

The Post-Political Urbanity: Art and the Contested Public Sphere

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We live in post-political times (Rancière 2004), when the fetishization of urbanity and technocracy creates the context of replacing the usual terms of describing the city with regard to neo-liberal thinking as competitiveness, creativity, sustainability, globality – terms that have been finding their applicability simultaneously, in a material and discursive manner. Thus, the city is being approached in terms of the competitive city, the creative city, the sustainable city, the global city, considering different perspectives over masses and class distinctions, which presuppose a special relation between singularity and universality: a singularity of its proper name – as the post-political city (Swyngedouw, 2010) – and an absolute universality of the action of the masses.

It has been argued that the actions of the masses have constituted a saturation that determined the obsolescence of theorizing in terms of mass and class distinction, and thus we should open the possibilities for a non-expressive conception of political dialectics (Badiou 2005). Art manifestations and protests, as non-expressive configurations of political dialectics, would not signal a circumstantial manifestation of the social contradiction, but it would represent a new way of configuring social action, given that politics are constituted as a space of constant controversies which need recognition, a space of conflict that accepts the need for socio-political reconfiguration (Rancière 2004). In the actual political configuration, art and protests remains the only non-consensual space of discourse. If governance extends beyond-the-State (Swyngedouw 2010), by promoting experts and attesting their incontestability as a substitute for political debates, the symbiosis between art manifes-

tations and protests remains the only medium trusted to bring attention towards the dangers of post-political consensus, which is reconfiguring political power as a rhizomatic diagram of power. Art can deconstruct the arguments of formal politics, especially those that aims at globalizing the economy, and it can reveal our current post-political condition in which we approach politics as a suspension of political choice followed by a delegation of political decisions to technocratic experts.

In these circumstances, the end of proper politics is determined by the current neoliberal political strategies that have been implementing consensus at the level of specific governmental techniques. The democratic political consensus, despite its appearances, is radically reactive, anticipating the articulation of conflicting and annihilating divergent trajectories. Outside the consensual order, politics of difference cannot be constituted, which means that the post-political regimes dismiss any dissenting position, ignoring the freedoms and circumventing the individual's possibilities of choice. In this context, unfortunately, the only dissenting manifestations that are noticeable are those of the "traditionalists, stuck in the past, who refuse to accept the inevitability of a new neo-liberal order, or that of the fundamentalists. The only way to respond to them is by sheer violence, by suspending their humanitarian and their democratic rights" (Swyngedouw 2010).

The death of proper politics, the end of the actual political moment, is correlated with the death of the *Polis*, understood in the idealized Greek sense, as a place of public meetings and democratic negotiations, a space for the es-

establishment of dissident positions, often radical, a place of dissonance and a framework in which political subjectivation is born and configured (Swyngedouw 2010). The post-ideological consensus, criticized by a radical group of post-political theorists, is what reduces proper politics to the status of social administration and determines the establishment of an urban governance, which replaces the rule of law; the articulations of social space through consensual governmental strategies is configuring a zero moment in politics.

This zero moment in politics is considered the starting point in the process of establishing a depoliticized, post-democratic and post-political city. For Rancière, this moment is identified immediately after the collapse of the Soviet system which revealed the precariousness of democracy, despite its triumphant appearance. The politics of identifying formal democracy with liberal economic strategies manifested themselves as consequences of the inherent exhaustion of democratic arguments. The socialist alternatives were dismissed without imposing a renewal of democratic arguments, but, as a substitute, a reduction of democratic life to the management of local consequences of global economic needs was imposed as a common condition – which presented the same solutions, both in right-wing and left-wing politics: the consensus as a supreme democratic value (Rancière 2004).

However, this post-democratic logic betrays a constitutive error: the consensus, seen as the supreme democratic value, the dissolution of counter-arguments and the annulment of dialectical positions between right-wing and left-wing politics is exactly what cancels democracy. In this context, the appeal to liberal arguments, especially regarding economic policies was criticized, despite the popularized opinion that all these new forms of neoliberal governance deepen democracy. This consensual, post-political condition in fact nullifies democracy, and in the end, “perverts and undermines the very foundation of a democratic *Polis*” (Swyngedouw 2010), eliminating politics itself – which involves maintaining the divergences at the level of one’s own symbolic space, through dissensual public meetings.

This is how the paradox of democracy is constituted. Although it promises equality, democracy produces a form of “oligarchic government” (Rancière 2012), in which only the illusion of a nation that governs itself, that chooses for itself is created, when, in fact, an institutional governmental minority decides for the people in accordance with their financial strategies and the economic policies they seek to implement. Thus, “governmental arrangements that consensually shapes the city according to the visions, tastes and needs of the transnational economic, political, and cultural elites” (Swyngedouw 2010) are created in dependence to transnational economic strategies appropriated by new regimes of urban governance, which fuse social actors, cultural elites and institutions at an international level.

The post-political urban governance, constituted as a participatory government that delegates decision to technocratic experts and trusts in formal policies determines a public liberation from politics, causing the end of political debates and the agency of political change. Thus, political power is reconfigured at the level of rhizomatic diagrams between the newly established centers of power, namely the non-governmental organizations, social groups, but also private institutions and corporations, determining an institutional arrangement of governance. Erik Swyngedouw understands the post-political urban governance as form of governance that is characterized by a broadening of the sphere of government, although the political space itself is narrowing or even suspending. This is the moment when we feel the need to rethink politics and to evaluate the possibilities of returning to the original values of politics in the sense, specified by Rancière, that of the search for the common good. Hence, even this hypothesis was appropriated by post-political urban governance for which “the return to politics, to the common good, represented an ideal justification of the consensual order” (Rancière 2011). However, the apparent return to politics is, in fact, its liquidation. The democratic political consensus, despite its appearances, is radically reactionary, anticipating the articulation of divergent and conflicting trajectories. Despite the fact that they implemented consensual democratic policies, they brought everything but not peace, however they did search for alternatives to the established urban assemblies and for future possibilities of urban development.

In his article *The Post Political City? De-Politicization or the Insurgent Polis*, Erik Swyngedouw considers that the politics of consensus, by defining a post-political order, are constituted around encouraging a populism that overrides democracy and leads to “ultra-politics of violent disapproval and, ultimately, to the foreclosure of any real spaces of engagement” (Swyngedouw 2007). For Swyngedouw, violence is a natural consequence of this context, in which the leftist arguments of the constitution and maintenance of a commune are reinterpreted in terms of consensus – as a politics that refuses difference –, constituting a cynical, neoliberal and cosmopolitan framework. This is inevitably “the only form of politics which resides from a deconstructionist critique of the impossibility of a genuine radical politics, [which] the neo-liberal elites that assert the impossibility of an urban world, different from what they created [fear of...], clinging on the privileges their institutionalized urban settings generously provide them, radically evacuating proper politics from the urban space, and reducing the polis to a mere city” (Swyngedouw 2011).

Rebellion, in such a context, is exciting even when it can only be instituted at the symbolic level, which is why the artist James Becket proposes an exercise of catharsis, a form releasing tensions through art, as an alternative to establishing a violent political radicalization. Thus, Becket sketches the portraits of important personalities in the field of financial industries, such as: John Rusnak, former economic agent of *Allfirst Bank* and *Aib Group Washington*, or Joseph Cassano, executive director of insurance and former employee of *Aig Financial Products Brooklyn* – these annotations being a constituent part of each portrait. By framing these portraits and arranging them in relation to a stone on which the name of a city was inscribed² as “the presumable place of crime” (Bailey 2015)² James Becket realizes the installation *Voodoo Justice for People of Finance* (2013), which was exhibited at the International Hacking Exhibition *Habitat - Art of Control* in Utrecht, and later at the Thessaloniki Biennale in Greece.



Figure 1. James Becket, *Voodoo Justice for People of Finance*, 2013. All rights reserved by the author.

Despite the excesses, incoherencies, violence and contradictions of the contemporary urban order, Swyngedouw identifies a possible solution to contest the consensual order of neoliberal politics and to set up an urban utopia. What Swyngedouw points out is that at the level of all urban incongruities, interstitial spaces of the post-political urban order could be occupied in order to create a new environment for the actual political configuration. Even if the *Polis* – as a space for political expression – is replaced by what neo-liberal thinking promotes as a creative city. The interstices that are undoubtedly constituted in this space, which can only be manifested in conflict, constitutes the materiality of a possible change operable at the level of an intermediary space of a political commitment, which challenges the post-political consensual order. This interstitial space is the place where the utopia of the proper politics can be established.

Occupying this interstitial space is the only way in which a new political order can be built from the inside, thus positioning itself in the impossibility of being excluded, since it is constituted within the consensual space. The post-political condition requires the inclusion of all social actors, institutions and corporations in a pluralistic-consensual order, in which any dissenting position causes the radical exclusion of those who think or want the revolution. However, as Alain Badiou states, forms of insurrection or revolution are not structural effects of the classical conception on revolutionary politics – whose main feature relies on an expressive dialectics –, but there are moments, influenced by certain circumstances. Thus, “the moment, the political struggle, expresses social contradictions. And that is why an insurrection can be purely singular and universal: singular because it is a moment, a pure moment, and universal because finally this moment expresses the generality of the fundamental contradictions (Badiou 2005).”

In other words, the post-political urbanity is based on contradictions – which are taking place worldwide – as consequences of social inequalities, spatial differentiation and irregular urban developments. At the global level, the post-political city is fragmented, its contradictions creating “tensions, inconsistencies and exclusions forged through these kaleidoscopic yet incoherent transformations [of the

city generating] all kinds of frictions, cracks, cracks, vacant spaces” (Swyngedouw 2010), which are simultaneously within and outside the consensual order of the post-political society.

These vacant spaces – liminal and interstitial – can configure sub-urban relationships, functioning as a rhizomatic system of experimenting with alternative urban possibilities. At the level of these “marginal spaces – [configured from] fragments left unoccupied and non-sutured by the urban police order that regulates, assigns and distributes” (Swyngedouw 2010), new cultural-social practices and new forms of urbanity are emerging. These sub-urban spaces, radically marginal, configure alternatives for the expression of new political agencies through the valorization of freedom, hope, desires and promises. In contrast to the globalized order of urban polity, in which transnational relations at the level of capital circulation impose certain conduct of social practices, dictated by the stock market and capital flows, the marginal order of free spaces favors an affective economy and configures hybrid social practices, often at the limit of political exclusion and compromise of social power.

The creativity of these liminal spaces is not measured in terms of capital, although life is emanated, in these interstices, at the creative and imaginative level. However, creativity is not constituted as a neo-liberal value that can be capitalized, but as an attribute of the third space; “a fully lived space, a simultaneously real-and-imagined, actual-and-virtual locus of structured individuality and collective experience and agency” (Soja, 1996). As Swyngedouw points out, quoting Guy Baeten, this acceptance of sub-urban marginality as the third space acquires a dystopian note in the imaginary of the social elites for whom these “spaces of unchecked and unregulated experimentation reinforce the dystopian imaginary of cities, as places of chaos, disintegration and moral decay” (Swyngedouw 2010).

Contrary to the separatist tendencies of the social elites, these alternative social practices need their own space, not necessarily in order to avoid the establishment of a generalized state of chaos, but because their own development demands attention, recognition and enhancement in their own cultural space – which allows questioning the post-po-

litical condition and evaluating the new status of politics itself –, in the context of radicalizing democratic practices. Also, these new rhizomatic spatial configurations require a different constitution of practices and social relationships, which is why this interstitial space necessitates the recognition of its constituent multiple identity. It is this interstitial social space that allows the political moment to be constituted, in Slavoj Žižek's terms. Insisting on the post-political condition that requires the constitution of the political moment – as a state of political dissension and antagonism –, Žižek differentiates post-politics from *arche*-politics: which is considered as an “attempt to define a traditional, close, organically structured, homogeneous social space that allows for no void in which the political moment could be constituted (Žižek 1999).” Trying to exemplify the political moment, Žižek draws an analogy between the moment in which politics itself is constituted, as a phenomenon, in Ancient Greece, and the present moment of post-politics in post-traditional, fragmented and kaleidoscopic societies. Ancient Greece formed the social hierarchy within the *démós*, in which each member defended his privileges – a typical situation, favorable to the establishment of conflict, tensions being usually produced in a structured social body in which each individual recognizes a designated position.

The political moment is constituted, in this case, when we begin to recognize in the public sphere the voice of those whom lack power, those who are usually not represented: the excluded, the ones without a firmly determined place in the social edifice, although they present themselves, paradoxically, as the inhabitants of the whole society, of the true Universality: “we – the ‘nothing,’ not counted in the order –, are the people and we are All against others, who defend only their own privileges” (Žižek 1999). This is how, in Žižek terms, the *empty principle of universality is constituted, determining that the social nothingness*, the void, the powerless part of society becomes the one that destabilizes the entire structure of the Universality.

Exploring this situation, the group of Russian artists AES + F are representing a possible urban utopia, in which a shift of power occurred from the privileged ones to those excluded, those who do not have an established position within the social hierarchies. The multi-channel video installation

Inverso Mundus presents a reversal of roles, depicting scenes in which the rich people are asking for money from the poor, women are wearing man's clothes and man are wearing dresses, students are punishing their teachers and pigs are spluttering their butchers. In this regard, the work of art illustrates precisely the *empty principle of universality* theorized by Žižek, insofar as the reversal of roles are destabilizing the internal rules of society.

In this paradigm, recalling Etienne Balibar's concept of *equaliberty*, according to which there should be a principle equality of all those who have the ability to speak, Slavoj Žižek identifies “a short circuit between the Universal and the Particular: the paradox of a singular which appears as standing for a Universal, destabilizing the natural functional order of relations within the social body” (Žižek 1999). At the level of this short-circuit between the Universal and the particular, the political moment is constituted – a moment successively repudiated by politics of consensus, which propose the suppression of the radicalized marginalization's irregular and unverified interstitial space. This suppression is made, on one hand by the liberal politics, namely the *para-politics*, which neutralizes political space by approaching political conflict in terms of elite competition (Mouffe 2005); and, on the other hand by the Marxist meta-politics that, at the level of some constitutive ambiguities, translate the political conflict – although fully assumed – in the sphere of economic-administrative processes.

The subject of Žižek's thesis, in the context of this discussion, regarding *meta-politics*, *para-politics* and *arche-politics* – as a means of challenging the post-political aspirations – is reinterpreting the thinking of the political philosopher Carl Schmitt in the post-political era. The aim of Slavoj Žižek in his article *Carl Schmitt's in the Age of Post-Politics* was to identify the paradoxes of Schmitt's thinking that are overlapping liberal reasons with critical positions toward liberalism. For Slavoj Žižek, Schmitt betrays his right-wing political orientations, disavowing the actual dimension of the political antagonism [the political moment] and considering politics itself as constituting a social situation that invokes the radical opposition between friend and foe – “no matter how radical it could seem, this opposition is not radical enough, insofar as it already transfers the inherent antago-



Figure 2. AES+F, *Inverso Mundus*, 2015. All rights reserved by the author.

nism, essential to politics, to external relations between us and them" (Žižek 1999).

Thus, for Schmitt, politics is shaped at the level of collective forms of identification – us, unlike them –, “the criteria of politics, its *differentia specifica*, is the friend/enemy discrimination, the political being understood only in the context of the ever present possibility of antagonistic friend and enemy grouping, regardless of all the aspects that this possibility – constituted in the realm of decisions, and not of free discussions – implies for morality, aesthetics and economy” (Mouffe 2005). In the current post-political context, Schmitt’s *ultra-political* arguments are no longer relevant

and must be countered by appealing to proper politics. However, it is necessary to return to Schmitt’s thinking, given that his theories are established as a point of reference in “detecting the deadlocks of post-political liberal tolerance [...and shaping] the form in which the foreclosed political returns to the post-political universe of pluralistic negotiation and consensual regulations” (Žižek 1999). Žižek proposes, as a method of resistance to these Schmittian *ultra-politics*, the reactivation of antagonistic instances, relevant for proper politics. Tolerance, compromise of truth or blaming of cultural differences are deficient attitudes in contexts in which part of the “true Universality are not those who preach global tolerance of differences or the

all-encompassing homogeneous unity, but those who engage in a passionate struggle for the assertion the Truth which compels them" (Žižek 1999). Thus, the reactivation of the antagonistic instances would not deny the Universality, but it would be substantial for it.

Aware of this political reality, the artist duo Claire Fontaine realize the work: *They Hate Us for Our Freedom*, in which the typical disjunction 'us-they', defining the Schmittians *ultra-politics*, can be anticipated even from the title. The work, realized in a particular sculptural technique of the artists – practiced in different contexts and with different references to current political realities – represents in a sculptural manner George W. Bush's affirmation following the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001. The sculptural text: *They hate us for our freedom* – an assertion that was used as the title of the exhibition at the Contemporary Art Museum St.

Louis of Washington – was represented on the wall, as an installation made of matches, which was lit in the opening of the exhibition. The artist duo frequently uses this technique, drawing with burning matches maps of countries, as the United States of America or Italy, with the intention of signaling the imminence of armed conflicts or the precarious security of living in these territories.

The exhibition *They Hate Us for Our Freedom* problematizes the understanding of freedom in liberal societies, discreetly signaling the violence and lack of independence that comes from simply being governed. George W. Bush's statement is constituted in a disjunctive logic of liberal thinking, specific to strategies of exclusion that attests an ideological and economic distance to the Orient, which anticipates the armed conflicts that will follow. The paradox of the Schmittian thought, which associates the consensus of separatist pol-



Figure 3. Claire Fontaine, *They Hate Us for Our Freedom*, 2008. All rights reserved by the author.

itics with a 'friend-enemy' type relationship is accompanied here by another paradox, that one of freedom constitution. George W. Bush affirms a logic of freedom, which arouses hatred and envy towards the American people, but how can freedom be constituted in a state of terror? Where can one find the freedom of a nation that is constantly threatening, and which in turn threatens? What, in the end, is freedom?

The radicalized Schmittian politics, implemented at the level of decisional, non-contextual confrontations between *us* and *them* are constituted, paradoxically, as a result of identifying the consensus in a specific dynamic for exclusion – us, unlike them –, which makes the rational politics of consensus only partially accomplished. However, this hypothesis, as both Slavoj Žižek and Chantal Mouffe point out, is the double paradox of Schmitt's approaches to democratic liberalism – “whose main characteristics, outside of individualism, was the rationalist assumption on the existence of a universal consensus, based on rational arguments” (Mouffe 2005). The consensus cannot be understood through liberal rationalism for the simple reason that each persistent rationalism calls for the irreducibility of denying antagonism. As a consequence, the consensus cannot be reached by liberal politics which are based on relations of exclusion, since these politics are experiencing the circumstances of 'a blindness', specific to the antagonistic dimension, a blindness which does not represent an empirical omission, but a constitutive one.

In conclusion, an urban revolution is the only possible solution to the non-expressive configuration of political dialectics. This possible revolution will not signal a circumstantial manifestation of social contradiction, but it would represent a new way of configuring social action, given that for both, Žižek and Rancière, politics is the space of constant controversies that need recognition, a space of conflict that accepts the need for socio-political reconfiguration, a space where not only the elites are those who dictates social needs, a space where even those who do not have a firmly determined position in social hierarchies are recognized as legitimate partners in political debates – which are not configured as mere competitive assertions of the interests of elites, but as real political struggles for “the recognition of the other as a legitimate, and at the same time legitimizing

partner” (Žižek 1999) –, a space of those who are excluded, who are not recognized, who do not represent an instance of power, but who are capable of destructing power from within, according to the *empty principle of universality* in which the particular can destruct the universal.

This new social configuration must recognize conflict as a constituent part of society since true politics are inevitably setting up “a space of contestation in the name of equality [...] a space for those who are uncared and unnamed, not part of the *police*' (symbolic, social or state) order; where they claim their rights to the Polis” (Swyngedouw, 2007). In other words, the urban space requires an opened reconfiguration, an indefinite one, which leaves space for the subsequent requests of each individual, since proper politics are constituting the moment when a particular request is not simply part of negotiating interests, but something that generates a metaphorical condensation of the global restructuring of the entire social space. These reconfigurations do not aim at simply including the particular in the Universal, or designating a proper place of the particular in Universal structures, but completely change the existing parameters of politics.

In his work *The Ticklish Subject. The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, Žižek recalls the modern definition of politics as an art of the possible, considering that, in postmodernity, “authentic politics are constituted antithetically as an art of the impossible, given that they change the very parameters of what is considered possible in the existing political constellation” (Žižek 2000). Apart from a complex reconfiguration of the current parameters, new consequences of the post-political suppression of politics appear, its exclusion from the symbolic order determining its return in the form of new postmodern racial prejudices. These segregationist prejudices can also be linked to sexual orientation or ethnicity, perfectly fitting into the configuration of a “depoliticized notion of society, in which each particular group is 'accounted for', has its specific status – of a victim – acknowledged through affirmative action or other measures designed to guarantee social justice” (Žižek 1998). Thus, the victimization of minorities and protests are utilized in order to ensure compensatory treatment for the injustices.



Figure 4. Jason Lazarus, *Phase 1/Live Archive*, view from the exhibition organized within the Museum of Contemporary Art from Chicago, 2013. All rights reserved by the author.

Starting from the idea of creating a symbiosis between art and protest, the American artist Jason Lazarus identifies a possible form of compensation for the social injustices suffered worldwide: mediating the demands written on protest banners by those excluded, and disseminating them as art. In this sense, the artist selects banners made by protesters of social movements, such as the Arab Spring in the Middle East and North Africa or Occupy Wall Street

in America, and displays them in a gallery project called *Phase 1 / Live Archive*, which aims for a re-instrumentation of political protest as a learning approach. This strategy becomes public and has an impact on the public, while evoking Marx's thesis on history, according to which man creates his own history, but not under his chosen conditions (Anita Chari 2015).

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