Foreword:
A Preliminary Theoretical Report on Anarchist Insurrectionary Imagination

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The announcement that we are witnessing an era of “post-politics”\(^1\) does not sound surprising, as we have long been hearing such “death announcements” as that of the end of ideology, the end of the nation-state, the end of history, the end of nature and the end of utopia, to name only a few. Ours is allegedly an era depleted of revolutionary imagination or faith in socio-political structural transformation. As this post-political plot goes, participatory and representational democracy and market economics have become a more inclusive and penetrating form of governance. “People,” no longer designating a valid category of political subjectivity, gives place to the demographic-statistical term “population,” while citizens become consumers, and elections nothing but a choice of lifestyles, fashions, images, commodities. . . . Over against this domain of liberal-democratic biopolitical management stands life itself as a matter of self-reflexive risk. Accordingly, politics is reduced to risk assessment and policy and loses whatever radical momentum it may have had.

Andy Merrifield nicely captures the Kafkaesque characteristics of our contemporary post-political condition. Contemporary post-politics, according to Merrifield, is Kafkaesque to the degree that castles and ramparts are everywhere in plain view as a kind of Debordian spectacle that is nonetheless inaccessible (“The Enigma” 283-84). It works as “a vast whirlpool . . . [which] sucks everything into a singular and unified spiraling force, into a seamless web that has effectively collapsed and amalgamated different layers and boundaries” (285). Such a paradoxical amalgam of banality and inaccessibility, integration and fragmentation, to a large degree explains away cynicism as a symptomatic defense mechanism or the dominant post-political ideological fantasy. Today, ideology par excellence

\(^{1}\) For an overview of the literature that conceptualizes the post-politics in question, see Wilson and Swyngedouw, “Seeds of Dystopia” 6.
functions not so much as blatant false consciousness as, to borrow Peter Sloterdijk’s terms, “enlightened false consciousness” (5): the detached, sober claim that everything looks perfectly clear symptomatically conceals what is really a resistance to interpretation, political apathy and poverty of imagination.

With the above post-political conundrums in mind, however, how are we supposed to respond to or rationalize the insurrections irrupting in the second decade of this century: the Arab Spring, the Occupy Wall Street Movement, anti-austerity demonstrations in Europe, and, more recently, the Sunflower or Occupy Legislature Movement in Taipei and Occupy Central Movement in Hong Kong? These insurrections are triggered by either the violent actions of the police and the army, the governments’ decisions, or electoral controversies; the protestors’ demands include shifts in power, systemic transformations, revisions of governmental policies, or simply the basic human right to exist. Taking an overview of the recent occupations and demonstrations, Japhy Wilson and Erik Swyngedouw point to “their claims to embrace a desire for a fully-fledged transformation of the political structuring of life, against the exclusive, oligarchic, and consensual governance of an alliance of professional economic, political and technocratic elites determined to defend the neoliberal order” (“Seeds of Dystopia” 3). In a rather skeptical vein, Jodi Dean cautions against the tendency of occupation movements like Occupy Wall Street to become a “politics of no-politics,” which displaces principles of division and antagonism with procedural concerns with consensus and with the refusal of demands (269, 271). For Dean, hardcore oppositional movements disrupt public space and assert the will of a minority in defiance of democratic procedures (271).

The point is that these controversies make manifest the way in which theory positions itself in the era of post-politics and uprisings, showing how theory can be evantal-ized and hence revive the radical political imagination. As a matter of fact, the world’s recent riots and uprisings have fascinated and preoccupied and thinkers on the left like Noam Chomsky, Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek and Kojin Karatani, and have brought theoretical discourses onto the sites of actual events. These thinkers’ interventions, albeit via different philosophical and political routes, commonly aim to revitalize the people’s power, embody new forms of exchange, solidarity and community, and generate emancipatory projects in support of justice and equality. Accordingly, for them radical politics is radical not merely in the sense of rejecting political-economic institutions of domination.

At this point, I am tempted to invoke the Situationists’ slogans during the upheavals in Europe in May of 1968: “Be realistic, demand the impossible” and
“Imagination is seizing power.” These slogans touch the core of the anarchist insurrectionary imagination, for now we are speaking of an imagination with real power and real effects, one that takes us beyond the negativity of critique and destruction to an affirmation of life’s real potential. Anarchy—from the ancient Greek ἀναρχία (anarkhia) meaning “no rule” or “no ruler”—reached its highest point as late as the Russian and then the Spanish Revolution in the first decades of the twentieth century. We have witnessed anarchism not just with political revolutions but with workers’, feminist, counter-cultural, Green and peace movements. Grounded in the thinking of such founding figures as William Godwin, Peter-Joseph Proudhon, Michael Bakunin and Peter Kropotkin, anarchism in both theory and praxis opposes all forms of coercive authority and external governmental control. The principles of voluntary association, mutual aid and freedom to disagree lay the foundations for societies based on equality of opportunity (rather than outcome) where human beings could realize their true potential. At its most radical or most utopian, anarchy promotes an ongoing process of pursuit rather than “a uniform end to be achieved once and for all” (Jun 131).

Accordingly, anarchism does not adhere to any theoretical system, manifesto or mission statement; it belongs to the site of the event and departs from the abstraction or obscurantism of high theory. David Graeber, one of the leading intellectuals and activists of Occupy Wall Street, definitively labels anarchism as a kind of “Low Theory” that is opposed to policies which negate true politics; it does not originate from within the elite or, in Lacanian psychoanalytic terms, “the subject supposed to know.” Truly anarchist social theory, as Graeber proposes, “reject[s] self-consciously any trace of vanguardism” (Fragments 11). What makes the anarchist project of direct action possible is a “political ontology of imagination” that is always changing, adapting, improvising and, hence, filled with social, artistic and intellectual creativity (Revolutions 53, 60). Nevertheless, it remains debatable as to whether Graeber’s anarchist imagination has gone far enough when he privileges the gradual creation of alternative forms of organization and communication over a “sudden revolutionary cataclysm” (Fragments 40), and stresses such liberal-democratic principles as “deliberation” and “participation” (Democracy 186).

As its name suggests, the Invisible Committee manifests its insurrectional style via the principle of anonymity, which entails the absence of recognizable political identities and positions, so that the Committee will not become an easy target for the government (To Our Friends 157, 159). Therefore, even the term “anarchist” should be put in brackets and in effect made to disappear. This also
implies the Committee’s non-symmetrical relationship with the system. Thus liberal-democratic political principles such as participation and dialogue are irrelevant to the insurrectional style, which does not make any specific demands so as to widen the breach between politics and the political. Members of the Invisible Committee do not recklessly glorify the use of violence; nor do they fetishize non-violence. For them, “A gesture is revolutionary not by its own content but by the sequence of effects it engenders” (To Our Friend 145). Their urge to create communes and make connections does not aim at any sort of mobilization or class unity or solidarity. Instead, it aims at demobilization, at organizing beyond and against work (The Coming Insurrection 51). This does not imply any sort of passive withdrawal. The Invisible Committee’s insurrection fills the occupied territory with new life so as not to let the government take it back. This insurrection is steeped in the details of everyday life. Thoroughly animated by passion and imagination, the insurrection in this sense disappears in order to occupy, thus creating a space and milieu as well as a moment and flow. It is never subsumed within a dominant whole; it affirms remainders, and its radical power lies in “the ragged and the irreducible” (Merrifield, Magical Marxism 58).

Though not specifically anarchist, Merrifield’s reformulation of Marxism—more accurately put, his “magical Marxism”—is congenial to the anarchist insurrection as I have attempted to describe it. Inspired by Latin American magical realism, Merrifield draws on dream, desire and imagination to move “beyond the dour realism of critical negativity” and the “formalist straightjacket” of Marxism (Magical Marxism 1), reaching out towards a more fantastic, more phantasmal materialism as well as “an affective politics of hope” (10). What makes

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2 We can’t fail to see Agamben’s relevance here. Actually, Agamben taught Julien Coupat, a freelance rebel and allegedly the principal figure in the Invisible Committee, in Paris’s École des hautes études and collaborated with him in creating the anarchist journal Tiqquin. To what extent Agamben’s thinking had an impact on the Invisible Committee, of course, remains a question worth exploring. Nevertheless, Agamben’s work on the remnant, (im)potentiality and the messianic may provide philosophical coordinates for the insurrectional style in question. For example, Melville’s Bartleby represents for Agamben a figure of “unfathomable potentiality” who “writes nothing but [the] potentiality to not-write” (The Coming Community 37). In other words, Bartleby’s refusal to work embodies potentiality qua impotentiality, which undermines and unsettles (capitalist-biopolitical) causal and representational relations and which is an “originary possibilization,” a condition of possibility which points to no concrete possibilities (The Open 185). Such potentiality qua impotentiality, in engendering the “as not” (hōs mē), also puts the homogeneous chronological time (of productivity, progress, teleology, etc.) out of joint with itself. For more details, see my “The Crime of Indistinction? The Undead and the Politics of Redemption from an Agambenian Perspective,” Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies 38.1 (March 2012), 171-94.
global alliances possible is not so much what belongs to the superstructure but rather to the pre-conceptual, corporeal rhythms and affects (of anger, fear, pain, sympathy, admiration, etc.), the diffusion of general struggle and insurrection (Magical Marxism 75-76). From such a magical Marxist perspective, uncertain, unpredictable and non-teleological actions and connections collude and collide with each other as a new historical reality takes shape. Merrifield thus favors the city as the setting par excellence for “the politics of encounter.” Occupying a city center is not necessarily insurrectionary; the point is to create a node which “represents a fusion of people and the overlapping of encounters, a critical force inside that diffuses and radiates outward” (Politics 63). If any common forms of identification and expression are possible, they must be forged out of self-organizing networks (Politics 65).

From the above musings have arisen the following theses. First of all, the anarchist insurrectionary imagination can fruitfully begin by breaking with the myth of counting or, more accurately, the myth of the majority-minority division. We should not misunderstand or misuse the slogan “We are the 99%!”—which recent “occupy” movements have repeatedly invoked—as anything remotely representative of the democratic dogma of ballot counting and majority rule. This 99% pertains to an anonymous and opaque anarchist collective composed of all those who are under-represented, underprivileged and/or dispossessed, all those manifestations, so to speak, of human excrement in the eyes of the people in power and good citizens: the unemployed, squatters, slum dwellers, undocumented migrant workers . . . who claim their immediate right to a space, occupy it, profane its proper use, and create therein a new form-of-life by disrupting the accelerating, intensifying rhythm of labor and productivity, and breaking with that myth of speed which supports the whole capitalist biopolitical machine.

Works Cited


