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Comment on Loris Caruso/2. Inaudible Politics and the Crisis of Democracy

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Essays

Comment on Loris Caruso/2

Inaudible Politics and the Crisis of Democracy

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1. Introduction

It has become something of a cliché to claim we live in times of crisis. Ecological, economic, cultural, political, you name it, someone has affixed the term "crisis." Whether crisis has ever been anything but the norm is, of course, arguable [Žižek 2011]. It is therefore worth asking a more precise question: are crises we currently experience distinct or of a different magnitude? In terms of economic crisis, the levels of sustained state intervention into the global economy are unprecedented. In Europe alone, the quantitative easing programs m (i.e. printing money) that allow European banks to remain solvent will run at 60bn Euros every month through September 2016. Related to this, the political maneuvering that has occurred to distribute the social costs of the economic crisis is reshaping the entire governmental landscape. The latest Greek bailout fiasco is set to remake inter-state relationships within the European Union. At the same time, a smoldering environmental catastrophe continues with only the occasional headline to remind us of the threat of extinction. The flip-side of these multiple crises, and we have mentioned but a few, is a demand for action. Why then do our crisis roll-on unhindered?

The answer to this question resides somewhere within our political system. Politics should, we presume, be enacted to solve our societal problems and generate the conditions necessary to implement our normative goals [Mouffe 2005]. It appears, paradoxically, that our period of inaction is accompanied by a host of efforts

to make government more open and, thusly, more responsive to the demands and desires of citizens. Across most of the Global North, we still see a host of attempts by governments to "open up," become "more participatory" and enact "consultations" [Swyngedouw 2005]. In varied iterations, these types of interventions are all attempts to legitimate our forms of supposedly democratic government.

Across the social sciences, there is near consensus that such efforts are either terribly ineffective or pure window dressing. Indeed, some have claimed that so-called participatory governance is an incredibly powerful coercion technique where dissent is often directed into a governmental process that only sedates and/or extinguishes it (*ibidem*). Presenting oneself as inclusionary can therefore be used by governments to label those who refuse to enter into preordained consultation procedures as inherently terroristic; dissenters become anti-democratic agents who want to disrupt the smooth working of the "inclusive" democratic government regime [Žižek 2002].

It has therefore become critical that we study the ways in which supposedly 'open' government is in fact closed. Furthermore, it is critical that the next step in our analysis is taken by asking why and for whose benefit government remains closed. Loris Caruso's [2015] critical examination of the political process and grassroots movements in Italy therefore contributes towards the urgent task of understanding our perilous political predicament. Caruso takes aim at those using the political opportunity structure (POS) to understand how institutional form and process relates to the effectiveness of social movements. Using the case of protests against U.S. military base development in Vicenza, Caruso shows how the theoretical claims of POS analysis are turned on their head. In Vicenza, it was actually a political system full of "political opportunity" that caused the annulment of the protests.

In this paper I want to draw on Caruso's [2015] conclusions to make some related arguments about politics and political institutions. My principle objective is to set Caruso's critique of the POS model and the Vicenza case study within the context of some fundamental questions about politics and social change. I do so with the acknowledgement that I may overlook some of the nuance of both the POS model (and related critique) and the case study. Such a risk is warranted however, since the issues that Caruso raises about the failures of open government are ones replicated across the globe. Framing why and how protest movements fail, and assessing the criteria with which this failure should be assessed, is an urgent project.

2. The "Politics" in Political Opportunity Structure

The central objective of the political opportunity structure is to understand the governmental and institutional context and how it impacts the effectiveness of a social movement [Kriesi 1995]. If we can understand this relationship, the implication is that governmental institutions can be navigated and/or constructed in such as ways to make them open and responsive to various social movements. Tarrow [1989] argued that the concept has four principle dimensions: *a*) the degree of open access within the political system, *b*) the degree of stability of political alignments, *c*) the availability of potential partners and *d*) lines of conflicts between political elites [see Kriesi 1995]. From these four dimensions, it is argued that the relationship between political system and social movements contained within it can be understood:

> In combination with the general setting, these strategies [sic] in turn define *a*) the extent to which challenging collective actions will be facilitated or repressed by the "members of the system," and *b*) the chances of success such actions may have, and *c*) the chances of success if no such actions take place, which may be either positive if the government is reform-orientated, or negative if the government in power is hostile to the movement [Kriesi 1995, 168].

Using the POS model therefore allows for the ability to rank and assess various political systems based on these criteria. For example, one can use the POS model to define a certain political system as open and, consequently, amendable to progressive/regressive social movements.

Caruso [2015] examines the protest movements that surrounded controversial plans to open a U.S. military base close to Vicenza. A series of protest movements are found to have emerged, and the state government responded in various ways to these movements. Key to this emergent state-society relation was a referendum on the base construction that was called. Shortly before the referendum, "the State Council rejected any legal validity of the civic referendum" [Caruso 2015, 9]. Even though protestors pushed ahead with the poll, the social movement had reached a stage of impasse. Rather than being open (as indicated by the staging of a referendum), the state closed down and began preparatory construction work on the base. Although protestors responded, Caruso claims such efforts become "very wasteful" and fatigue spread throughout the ranks of protestors.

Caruso's account of the varied back-and-forth relations between the base protestors and the local state is pushed through the POS lens. In doing so, Caruso claims the limitations of the POS model are clearly demonstrated:

> Our empirical case shows that it is not enough to say that the opening/closing of the opportunity structure does not play a decisive role in mobilization. The closure

> of the structure itself, and the consequent hostility towards the actors of official politics, is a decisive mobilization factor. The cohesion within elites […], the absence of allies within the political system […], are incentives to protest [Caruso 2016, 10-11].

Put simply, Caruso finds that many of the factors that the POS model might suggest are detrimental to the emergence of protest movements were central to the very opposite: as the political system became closed, so the protest movement gathered momentum. Institutional resistance was therefore found to have generated countermovements. Such a conclusion clearly challenges the POS model. If the relationship between institutional openness and social movement effectiveness is actually inverse, the implications are potentially vast.

However, Caruso's engagement with POS theory misses a more fundamental point about politics. POS models focus on the incorporation and representation of social movements within institutional politics as an indication that politics are actually happening. That is, social contestations and disputes are thought to be incorporated into the governmental process in such a way that institutional politics are responsive to grassroots concerns. But is this really politics? In order to understand the relationship between government and politics, we must first establish what politics are. For this, we must return to some foundational philosophical issues.

3. Democratic Politics

If we return to the foundational concerns of political philosophy, we find politics has a meaning that is more precise than merely social contestation. With the (theoretical) formation of society, we find that politics is concerned not simply with contestation, but with the principles by which a society organizes itself. Jacques Rancière [1999] explains:

> The political begins precisely when one stops balancing profits and losses and worries instead about distributing common lots and evening out communal shares and entitlements to these shares […]. For the political community to be more than a contract between those exchanging goods and services, the reigning equality needs to be radically different from that according to which merchandise is exchanged and wrongs redressed [Rancière 1999, 5].

The central argument here is that politics is concerned with how things are held in common. That is, how rules that are applied to everyone are formulated and implemented. Any social order will have such rules; what Rancière refers to as "policing." For example, a tribal order might organize its common lots according

to the hierarchy within the tribe. A monarchy does things slightly differently, often based around the idea that distributions are organized by those closer to God.

Politics, however a society is policed, therefore emerges when a miscount occurs; when the parts of a society are not ordered and allocated according to its rules:

> What the "classics" teach us first and foremost is that politics is not a matter of ties between individuals or of relationships between individuals and the community. Politics arises from a count of community "parts," which is always a false count, a double count, or a miscount [Rancière 1999, 6].

Politics is not therefore contestation per se, but rather a contestation over ones miscounting within a certain social order. The scandalous part of a democratic society is that it is founded on political equality. This means that a miscount within a democratic society is concerned solely with inequality:

> […] politics has no objects or issues of its own. Its sole principle, equality, is not peculiar to it and is in no way in itself political. All equality does is lend politics reality in the form of specific cases to inscribe, in the form of litigation, confirmation of the equality at the heart of the police order [Rancière 1999, 31-32].

In this formulation, politics becomes a very specific form of contestation. In democratic societies, politics occur when a certain group – what Rancière calls "the part with no part" – makes a claim that they are treated as unequal. The implication for the democratic police order is that this miscount must be corrected. Any democratic regime that enforces and/or maintains the unequal status of any of its parts contravenes the basis of its legitimacy.

Rancière [1999] is therefore arguing that we use the term "politics" to refer to a very specific form of social change. This form of social change is concerned with those moments where the political foundation of the society is (re)affirmed. Lots of other contestations can and do take place within any society, and they are not necessarily any more or less important than politics. However, what we achieve by distinguishing politics from policing is a connection between societal principles and social contestations.

A core relation between societal principles and social contestations is of importance to Caruso's discussion of POS. In Rancière's theory of politics, those conducting the social contestation – the "part with no part" who presents the equality claim – do not just speak for themselves. What they are enacting is a demand that democratic society realizes itself. Although a distinct part – a probably a small, minority faction at that – of the society, the properly political equality claim speaks for "the people:"

> Wherever the part of those who have no part is inscribed, however fragile and fleeting these inscriptions may be, a sphere of appearance for the demos is created, an element of the *kratos*, the power of the people, exists. [Rancière 1999, 88].

The mobilization of "the people" – that community who must come to an arrangement about how to hold things in common – therefore takes place through the numerous and varied equality claims. Rancière's [1999] political philosophy extends and develops this point [see Davidson and Iveson 2014a; 2014b], but this brief outline will suffice in providing some reflections on POS models and their relationship to politics.

The POS model makes a series of presumptions about politics and social change that have very little concern for the founding principles of democracy. Whilst there is often an implicit notion that POS is concerned with democracy – via the idea that democratic governments should be open and responsive to their citizens – it is necessary to insert Rancière's distinction between politics and policing in order to deal with the contradictions that Caruso's study of Vicenza illuminates.

After initial consultative phases relating to the establishment of a military base in Vicenza, the governmental process what shutdown. As a consequence a larger mobilization of people took place; flipping some of the POS model assumption on their heads. So, we might ask: were the government's actions legitimate in this case? Should government always be open to social movements? It is only by recourse to the principles which Rancière demonstrates to be foundational to politics that we can answer such questions. The POS model does not provide the theoretical tools to take up this task.

It is therefore tempting to substitute the POS model's concern with openness with democratic equality. We can then ask if the governmental closure and resistance to the social movements that contested the US military base in Vicenza were legitimate. Did they represent an attempt to protect and enact equality? Or, conversely, was the government acting illegitimately in terms of ignoring a political claim and, as such, not enacting its commitment to "the people." Caruso makes it clear that governmental interests were far from responsive to any claims emanating from the people. Instead, governmental closure took place in order that only elites could have a say over whether a very controversial form of development took place. It is hardly surprising such actions would stimulate a counter-insurgency from local residents and their comrades, since they clearly demonstrate an inequality of political power.

The contradiction that Caruso finds with the POS model therefore looks less like a contradiction when we infuse some political philosophy into the POS model. We can start to understand the relationship between governments and social movements in a ways that explain the political process less as an institutional arrangement

and more as a socio-political process. Such an orientation becomes more urgent as the current epoch progresses. Rancière [1999] has described the current political moment as post-democratic:

> This idyllic state of politics generally goes by the name of consensus democracy […]. And so we propose the term "postdemocracy" to reflect on an object that is stranger than it looks. [Rancière 1999, 95].

Others, more commonly, describe it as post-political [Mouffe 2005].

Post-democracy is a state of government (and society) that forecloses politics. Equality claims, those demands that seek to correct for a miscount – for the incorporation of the part with no part –, are made illegitimate by the presumption that all are already included. The openness of government therefore serves not as a device within which various social movements can have their voices heard and demands met. Rather, openness is concerned with incorporation and assimilation. Since all are already presumed to be incorporated (i.e. we have had all the consultation and policy workshops necessary), then those who remain outside of the governmental process are deemed not to speak "for the people". Rather they are cast as terroristic elements bent on disputing the consensus-based social harmony: if all are already included, there can be no "part with no part!"

The response of protestors in Vicenza is therefore not simply a failure of the POS. Rather it can and should be viewed as a failure of democracy. As such the actions of the government become not simply problematic, but illegitimate. The equality presumption with which the governments involved are based – made legitimate – is not enacted. It should therefore be called something else: tribal, oligarchic etc. The POS model cannot adequately incorporate such political critique. In this POS analysis, post-democratic governments can appear as simply inefficient (i.e. some innovations can be undertaken to make the process better, more efficient etc.). It this therefore worth considering what type of theoretical context the study of governmental openness, political stability, political partnerships and conflicts should take place within.

4. Modest Government and Systemic Violence

An analytical reorientation of POS models might proceed with two interventions. First, an installing of a Rancière-type understanding of politics into the POS model it can serve to set expectations for institutional process that are founded squarely on political principles. Second, an understanding of the actively political role of governmental openness and closure can lead to a more productive understanding of systemic violence.

As I have already stated, Rancière sees politics as a very particular type of social contestation. In these contests, a "part with no part" presents a demand for equality. As such, the claimants are in effect speaking for "the people" since they are seeking to uphold the social form (i.e. equality) that has been deemed legitimate. This interpretation of political process generates an interesting dynamic between social movements and social authority. Given a democratic society presumes its own legitimacy – that all are in fact treated as equals – the equality claim takes a peculiar form. Rancière uses the following example to demonstrate:

> Politics exist because those who have no right to be counted as speaking beings make themselves of some account, setting up a community by the fact of placing in common a wrong that is nothing more than this very confrontation, the contradiction of two worlds in a single world: the world where there is something "between" them and those who do not acknowledge them as speaking beings who count and the world where there is nothing. [Rancière 1999, 27].

Politics therefore take the form of a speech act, where the claimant is identifying inequality within the presumed-to-be-equal social and political arrangement. The social order (i.e. police) therefore will tend not to understand this claim; it is as if the political subject is speaking another language:

> We should take disagreement to mean a determined kind of speech situation: one in which one of the interlocutors at once understands and does not understand what the other is saying. Disagreement is not the conflict between on who says white and another who also says white but does not understand the same thing by it or does not understand that the other is saying the same thing in the name of whiteness. [Rancière 1999, x].

While both interlocutors might be referencing a shared relationship with democracy, they come from different positions about the state of democracy. This disjuncture creates many tensions within the political process. One is worth noting here.

If the politics involves an initial moment of miscommunication, a tremendous amount of responsibility is placed upon the institutions we establish to enact democracy. These institutions must be, by definition, modest. Rather than the ultimate protectors of "democracy," they must grant this authority to those presenting equality claims that speak "for the people." To some extent, this demands that government is open to social movements; as the POS model implicitly insists. However the government must also serve as a vehicle to engage with and/or assess the equality claim. Not all social movements will seek to enact democratic change, and therefore the police order must be responsive to such demands. Openness of our political institutions must therefore be accompanied by an ability to censor [Žižek 2009]. As a consequence the police order must be capable of both protecting and destroying itself.

Faced with Caruso's example of governmental closure and social movement response, we therefore find a deaf political regime. Through the course of the contestation, it refused to listen to the demands of protestors and the ultimate process of decision-making was instigated by those who abused their privileged access to social power. The claims of "the people" were ultimately overridden by the objectives of the elites. The social movement is therefore left with few routes to impact the development agenda. In order to make such assessments about openness, we must be able to discern between those political claims which are desirable in terms of the ethical legitimacy of the said society. Whether a governmental process is open or not gets us only half way to our necessary critical analysis.

5. Enacting Politics

In the absence of the social movement's ability to penetrate the state, Caruso makes the following conclusion:

> […] it is possible to consider a new possible historical shift in the relationship between popular protest and institutional politics. As we have seen, this relationship may evolve towards a direct assumption of a political-electoral role by social movements. Signals going in this direction come not only from local movement, and neither only from Italy. There are several examples, in Europe, of a new hybridization between party-form and the movement-form [Caruso 2015, 16].

The failure of institutional politics to respond to the growing set of demands coming from grassroots political movements is seen to have begun to re-orientate the distinction between the two. Grassroots organizations must now come to engage and, indeed, occupy the institutional arenas of government in order to enact social change. Democratic political institutions can therefore been seen to have failed in their democratic responsibilities.

Caruso describes this shift as a "new hybridization," but such a description might overlook many features of the current post-political moment. Many political parties have a long tradition of emerging from, engaging with, and being transformed by social movements (REF). It is only in more recent years that the party-form seems to have become less responsive to movement demands. We might therefore be witnessing a reversion to old party-movement relations, as opposed to a new hybridization. Such questions likely deserve significant empirical inquiry as the European and North American political landscape changes.

It should be noted that this shift in the connection between social movement and party form is also related to a crisis of politics itself. The failure of the party-form

is not simply about these institutions being unresponsive or ignorant of grassroots movements. The failure also relates to a transformation of political conflict itself:

> […] contrary to what post-political theorists want us to believe, what we are currently witnessing is not the disappearance of the political in its adversarial dimension but something different. What is happening is that nowadays the political is played out in the moral register. In other words, it still consists in a we/they discrimination, but the we/they, instead of being defined with political categories, is now established in moral terms. In place of a struggle between "right and left" we are faced with a struggle between "right and wrong." [Mouffe 2005, 5].

Mouffe is here claiming that the nature of disagreement within our political culture has transformed. The fight between political parties, and indeed the fight for representation within representative democracies, in post-political times creates a situation whereby the negotiation of alternatives is replaced by a more crude confrontation:

> Now, when instead of being formulated as a political confrontation between "adversaries," the we/they confrontation is visualized as a moral one between good and evil, the opponent can be perceived only as an enemy to be destroyed and this is not conducive to an agonistic treatment. [Mouffe 2005, 5].

Such confrontations clearly lack the mediating political philosophy from which democracy derives its legitimacy [Rancière 1999]. However, this type of confrontation does look something like that described by Caruso; two parties in disagreement become locked in a confrontation that, if it continues, can only escalate. In the end, the will of one party is simply overridden by the other.

Enacting politics in the post-political moment therefore involves a number of difficulties. Not only do governments act to utilize participatory governance to quell and neutralize disagreement, but also a dominant political culture lacks a recourse to political ethics that demands opinion and disagreement answer to the principles of democracy. In the case of the U.S. military base in Vicenza, the disagreement between governments and protestors lacked any forum – institutional or ideological – through which the dispute could be resolved and, hence, the power of the state was eventually used to carry out development in spite of opposition.

6. Conclusions

The crisis of democratic politics is therefore to be found everywhere. Caruso [2015] is correct in suggesting that the case of the U.S. military base in Vicenza can be set within a much broader context. The inability of social movements to work

within state prescribed consultation processes with any effectiveness is now widely acknowledged. Indeed, this is an important part of the post-political condition. As a consequence, social movements face the choice of operating outside of state structures or developing strategies to transform the very institutions that now impose the post-political condition.

Of course, we now know a little more about the difficulties that this situation creates. The rise of Syriza in Greece – an example given by Caruso in his description of "new hybridizations" – and its subsequent disciplining by international institutions – "the troika" – has made clear the difficulties that electoral success leads to. In Greece, the coalition of social movements and their incorporation into a successful political party has generated a conflict over the nature of democracy itself. As technocracy has triumphed over democratic politics, and financial fictions have taken precedent over reasoned problem-solving, the next stage in the realization of political change has become clear: the localized movement unification and electoral success is not sufficient.

Here Rancière's [1999] conceptualization of democracy can help us again. Politics, for Rancière, is a universal concept: politics operates in the same way in all places, but it necessarily always contextual. That is to say, political disagreements are always spatially and temporally emplaced. Claims about inequality are not made in some abstract sense, but are contextual demands within particular social formations. They are the demand for full participation in, for example, the American South's public transit system or the right to have voting rights within the Greek polis. A critical role for critical urbanists therefore becomes the drawing of connections between diverse political claims. For Caruso's study of protest in Vicenza, this means there is a necessity to demonstrate how the undemocratic actions of the state in Italy followed the same post-political procedures as in Greece and elsewhere. Whereas the issues at stake are vastly different, the denial and erasure of politics is the same. In our ability to demonstrate this, we therefore have the capability to create lines of universalization – of an international politics – without necessarily erasing the very issues that caused people to formulate and present their political claims. Only with such a set of actions is it likely that the violent imposition of state power demonstrated from Vicenza to Athens can be countered with something worthy of the term "democracy."

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Comment on Loris Caruso/2

Inaudible Politics and the Crisis of Democracy

Abstract: The term "post-politics" captures the paradox of contemporary democracy; that a system designed to enable popular social movements access to power has, in fact, closed down that very possibility. We are left with a system, as Caruso [2015] demonstrates, whereby elites manufacture a seemingly "open" democratic process only to assert their control over political institutions when necessary. The challenge for today's social movements is therefore how to navigate a political system that is, at its core, illegitimate. Do they circumvent or ignore post-political regimes? Or do they attempt to re-engage with the democratic state to rediscover its very purpose: to enact a society based on equality? It appears the latter choice is now being selected across Europe.

Keywords: Politics; Rancière; Post-Democracy; Political Opportunity Structure; Cities.

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