is of necessity a violation of democracy. It requires foreclosing or displacing dissent and manufacturing consent and, therefore, annuls the proper democratic political. Indeed, the tension between the Multiple of the Political and the

Singular or the One of Policy (Swyngedouw 2008b) is overlaid by the ‘scandal of democracy’, its impossible core that promises pluralist dissensual arrangements, yet institutes exclusive, singular, consensual practices. Indeed, post-politics refuses politicisation which aims at “more” than the negotiation of interests. A consensual post-politics arises that either eliminates fundamental conflict (usually by invoking the whole of the people – (see (Swyngedouw 2007a) and/or elevates it to Schmittian antithetical ultra-politics (Schmitt 1996). The consensual times we are currently living in have thus eliminated a genuine political space of disagreement.

Propelled on by a drive towards reflexivity, the need to make decisions on processes with high risk low probability (Beck’s risk society thesis) on the one hand and the injunction to choose in the absence of any grounding or guarantee in truth, transfers administrative powers increasingly to a technocratic-scientific elite who is supposed to know and (cap)able to manage the situation. While difficulties and problems are staged and generally accepted as problematic (such as, for example, climate change, social exclusion, economic competitiveness, and the like), they need to be dealt with through compromise, managerial and technical arrangement, and the production of consensus.

Consensus, in a very precise sense, is for Rancière the key condition of post-politics:

“Consensus refers to that which is censored ... Consensus means that whatever your personal commitments, interests and values may be, you perceive the same things, you give them the same name. But there is no contest on what appears, on what is given in a situation and as a situation. Consensus means that the only point of contest lies on what has to be done as a response to a given situation.

Correspondingly, dissensus and disagreement don't only mean conflict of interests, ideas and so on. They mean that there is a debate on the sensible givens of a situation, a debate on that which you see and feel, on how it can be told and discussed, who is able to name it and argue about it ... It is about the visibilities of the places and abilities of the body in those places, about the partition of private and public spaces, about the very configuration of the visible and the relation of the visible to what can be said about it ... Consensus is the dismissal of politics as a polemical configuration of the common world" (Rancière 2003b: §4-6).

Consensus, as the "the annulment of dissensus" announces the "end of politics" (Rancière 2001: §32). This post-political world eludes choice and freedom (other than those tolerated by the consensus). However, consensus does not equal peace or absence of fundamental conflict (Rancière 2005a: 8). Indeed, in the absence of real politicization, the only position of real dissent is that of either the traditionalist or the fundamentalist. The only way to deal with them is by sheer violence, by suspending their 'humanitarian' and 'democratic' rights. The post-political relies on either including all in a consensual pluralist order and on excluding radically those who posit themselves outside the consensus. For the latter, as Agamben (Agamben 2005) argues, the law is suspended; they are literally put outside the law and treated as extremists and terrorists: those who are not with us are irremediably against us, they constitute the enemy. Invoking the Whole/the One of the people, while denying the constitutive antagonisms and splits within the people and that cut through the social order, post-political governance is

necessarily exclusive, partial, and predicated upon outlawing those that do not subscribe to the consensual arrangement. That is exactly why for Agamben 'the Camp' has become the core figure to identify the condition of our time. In other words, a Schmittian ultra-politics that lurks behind and underneath the post-political consensual order and does not tolerate an outside, that sutures the entire social space by the tyranny of the police (state) and squeezes out the political, pits those who 'participate' in the instituted configurations of the consensual post-political order radically against those who are placed outside, like the sans-papiers, political islam, radical environmentalists, communists and alter-globalists, or the otherwise marginalized. The riots in the suburbs of France's big cities in the fall of 2005 and the police responses to this event were classic violent examples of such urban ultra-politics (see Dikec, 2007). This post-political consensus, therefore, is radically reactionary as it forestalls the articulation of divergent, conflicting, and alternative trajectories of future socio-environmental and socio-spatial possibilities and assemblages. There is no contestation over the givens of the situation, over the partition of the sensible, there is only debate over the technologies of management, the arrangements of policing, the configuration of those who already have a stake, whose voice is already recognized as legitimate. Consider, for example, how current climate change policy aims to retro-fit the climate with technological-managerial interventions in order to continue as before, in order to make sure nothing changes fundamentally (see (Swyngedouw 2007a), so that things go on as before! (Dean 2006).

Rancière, Mouffe and Crouch associate the political 'form' of this post-political consensus with the emergence of post-democratic institutional configurations:

“Postdemocracy is the government practice and conceptual legitimation of a democracy *after the demos*, a democracy that has eliminated the appearance, miscount, and dispute of the people and is thereby reducible to the sole interplay of state mechanisms and combinations of social energies and interests ...

Consensus democracy is a reasonable agreement between individuals and social groups who have understood that knowing what is possible and negotiating between partners are a way for each party to obtain the optimal share that the objective givens of the situation allow them to hope for and which is preferable to conflict. But for parties to opt for discussion rather than a fight, they must exist as parties who then have to choose between two ways of obtaining their share ....

What consensus thus presupposes is the disappearance of any gap between a party to a dispute and a part of society .... It is, in a word, the disappearance of politics” (Rancière 1998: 102) (see also (Mouffe 2005: 29).

This arrangement assumes that “all parties are known and a world in which everything is on show, in which parties are counted with none left over and in which everything can be solved by objectifying problems” (Rancière 1998: 102). There is no excess left over and above that what is instituted. There is indeed a close relationship between the post-political condition and the functioning of the political system. Colin Crouch, Chantalle Mouffe and others insist that this kind of consensual post-politics is paralleled by the rise of a post-democratic institutional configuration ((Crouch 2000, 2004). For Colin Crouch, there is a significant decline of government by the people and for the people. Although the formal configuration of democracy is still intact, there is a proliferating arsenal of

new processes that bypass, evacuate or articulate with these formal institutions. I have elsewhere defined constituted post-democracy as embodying new forms of autocratic Governance-Beyond-the-State (Swyngedouw 2005) in which the act of governing is reconfigured on the basis of a stakeholder arrangement of governance in which the traditional state forms (national, regional, or local government) partakes together with experts, NGOs, and other 'responsible' partners (see Crouch, 2004) in partitioning the sensible, in organizing the 'distribution of places and functions'. This is the condition of post-1991 democracy. Not only is the political arena evacuated from radical dissent, critique, and fundamental conflict, but the parameters of democratic governing itself are being shifted, announcing new forms of governmentality, in which traditional disciplinary society is transfigured into a society of control through disembedded networks of governance. These new glocal forms of 'governance', operative at a range of articulated spatial scales, are expressive of the post-political configuration (Mouffe 2005: 103) (Swyngedouw 2007b) (Swyngedouw 2008a).

These arrangements of 'governance-beyond-the-state' are resolutely put forward as an idealized normative model (see (Le Galès 2002) (Schmitter 2002) that promise to fulfill the conditions of good government "in which the boundary between organisations and public and private sectors has become permeable" (Stoker 1998: 38). They are constituted as presumably horizontally networked associations, and based on interactive relations between independent and interdependent actors that share a high degree of consensus and trust, despite internal conflict and oppositional agendas, within selectively inclusive participatory institutional or organisational settings. They imply a common purpose, joint action, a framework of shared values, continuous interaction and the wish to achieve

collective benefits that cannot be gained by acting independently (Stoker 1998) (Rakodi 2003). It is predicated upon a consensual agreement on the existing conditions (the state of the situation) and the main objectives to be achieved. They exhibit an institutional configuration based on the inclusion of private market actors, civil society groups, and parts of the 'traditional' state apparatus (Lemke 2002) in which a particular rationality of governing is combined with new technologies, instruments, and tactics of conducting the process of collective rule-setting, implementation, and often including policing as well.. The mobilised technologies of governance revolve around individualisation, reflexive risk-calculation (self-assessment), accountancy rules and accountancy based disciplining, quantification and bench-marking of performance. As Lemke (2002: 50) argues, such arrangements announce "a transformation of politics that restructures the power relations in society. What we observe today is not a diminishment or reduction of state sovereignty and planning capacities, but a displacement from formal to informal techniques of government and the appearance of new actors on the scene of government (e.g. NGOs), that indicate fundamental transformations in statehood and a renewed relation between state and civil society actors".

Politics is hereby reduced to the sphere of policy-making, to the domain of governing and polic(y)ing through allegedly (and often imposed) participatory deliberative procedures, with a given distribution of places and functions. Consensual policy-making in which the stakeholders (i.e. those with recognized speech) are known in advance and where disruption or dissent is reduced to debates over the institutional modalities of governing and the technologies of expert administration or management, announces the end of

politics, annuls dissent from the consultative spaces of policy making and evacuates the proper political from the public sphere. In this post-democratic post-political constitution, adversarial politics (of the left/right variety or of radically divergent struggles over imagining and naming different socio-environmental futures for example) are considered hopelessly out of date. Although disagreement and debate are of course still possible, they operate within an overall model of elite consensus and agreement (Crouch 2004), subordinated to a managerial-technocratic regime (see also (Jörke 2005) (Blühdorn 2006)), sustained by a series of populist tactics. What is at stake then, is the practice of genuine democracy, of a return to the polis, the public space for the encounter and negotiation of disagreement, where those who have no place, are not counted or named, can acquire, or better still, appropriate voice, become part of the police. But before we can consider this, we need to return to the possibilities of ‘thinking the political’.

## **Thinking the political**

I situate my argument of what constitutes the political in the interstices between two great, but radically opposed, perspectives that have galvanised much of progressive and leftist energies over the past few years. The first one is Hardt and Negri’s *Empire* and the immanent force of the multitude whose energies are liberated through the vicissitudes of empire, which in its womb, already harbours and nurtures the free reign of the multitude that will transgress and revolutionise the very disempowering and unequally constituted constellation of Empire (Hardt and Negri 2001). Indeed, as they could claim at the end of their book, there is an unbearable lightness in being communist as the immanent force of

the multitude will realise itself through some sort of mythical energetic force. The multitude as political agent, from their perspective, grows out of and supplants Empire as a necessary, teleological, revolutionary gesture; political subjectivity is barred, annulled; the forces of empire will just do the trick. In this sense, the observation that Hardt and Negri have written the Communist Manifesto for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is correct; it breathes the same unrelenting belief in the immanence of the multitude as it will emerge from the debris of a transcended imperial order, and a politics of egalibertarian emancipation is already structurally fermenting within the interstices of rhizomatic and decentred imperial reign. Second, and at the other side of the spectre stands, symbolically speaking, John Holloway's *Change the world without taking power* (Holloway 2002). For him, radical transformation resides in continuous political activism, the obsessive desire for becoming that supplants the need for being, for spatialisation. His emancipatory politics adheres to the sort of activism that asks the constituent oligarchic polity of state and of economy to change, to take the demands seriously. It is political acting that aims at changing the elites not at their transformation, let alone their replacement in a different constituent order. While the political is an immanent process borne out of the configurations of empire for Negri, it is the obsessive activist, driven by a desire for justice and an analytical toolkit that situates injustices within the contours of the politico-economic and socio-cultural order that holds the promise for radical change for Holloway. Simon Critchley offers an ethico-philosophical foundation for such anarchic 'politics of resistance' (Critchley 2007). For Slavoj Žižek, such politics of resistance has de facto accepted the inevitability of capitalism's global hegemony and retreats in the bulwark of localised political

activism, centred on a critique of what is and acts around the provision of a space for the multitude of new subjectivities. In a review of this position, Žižek (Žižek 2007) states:

“The big demonstrations in London and Washington against the US attack on Iraq a few years ago offer an exemplary case of this strange symbiotic relationship between power and resistance. Their paradoxical outcome was that both sides were satisfied. The protesters saved their beautiful souls: they made it clear that they don’t agree with the government’s policy on Iraq. Those in power calmly accepted it, even profited from it: not only did the protests in no way prevent the already-made decision to attack Iraq; they also served to legitimise it. Thus George Bush’s reaction to mass demonstrations protesting his visit to London, in effect: ‘You see, this is what we are fighting for, so that what people are doing here – protesting against their government policy – will be possible also in Iraq!’”

In what follows, I shall propose and explore a different foundation of and for the political, one that foregrounds the notion of equality as the foundation for democracy, for égaliberté as an unconditional democratic demand, one that sees the properly political as a procedure that disrupts any given socio-spatial order, one that addresses a ‘wrong’. This ‘wrong’ is a condition in which the axiomatic principle of equality is perverted through the institution of an order that is always necessarily oligarchic. The proper political, therefore, always operates at a certain distance from the state, but is aimed at the transformation of the state (the police).

Let me start with considering Jacques Rancière’s conceptualization of politics and the political. For him, the space of *the political* has become sutured by what he defines as *the*

*police* (or policy) (Rancière 1998);(Rancière 1995). He explores whether the political can still be thought in an environment in which a post-political consensual policy arrangement has increasingly reduced the ‘political’ to ‘policing’, to ‘policy-making’, to managerial consensual governing. Rancière distinguishes between ‘the police’ (*la police*), ‘the political’ (*le politique*), and ‘politics’ (*la politique*) (see also (Ricoeur 1965); (Lefort 2000)). The ‘police’ is defined as the existing order of things and constitutes a certain ‘partition of the sensible’ (Rancière 2001: 8): the police refers to “all the activities which create order by distributing places, names, functions” (Rancière 1994: 173). This partition of the sensible “renders visible who can be part of the common in function of what he does, of the times and the space in which this activity is exercised ... This defines the fact of being visible or not in a common space ... It is a partitioning of times and spaces, of the visible and the invisible, of voice and noise that defines both the place (location) and the arena of the political as a form of experience” (Rancière 2000a: 13-14). The police refers to both the activities of the state as well as to the ordering of social relations and “... sees that those bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task; it is an order of the visible and the sayable that sees that a particular activity is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and another as noise” (Rancière 1998: 29). Indeed, as Dikec maintains, the police “relies on a symbolically constituted organization of social space, an organization that becomes the basis of and for governance. Thus, the essence of policing is not repression but distribution – distribution of places, peoples, names, functions, authorities, activities and so on – and the normalization of this distribution” (Dikeç 2007: chapter 2, p. 5). It is a rule governing the appearance of bodies, that configures a set of activities and occupations and arranges the

characteristics of the spaces where these activities are organized or distributed (Rancière 1998: 29). The police order is predicated upon saturation, upon suturing social space: “[t]he essence of the police is the principle of saturation; it is a mode of the partition of the sensible that recognizes neither lack nor supplement. As conceived by ‘the police’, society is a totality compromised of groups performing specific functions and occupying determined spaces” (Rancière 2000c: 124). This drive to suturing is of course never realized. The constitutive antagonisms that rupture society preempt saturation; there will always be a constituted lack or surplus, that what is not accounted for in the symbolic order of the police (Dikeç 2005). It is exactly this lack or excess (the ‘void’ for (Badiou 2006)) that constitutes the possibility of the political.

The political, then, is about enunciating dissent and rupture, literally voicing speech that claims a place in the order of things, demanding “the part for those who have no-part” (Rancière 2001: 6). The political is the arena in which *Ochlos* is turned into *Demos*, where the anarchic noise of the rabble (the part that has no-part) is turned into the recognized voice of the people, the spaces where that what is only registered as noise by the police is turned into voice. In the *Nights of Labor*, Rancière explores how the workers in 19<sup>th</sup> century France, through carving out their times and spaces, became the political subject under the name of the proletariat and, through this, claimed their place in the police order (Rancière 1989). Politics is, therefore, always disruptive, it emerges with the “refusal to observe the ‘place’ allocated to people and things (or at least, to particular people and things)” (Robson 2005: 5): it is the terrain where the axiomatic principle of equality is tested in the face of a wrong experienced by ‘those who have no part’; a ‘wrong’ that is always inherent in the oligarchic spaces of an instituted democratic polity.

In other words, equality is the very premise upon which a democratic politics is constituted; the foundational gesture of democracy is equality. It opens up the space of the political through the testing of a wrong that subverts equality, a subversion that inheres in the constituted 'forms' of democracy and, in an intensified way, in its post-political guise. Rancière is here on the same terrain as Alain Badiou: "[E]quality is not something to be researched or verified but a principle to be upheld" (Hallward 2003a: 228). Emancipatory politics emerge out of a fidelity to the democratic principle of equality; it is the unconditional given of and for democracy. Equality is, consequently, not some sort of utopian longing, but the very condition upon which the democratic political is founded. The truth (in the sense of being true or faithful to something) of democracy is its universalising foundation on equality and the demand for justice, for a just politics. Etienne Balibar (Balibar 1993) names this fusion of equality and liberty 'égalité', the former defined as the absence of discrimination and the latter as absence of repression (Dikeç 2001). The very promise of democracy, but which is always scandalously perverted, and therefore necessitates its continuing reclamation, is founded on the universalising and collective process of emancipation as égalité. Indeed, freedom and equality can only be conquered: they are never offered, granted or distributed.

The political, therefore, is not about expressing demands to the elites to rectify inequalities or unfreedoms, exemplified by the demands of many activists and others who are choreographing resistance to the police order, but, in contrast, it is the demand to be counted, named, and recognized as part of the police order. It is the articulation of voice that demands its place in the spaces of the police order: it appears, for example, when

undocumented workers shout “we are here, therefore we are from here” and demand their place within the socio-political edifice. These are the eventual time-spaces from where a proper political sequence may unfold. The political is about the unconditional enunciation of the right to *égaliberté*, the right to the polis; the political is thus premised on the unconditionality of equality in an oligarchic police arrangement that has always already ‘wronged’ the very condition of equality and liberty. This is of course what Rancière also refers as the scandal of democracy that maintains a singular presence, yet is radically split into two processes: the oligarchic police process on the one hand and the principle of equality expressed through the process of emancipation on the other (Rancière 1998). Democratic politics, therefore, are radically anti-utopian; they are not about fighting for a utopian future, but are precisely about bringing into being, spatialising, what is already promised by the very principle upon which the democratic political is constituted, i.e. equality.

If the supervision of places and functions is defined as the ‘police’, “a proper *political* sequence begins, then, when this supervision is interrupted so as to allow a properly anarchic disruption of function and place, a sweeping de-classification of speech. The democratic voice is the voice of those who reject the prevailing social distribution of roles, who refuse the way a society shares out power and authority”. (Hallward 2003b: 192). The proper political act, Rancière maintains, is the voice of “floating subjects that deregulate all representations of places and portions.”(Rancière 1998: 99-100):

“In the end everything in politics turns on the distribution of spaces. What are these places? How do they function? Why are they there? Who can occupy them? For me, political action always acts upon the social as the litigious distribution of places and roles. It is always a matter of knowing who is qualified to say what a particular place is and what is done to it.” (Rancière 2003a: 201)

The political arises when the given order of things is questioned; when those whose voice is only recognized as noise by the police order claim their right to speak, acquire speech, and produce the spatiality that permits and sustains this right. As such, it disrupts the order of being, exposes the constituent antagonisms, voids and excesses that constitute the police order, and tests the principle of equality. The political, therefore, always operates from a certain minimal distance from the State/the police<sup>1</sup>.

Politics proper, then, is the confrontation of the political with the police order, when the principle of equality confronts a wrong instituted through the police order. It appears thus when the police order is dislocated, transgressed, “when the natural order of domination is interrupted by the institution of a part of those who have no part” (Rancière 1998: 11): “[p]olitics in general ... is about the visibilities of places and abilities of the body in these places, about the partition of public and private spaces, about the very configuration of the visible and the relation of the visible to what can be said about it. All this is what I call the partition of the sensible” (Rancière 2003b: 3). A proper democratic political sequence, therefore, is not one that seeks justice and equality through governmental procedures on the basis of sociologically defined injustices or inequalities, but rather starts from the paradigmatic condition of equality or *égaliberté*, one that is ‘wronged’ by

the police order. Therefore, a proper politics is one that asserts the principle of equality and justice as its original principle, not as a normative goal; democratic politics is, therefore, always disruptive and transformative:

“Political activity is whatever shifts a body from the place assigned to it or changes a place’s destination. It makes visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise; it makes understood as discourse what was once only heard as noise” (Rancière 1998: 30). Politics acts on the police (Rancière 1998: 33) and “... revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time” (Rancière 2006b: 13).

The space of the political is to “disturb this arrangement [the police] by supplementing it with a part of the no-part identified with the community as a whole” (Rancière 2001), it is a particular that stands for the whole of the community and aspires towards universalisation. The space of the political is therefore always specific, concrete, particular, but stands as the metaphorical condensation of the universal. And of course, politics is about the production of spaces and the recognition of the principle of dissensus as the proper base for politics. As Rancière attests: “[t]he principle function of politics is the configuration of its proper space. It is to disclose the world of its subjects and its operations. The essence of politics is the manifestation of dissensus, as the presence of two worlds in on” (Rancière 2001: Thesis 8); it occurs when there is a place and a way for the meeting of the police process with the process of equality (Rancière 1998: 30).

Politics has, therefore, no foundational place or location: “Politics ‘takes place’ in the space of the police, by rephrasing and restaging social issues, police problems and so on”, it is the disruption of the police order (Rancière 2003c: 7). It can arise anywhere and everywhere. “[S]pace becomes political in that it ... becomes an integral element of the interruption of the ‘natural’ (or, better yet, naturalized) order of domination through the constitution of a place of encounter by those that have no part in that order. The political, in this account, is signaled by this encounter as a moment of interruption, and not by the mere presence of power relations and competing interests” (Dikeç 2005: 172). The political understood in above terms rejects a naturalization of the political, signals that a political ‘passage à l’acte’ does not rely on expert knowledge and administration (the partition of the sensible), but on a disruption of the field of vision and of the distribution of functions and spaces on the basis of the principle of equality. With Alain Badiou, Rancière shares the view that the political event is rare and unusual; they are far from believing that ‘everything is political’, the clarion call of 1970s style progressive movements. While the political event might arise anywhere and everywhere, the political sequence is unusual, eventual, not predictable, and, above all, disruptive. Politics, i.e. the struggle of those who have no name and no voice to enter the space of the police, the contested borderline zone between the political and the police, is an even rarer moment, when those who are part of the situation but not part of the state of the situation become part of the state.

This view of the political as a space of dissensus, for enunciating difference and for negotiating conflict, stands in sharp contrast to the consolidating consensual ‘post-politics’ of contemporary neo-liberal ‘good’ governance. Of course, it also begs the

question as to what to do. How to reclaim the political, as discussed above, from the debris of consensual autocratic post-political post-democracy?

## **Claiming the Democratic Polis**

The notion of the political articulated in this paper centers on division, conflict, and polemic (Valentine 2005), accepts the constitutive antagonisms that split ‘the people’, that traverse the myth of the One, the singular, and rejects the myth of an archae-political possibility of an organic, sutured, unfractured community, the possibility of a community one with itself. Therefore, democracy always operates against pacification, acknowledges social disruption, and disturbs the management of consensus and ‘stability’. As Peter Hallward, echoing Rancière and Badiou, argues: “[t]he concern of democracy is not with the formulation of agreement or the preservation of order but with the invention of new and hitherto unauthorised modes of disaggregation, disagreement and disorder” (Hallward 2005: 34-35). A political truth procedure, for Badiou, is initiated when in the name of equality fidelity to an event is declared, a fidelity that, although always particular, aspires to become public, to universalize. It is a wager on the truth of the egalitarian political sequence, unleashed by a declaration of fidelity to the communist hypothesis (Badiou 2008), a truth that can be only verified ex-post. Preferred examples of Badiou and Žižek are Robespierre, Lenin, or Mao in their declaration of fidelity to the procedure of communist truth in the revolutionary event.

Badiou defines 'le passage à l'acte' as an intervention in the state of the situation that transforms and transgresses the symbolic orders of the existing condition and marks a shift from the old to a new situation, one that cannot any longer be thought of in terms of the old symbolic framings. Žižek insists that such a political act does not start 'from the art of the possible, but from the art of the impossible' (Žižek 1999b). Proper politics is thus about enunciating demands that lie beyond the symbolic order of the police; demands that cannot be symbolized within the frame of reference of the police and, therefore, would necessitate a transformation in and of the police to permit symbolization to occur. Yet, these are demands that are eminently sensible and feasible when the frame of the symbolic order is shifted, when the parallax gap between what is (the constituted symbolic order of the police) and what can be (the reconstituted symbolic order made possible through a shift in vantage points, one that starts from the partisan universalizing principle of equality). This is the actual political process through which those that have no part claim their place within the symbolic edifice of the police, become part of the state of the situation. This is where the impossible egalitarian demands are formulated and fought for that express and transgress the partition of the sensible, that require a transformation of socio-physical space and the institution of a radically different partition of the sensible. It is the sort of demands that 'restructure the entire social space' (Žižek 1999b: 208), that are impossible to be symbolized within the existing police order. The form of politicization predicated upon universalizing egalitarian demands cuts directly against the radical politics that characterize so much of the current forms and theorizations of resistance. Rather than embracing the multitude of singularities and the plurality of possible modes of becoming, this approach starts from the suturing attempts

of the existing police order and its associated social relations; rather than reveling in the immanence of imperial transformation, an immanence to which there is no outside (à la Hardt and Negri), rather than the micropolitics of dispersed resistances, alternative practices, and affects (à la Holloway or Critchley), the view explored in this contribution foregrounds division and exclusion and emphasizes the ‘passage to the act’ through a political truth procedure that necessitates taking sides (see (Dean 2006: 115). Politics understood as rituals of resistance is, according to Žizek, doomed to fail politically:

“Radical political practices itself is conceived as an unending process which can destabilize, displace, and so on, the power structure, without ever being able to undermine it effectively – the ultimate goal of radical politics is ultimately to displace the limit of social exclusions, empowering the excluded agents (sexual and ethnic minorities) by creating marginal spaces in which they can articulate and question their identity” (Žižek 2002b: 101).

The problem with such tactics is not only that they leave the symbolic order intact and at best ‘tickle’ the police order, they are actually conducive to the flows of global capital and can be fully subsumed within it. As Žižek puts it, “these practices of performative reconfiguration/displacement ultimately support what they intend to subvert, since the very field of such ‘transgressions’ are already taken into account, even engendered by the hegemonic form” (Žižek 1999b: 264).

In contrast, as Alain Badiou (Badiou 2005b) argues, a new radical politics requires formulating and enrolling new great fictions that create real possibilities for constructing

different egalibertarian socio-environmental or geographical futures. This requires foregrounding and naming different socio-environmental futures, making the new and impossible enter the realm of politics and of democracy on the basis of the very promise of democracy (egaliberty), but which the oligarchic hatred of democracy systematically undermines or disrupts, and recognizing conflict, difference, and struggle over the naming and trajectories of these futures. Politics consists in a “series of actions that *reconfigure the space* where parties, parts, or lack of any parts have been defined (Rancière 1998: 30)” cited in (Dikeç 2005: 181-182)”. Proper egalitarian democracy is “the symbolic institution of the political in the form of the power of those who are not entitled to exercise power – a rupture in the order of legitimacy and domination. It is the paradoxical power of those who do not count: the count of the ‘unaccounted for’” (Rancière 2000c: 124). Dissensus is the proper name of egalitarian politics:

“The notion of dissensus thus means the following: politics is comprised of a surplus of subjects that introduce, within the saturated order of the police, a surplus of objects. These subjects do not have the consistency of coherent social groups united by a common property or a common birth, etc. They exist entirely within the act, and their actions are manifestations of a dissensus; that is, the making contentious of the givens of a particular situation. The subjects of politics make visible that which is not perceivable, that which, under the optics of a given perceptive field, did not possess a *raison d’être*, that which did not have a name .... This ... constitutes the ground for political action: certain subjects that do not count create a common polemical scene where they put into contention the

objective status of what is ‘given’ and impose an examination and discussion of those things that were not ‘visible’, that were not accounted for previously”

(Rancière 2000c: 124-125)

Therefore, the political act (intervention) proper is “not simply something that works well within the framework of existing relations, but something that *changes the very framework that determines how things work* .... it changes the very parameters of what is considered ‘possible’ in the existing constellation (emphasis in original)” (Žižek 1999b: 199). The political becomes for Žižek and Rancière the space of litigation (Žižek 1998), the space for those who are not-All, who are uncounted and unnamed, not part of the ‘police’ (symbolic or state) order. A true political space is always a space of contestation for those who have no name or no place.

This is where the impossible egalitarian demands are formulated and fought for that express and transgress the partition of the sensible, demands that presupposes or requires a transformation of socio-physical space. Such egalitarian-democratic demands, scandalous in the representation order of the police yet eminently realizable, are like those formulated in the last chapter of the Communist Manifesto (universal and free education, universal and free care for the elderly, universal and equitable voting rights, universal and free health care, collective organization of (produced) natures). When these demands were formulated in 1848, they were scandalous, deeply disruptive and rejected out of hand as impossible by the police order. Yet, four of these five demands were realized in one form or another in most of Western Europe during the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the passion for the real (Badiou 2007) embodied by these demands fuelled the passage to the

act that instituted them. That constitutes, for Badiou or Ranciere, a proper political sequence, and one that can be thought and practiced irrespective of any substantive social theorization – it is the political in itself at work. Of course, the current neo-liberal police order has already substantially eroded these democratic gains while traversing the symbolic order, one that now sees these demands again as scandalous and impossible. These are today among the key arenas where the principle of freedom and equality is perverted and undermined, where the scandal of democracy erupts most violently. Another example of such political sequence erupted when, in 1981, *Solidarnosc*'s demands for better working conditions on the Gdansk shipyards translated into the universal demands for political rights against the oligarchic bureaucratic order of state capitalism and their apparatchiks in Poland; when the latter acknowledged the demands of the activists, their police order's symbolic edifice and constituted order crumbled and revealed the empty locus of power. They launched a proper political sequence that would overturn the symbolic order and the distribution of functions and places associated with it. Or when civil society groups took to the streets of East Germany and demanded different rights, it started a sequence that would transform existing authoritarian state forms. Their subsequent history of course also signaled their accelerated incorporation into a post-political European order as the opened dissensual political space soon closed down again.

It is the sort of demand expressed when illegal and other immigrants in Europe or the US claim that 'we are here, therefore we are from here'. The illegal immigrant already foreshadows of course the idealized neoliberal subject, the one without political inscription, without papers (and therefore no rights); the illegal immigrant already stands

in as the subject neoliberalisation seeks to universalize, the one without papers, *homo sacer*, and who, consequently, has no other choice than to sell him- or herself to the highest bidder:

“Nowadays, when the welfare state is gone, this separation between citizens and non-citizens still remains, but with an additional paradox that non citizens represent the avant-garde within the neo-liberal project, because they are indeed positioned within the labor force market without any kind of social rights or state protection. Thus, if we examine this problem in such a way, the *sanspapiers* and the *erased* are the avant-garde form of sociality which would prevail if the neo-liberal concept is to be fully realized, if it would not be important anymore if someone is a citizen or not, if everybody would be defined only according to their position in the labor market and the labor process” (Pupovac and Karamani 2006: 48).

Such new symbolizations through which what is considered to be noise by the police is turned into speech, is where a proper politicization of the spatial should start from, where a possible re-politicization of public civic space resides. These symbolizations should start from the premise that the promise of democracy, political equality, is ‘wronged’ by the oligarchic police order, and where those who are unaccounted for, unnamed, whose fictions are only registered as noise, claim their metaphorical and material space.

Reclaiming the democratic polis as the space of dissensus, disagreement, and as the space where places for enunciating the different, for staging the voices of those unheard or

unnoticed are constructed, egalibertarian voices that aspire to universalisation, is exactly where a proper democratic politics should reside. And it is exactly these practices that urgently require attention, nurturing, recognition and valorization. They demand their own space; they require the creation of their own material and cultural landscapes, their own emblematic geographies. These are the spaces where the post-political post-democratic consensus is questioned, where the right to égaliberté is asserted, practices of radical democratization experimented with, and democracy conquered; not an instituted formal arrangement that cannot but subvert itself, but one that aims at overtaking and replacing instituted post-political post-democracy.

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ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup> The 'Organisation Politique', of which Alain Badiou has been a founding and activist member exemplifies such tactics of minimal distance while maintaining an absolute fidelity to the principle of equality as founding gesture (see (Hallward 2003a))