

## ***Politics is ordinary***

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### **1). Who's afraid of 'The Political'?**

Political theory, as a specific genre tied to the exegesis of a textual canon, has a tendency to construct *a priori* understandings of what forms proper politics *should* take. These understandings often reflect the contexts and concerns of particular places or constituencies. For example, American political theory from the 1970s onwards has been shaped by a concern with declining levels of participation in elections, political party membership, and civic associations – in turn developing sophisticated normative models of what forms of *participation* citizens should be involved in.

Patrick Chabal has suggested that these sorts of models of participation don't really apply very well to African politics, proposing instead the notion of *partaking* to better describe the sense of engaging in collective life to make use of shared resources. Partha Chatterjee, writing in relation to Indian politics, likewise suggests that a norm of civil society derived from the experience of democratic transition in Eastern Europe doesn't capture the full dimensions of contentious political life in India, suggesting the notion of political society as a supplement.

These sorts of alternative concepts remind us, at their simplest, that what looks properly political in one context, might not resonate perfectly, if at all, in others.

The also remind us that political theory has a geography – one of applications and translations as much as of sources and origins.

The strains of political theory informing recent accounts of the post-political condition or the post-democratic city likewise reflect the particular concerns, and disappointments, of

quite specific intellectual communities – concerns and disappointments which circulate in the distributed geographies of post-structuralist Francophile theory.

Belonging to a broader range of more-or-less-post-Marxist, left-Heideggerian analysis of ‘the political’, analyses of the post-political city have perfected this style of *a priori* conceptualisation of politics.<sup>1</sup>

On the one hand, within the trajectory of Marxist and post-Marxist thought after the end of actually existing socialism, this style of analysis frees free politics from its conceptual subordination to class antagonism. On the other hand, this style of analysis contributes to a more widely shared diagnosis of the contemporary conjuncture as ‘post-political’ by virtue of its not conforming to standard model of clear-cut and well-defined conflict. The decline of class cleavages that shaped academic understandings of politics in post-War North America and Western Europe has come to be seen as tantamount to de-politicization itself.

The diagnosis of ‘post-political’ is, it should be said, sometimes rather ambivalent about just what is missing from the contemporary scene. Sometimes, we live in a post-political age characterised by a moralization of politics, by excessive consensualism, by a lack of fundamental conflict – an argument that seeks authority in the arguments about violence and hostility of thinkers as politically diverse as Carl Schmitt and Pierre Clastres. But sometimes, it seems that the way in which you can spot, empirically, the post-political is by finding decisions or issues which are protected from excessive consultation or popular participation, which are prone to capture technocratic expertise, which are excessively managerialist, which are conducted behind closed doors. In this sense, the post-political shows up against the back-drop of an unthematized norm of democratic inclusion that seems somewhat at odds with the normative investments of the first sense of the post-political.

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<sup>1</sup> cf. Colin Hay etc.

Likewise, sometime the post-political is exemplified by various sorts of post-national formations, such as human rights discourses; but sometimes, it is politics at the transnational scale that is meant to retain the energies of properly political politics, escaping the constraints of politics-as-usual framed by the nation-state.

I think it worthwhile reflecting awhile on the concept of 'the political' at work in the background of these diagnoses of the 'post-political', precisely for the reason indicated by this variable range of empirical reference: 'the political' is above all, a theoretical frame, one which constructs the empirical as a merely illustrative reference point – this is a framing which lies deep within the intellectual trajectory of the concept of 'the political' as it now circulates within critical theory.

The discourse of the 'post-political', as an analytical diagnosis, has a kind of Brechtian tenor to it – when ones finds that the world does not conform to one's conceptual expectations, then it allows you to announce that it is the world that is at fault; hold fast to one's preconceptions about what politics should be, where it is manifested, who are its subjects, what issues it condenses around; do not hesitate to invoke this or that passing incident, best defined as an 'event', to confirm the fugitive quality of the genuinely political. But under no circumstances allow that a concept of politics might be held in a relationship of accountability to the empirical world.

The conceptual trajectory of the concept of 'the political' in current critical theory perfectly exemplifies Axel Honneth's argument that one route out of a defunct productionist paradigm of emancipatory critical theory is to locate the potential for societal transformation in ever deeper ontological layers – in desire, in the drives, in the vitalism of life, in affect. In the case of 'the political', the distinctive twist is to locate this potential in the very structure of 'ontology' itself, as this has been understood through a series of political interpretations of post-Heideggerian thought.

There are three worth noting about the progressive ontologization of 'the political' that underwrites accounts of the post-political.

**First**, it should be said that there is an elective affinity between a strand of political ontology and the conventions of theory formation in critical human geography and related spatial disciplines. Both fields put a premium on demonstrating the possibility for change, as a benchmark of critical evaluation. In spatial theory, there has been an imperative to develop alternative spatial ontologies which trump flat, bounded, static concepts of space with relational, produced, assembled, more bendy, more wobbly images of space.

These alternative ontologies are meant to be preferable because they demonstrate that things could be different, that things are not as they first appear, and that current arrangements have histories and contingencies which imply they could be re-configured, performed differently, imagined anew.

Ontologies of ‘the political’ provide important ballast for the political inflection given to spatial theory over the last four decades, in so far as they sustain the idea that genuine political energy always involves processes of *constitution*, of *formation*, of *foundation* – and genuine critical activity always involves the exposure of *contingency*, the elaboration of *uncertainty*, or the affirmation of *creativity*.

So, the first thing to say about ‘the political’ is that it belongs to a broader intellectual culture that equates the genuinely political with the formal possibility of change.

**Second**, the concept of ‘the political’ is associated with a particular intellectual move, namely the reassertion of the primacy of philosophical reason over and above social scientific analysis. This has various versions – it is underwritten, most strongly, in the claim that all political concepts are really just secularised versions of theological concepts – a theme that resonates differently from Schmitt through Claude Lefort and onto Derrida, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, and beyond (and it is around this theme that the fundamental divide over how to interpret ‘the political’ that sets Habermas apart from this tradition revolves – Habermas’ sin from the viewpoint of this approach is to have

presumed to construct a genuinely post-metaphysical approach to philosophical questions).

The reassertion of the primacy of philosophical reason over social science is evident in this strand of thought – in Lefort's retrieval of political philosophy from political science, in Ranciere's disdain for Bourdieu's sociologization of aesthetic competency; in Arendt, in Wolin, in Connolly, likewise distancing themselves from the merely 'social scientific', a world of calculation, prediction, and rationality.

In their different variants, account of 'the political' in this tradition of political ontology can only ever imagine politics by dividing life into 'the political' and 'politics', or 'politics' and 'police', or constitutive and constituted power. Each, in their own way, references a more or less sophisticated political reading of Heidegger's analysis of ontological difference – where the ontological is understood to be a kind of layer, in some sense having priority over the merely 'ontic' – the world of mere politics, of governance, of elections, of parties.

'The political', then, emerges as a theme in critical theory through two closely related misreadings:

- 1). A misreading of the ontic-ontological distinction in terms of a layer-cake model of levels and priorities;
- 2). And a politicization of this distinction in terms of appearances, settlements, naturalizations, offset against disruptions, exposures, and invention.

More fundamentally, political ontological in a post-Heideggerian vein authorises a distinctive spatialization of the political imagination, in which all the genuine political energy is always to be found off-centre, at the margins. The master metaphor of this style of political theory is that of blindness-and-insight, whether inflected by a vocabulary of constitutive outsides, constitutive lacks, suturings, partitions of the sensible – always an extruded or marginalised term is identified as the point around which systems are closed and secured and around which they might be pried open and

made anew. It is no surprise that the culmination of this sort of political imagination comes in the form of a political-ontological interpretation of the axioms of set-theory.

Suffice to say that this is not a good way to theorise politics if one is interested in acknowledging and recognising the emergence of new forms of politics, new political actors, or new political issues. It's a way of theorising which works by ensuring that any actual political outcome will always appear to be a disappointment, however seemingly progressive or democratic or egalitarian. And it's a style of theorising which will thereby always secure the virtue of the radical theorist.

My **third** point about this concept of 'the political' is, then, that we might want to consider what use might be made of it to inform political analysis. I don't think it an irredeemable idea, but it is prone to two sorts of interpretation. In a strongly 'ontological' style, it informs the circulation of *a priori* models of the *properly political* and the *genuinely democratic* which are used to adjudicate about the world – this is the usage that informs analysis of 'the post-political condition' we are apparently living in today. It is a usage associated, often enough, with a methodological predilection for etymological or antiquarian derivations of the meanings of these sorts of concepts – a style perfected in the work of Agamben.

There is an alternative interpretation, one which might adopt a more critical perspective on the trajectory of this concept. We might note its proximity to analyses of totalitarianism that run from Arendt through Lefort, perhaps Ricouer, on to Pierre Rosanvallon, a proximity which might imply a more *phenomenological* interpretation of the historicity of 'the political'. We might note Derrida's inflection of this theme, via an argument of Levinas which would disallow the attribution of *priority* to ontological claims, which might appear to ruin any sense that there is something proper to politics, that 'the political' has any propriety at all; and we might certainly want to resist the incorporation of Foucault into the project of contemporary political ontology, noting instead the role his ideas play in the analysis of historically variable 'ways of being political'.

This alternative inflection might just be called genealogical – if by that we mean a style of analysis that focuses on this variability, and opens up and keeps open the problem of thinking about the emergence of new forms of political action without collapsing either the description or evaluation of these forms into the conventions and norms of established forms.

## **2). The grammars of politics**

I won't pretend that the task of theorising the emergence of new political forms is easy. I just want to suggest that political ontology is not a starting point for this project, and the current discourse around post-political conditions and post-democratic cities helps us to see why.

More strongly, 'the post-political' as an analytical term is based on a category error about the sort of concept, and reality, politics is; likewise, the slippage between post-political and post-democratic in much of this sort of analysis might be the point at which a failure to think about the *normativity* of concepts is revealed.

By this, all I mean is that certain concepts are strongly evaluative in their application – 'art' would be an example; so might 'democracy' – they are the exemplary 'essentially contested concepts' through which one might approach the problem of conceptualising the variability of terms which retain a certain sort of family resemblance.

Politics, like power, doesn't actually seem to be an essentially contested concept in this sense, not ordinarily at least – it's more strongly descriptive, less evaluative than art or democracy. Although, of course, in academic circles, it does take on a much more normative, perhaps even prescriptive inflection – the imperative to demonstrate that academic work, in particular waves of theory, are 'political' would indicate as much.

So perhaps we should just satisfy ourselves with the idea that politics is *ordinary* – it's the name given to a range of overlapping practices which have, for example, something to with the activity of addressing problems of living together in a shared world of plurality

and difference; or, its about who gets what, where, how and why; it has to do with conflict, rule, contestation, decision, enmity, interests; and compromise, agreement, reconciliation, and, sometimes, consensus. These are common enough usages, though not exhaustive. One or more of these usages are at work when we use the adjective 'political' to describe some activity, behaviour, or situation – it's a mistake, of course, to assume that the adjectival attribution of 'political' refers to a substance that an activity has, at its core. Saying something is 'political' no more implies the existence of an ontological substance which you should call 'The Political' than describing someone's actions as having unconscious motivations requires you to suppose the existence of anything like 'The Unconscious'.

The adjectival qualities of the concept of 'the political' – which are, of course, only really drawn out when this concept is translated into English – something is thereby gained, not lost, as Walter Benjamin would remind us – this adjectival quality is an index of the lack of propriety, the essential variability that this concept tries to pick out.

What does all this imply? So what if politics has a lot of ordinary usages, attributed to actions or actors by calling them 'political'?

Well, methodologically, perhaps it means we should attend to the *grammar* in which politics is conducted (which isn't necessarily the same as attending to the use of political words and terms). By this I mean seeking to attend to what's at stake in processes of conflict and consensus, antagonism and agreement, power and persuasion. Politics breaks out around many issues, and is motivated by various factors – by injustices, by harms, by loss, by violations, by resentments, by privilege.

Thinking of politics as ordinary, theorising it ordinarily even, leads to various conclusions:

- It's a mistake to think that politics has one form, which allows one to dismiss various processes as 'post-political'.



- It's a mistake to suppose that democracy is a precious, singular form, rather than a regime whose meaning and practice is, as Julia Paley puts, ethnographically emergent.
- Above all, it's a mistake to think that the absence of conflict, the diminution of antagonism, or the appearance of peaceable reconciliation between different actors is necessarily, always and everywhere, an index of 'post-political' tendencies that are to be automatically bemoaned.

Above all, it's good to remember that there is more to life than politics – and that quite a lot of politics is oriented to expanding the scope of life that is, in certain senses, de-politicized.

### **3). What *do* cities have to do with politics?**

So, if we were to pursue this genealogical style of inquiry into the variable forms that politics takes, and if we were to do so in relation to urban issues and the political relevance of the city, what sort of inquiry would we pursue?

Well, we would, for a start, have to suspend the idea that 'the city' does, in fact, have any privileged relationship, conceptually, empirically, or normatively, with 'the political', or with citizenship, or with democracy

- as a figure, for example, of a non-sovereign ideal of collective life to counter-pose against the model of the modern state
- or with reference to the importance of physical public spaces as the scenes for the assertion of the will of the people.

We might do better to think of the different sorts of *problematizations* that are facilitated by urban processes – and here, I'm following Allan Cochrane's method in reconstructing the variable content of 'urban'-policy; although, one might extend the reference to include Foucault of course, but also a problem-responsive account of the rationalities of public life derived from Dewey.

This is an approach that should lead us to investigate the different sorts of *situations* which urban processes provide from out of which political energies might emerge:

1. These situations might be understood causally, by asking after the role of urbanization processes in generating objects of political contention and shared concern [for example, concerns of landless people's movements];
2. They might be thought of in terms of how urban processes and practices provide mediums and opportunities for recognizing shared interests and identities or clarifying lines of antagonism;
3. Or these situations might be understood in terms of how urban processes help to shape the possibilities for institutionalised forms of concerted collective action – exercised through growth coalitions, or urban regimes, or movements, or parties, or states.

Thinking of urban processes as generative of political action in this sense, in terms of the *emergence of problems* and the *engendering of situations* around which collective action might form, is a way of thinking about the *importance of urbanization to politics* without thinking that *urban politics is particularly important*.