



FROM SOCIAL TO POLITICAL

NEW FORMS OF MOBILIZATION AND DEMOCRATIZATION

CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

Benjamin Tejerina and Ignacia Perugorria
Editors

February 9-10, 2012

Bizkaia Aretoa
University of the Basque Country
Bilbao – Spain

Organizers:



ISA RC17 – Research Committee Social Classes and Social Movements, International Sociological Association (ISA)
ISA RC48 – Research Committee Social Movements, Collective Action and Social Change, International Sociological Association (ISA)



Identitate Kutikilduan (Ikeritza) (OIEC-IKI)
www.identitatekutikilduan.org



Universidad del País Vasco Euskal Herriko Unibertsitatea

Bilbao

Universidad del País Vasco – Euskal Herriko Unibertsitatea,
Servicio Editorial = Argitalpen Zerbitzua, 2012.

ISBN: 978-84-9860-595-2

Depósito Legal / Lege gordailua: BI-142-2012

Benjamín Tejerina and Ignacia Perugorria (editors)

Edition: Mikel Azpiri Landa

Book cover design: Josu Aguinaga Cueto

Social Movements in Post-Political Society: Prefiguration, Deliberation and Consensus

RAPHAEL SCHLEMBACH

University of Salford

Abstract

This theoretical paper takes as its starting point the sociology of Alain Touraine, and applies it to study the mobilisations of the ‘indignados’ that have become manifest in square occupations from Madrid to New York. However, where Touraine stressed the task of his sociology to be the study of social movements in an era of the ‘programmed’ society, this paper engages recent literature and research that analyses contemporary society as ‘post-political’. Writers such as Rancière or Žižek make the case that today’s society is defined by a foreclosure of public debate, which would allow for an alternative vision to the neo-liberal order to emerge. The central question of this investigation is then to what extent the new mobilisations challenge the character of the post-political society. The paper is divided into three parts: a) a review of Touraine’s work on the ‘programmed’ society and its application today, b) an analysis of the ‘post-political’ character of society, c) the application of this theoretical framework to the new mobilisations.

Keywords

Alain Touraine, consensus, deliberation, post-politics, prefigurative politics

Introduction

With criticisms of economic globalisation making it less and less to the surface of public debate, and the fundamental questions of social organisation so completely monopolised by the stated necessity for economic growth, it took many people by surprise when signs of a new global conflict emerged that seemed to signal a complete upheaval of current forms of formal democracy and financial governance. Some of these tensions appeared in unlikely places. Suddenly, pro-democracy protests took grip of the Arab World and gradually influenced and inspired new mobilisations in Europe, North America and elsewhere. In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crash, and the economic crisis management that has followed it, it was not the organised labour movements or anti-poverty campaigns that were at the forefront of the new conflicts – though they were certainly present. Rather, the activists self-identified with a global popular class – the 99 percent. This paper then makes the case that these new mobilisations cannot be understood in the traditional terms of class struggle centred around property relationships, nor in terms of political-ideological affinity. Instead they question the very terms on which politics is possible.

I begin this paper with a brief review of Touraine’s earlier work (1971; 1977; 1981; 1988) that analysed social movements in programmed society, and paid special attention to the concept of ‘historicity’. For Touraine, a social movement is a particular moment in the historical trajectory of society understood as collectivity making and remaking itself. Historicity here refers to the ability of social actors to produce the

modus operandi of society. As such, in this paper I argue that we must understand new mobilisations such as the 15-M protests in Spain, or Occupy Wall Street, as products of and challengers to the social conditions in which they emerge. From this perspective we can analyse the movements' positions on questions of, for example, democracy or political economy.

In a second section I look at how writers who have stressed a process of post-politicisation (for example Badiou, 2005; Mouffe, 2005; Rancière, 2007; Žižek, 1999) assert that the political sphere is being closed by a hegemonic dominance of neo-liberal ideas over the realm of public discussion and deliberation. They argue that political economy, rather than being contested or criticised, is increasingly being policed and administered by technocratic arrangements that leave no space for political debate. As such, the existing neo-liberal arrangement becomes immune from critique and posits itself as a consensual agreement, with social change reduced to non-fundamental 'improvements'. Politics is here defined as the struggle of competing and conflicting views and ideas of social and public affairs. Post-politics thus refers to the overcoming and banning of public debate and contest to the benefit of a 'consensual' way of social administration and management. Rather than defined by a clash of ideologies, post-political society closes down the avenues for any challenge to the present socio-economic relations.

A third section applies this theoretical framework of post-politicisation to analyse the new mobilisations. In Touraine's terminology, the central question then would be: to what extent are they a manifestation of society acting upon itself; and therefore to what extent do they form a social movement? We will seek to answer this question with reference to the society in question, namely the post-political condition of our age and so ask: to what extent do the new mobilisations result from and break out of the post-political; or in other words: are they capable of producing a system of knowledge and action that (re)politicises issues of democracy, government and society? The paper analyses what are regarded as common characteristics of the mobilisations around square occupations in Europe and North America: that they are to a certain extent prefigurative, especially through their focus on deliberation in General Assemblies; that they put value on extra-parliamentary consensus decision-making; and that they seek greater transparency and regulation of economic (financial) processes.

The social movement in programmed society

Alain Touraine argued that the practical task of movement research is

... to discover the social movement which in programmed society will occupy the central position held by the workers' movement in industrial society, and the civil liberties movement in the market society by which it was preceded (Touraine, 1981: 24).

The objective of this research paper is to develop a sociological framework regarding newer mobilisations that have occurred globally during the recent period of crisis management in the wake of the 2008 financial crash; a framework which would reaffirm the task set out by Touraine. As such we can identify global student protests in places as diverse as Chile and the UK, new labour struggles in Europe and North America, democracy movements in the Mediterranean and Arab world, the global Occupy Wall Street movement, or anti-corruption protests in Russia. Such movements respond to an increasingly technocratic management of economic crisis and imposition of austerity programmes, which opens up questions about transparency and democracy. They are actors within an increasing process of 'post-politicisation' where

political and deliberative spheres are being closed by a hegemonic dominance of neo-liberal ideas over the realm of public discussion. These new mobilisations bring to light the argument that political economy, rather than being a contested field, is increasingly being policed and administered by technocratic arrangements that leave no space for political debate.

In this regard, there is something distinct about these new mobilisations. They no longer simply fit into the categories of counter-globalisation struggles that we witnessed at the turn of the millennium. These latter were characterised by responses to globalisation processes, market ideology and the flow of finance capital. Movements affirming human rights and global social justice represented the case for a defence of individual and collective identities against the encroaching effects of the neo-liberal market. They were global in their analysis, but often local in their forms of action, seeking to influence particular local adjustments to global economic processes. Today this is no longer what is at stake. While counter-globalisation movements struggled against an ‘enemy’ who advocated the free market and neo-liberalism, the new mobilisations face a situation in which the very project of neo-liberalism is in question. What is at stake now is the very question of the formal democratic consensus. The new movements seek to break this consensus open and respond with a call, or rather a proclamation, of real democracy.

I would argue that the earlier work of French sociologist Alain Touraine is particularly suited to begin an analysis of these new mobilisations. Why? First, Touraine’s emphasis on social movements – and especially on their relationship to society – is an appealing prospect for any attempt at understanding the new mobilisations as both a product of and a challenge to the present economic crisis and its management. Second, Touraine’s focus on social actors and historicity, rather than a systems theory, allows for an investigation that puts social movement agitation at the very centre of analysis, and indeed makes no separation between social and historical change and social movement action. Third, Touraine’s sociology of the programmed society emphasises a number of social characteristics (of production) that can inform the analysis of the current ‘post-political’ social arrangement. Most intriguingly, the engagement with Touraine’s sociology requires an understanding of the social movement as an actor springing from a relationship with, and acting upon, the *modus operandi* of society. When we identify prefiguration, deliberation and consensus as key qualities professed by the new mobilisations, we therefore cannot derive these from the consciousness of their participants, but must explain them in their endogenous relationship to the production of society itself.

As a key author of literature on new social movements, Touraine’s sociology bears witness to a transformation of production methods that calls into question the importance granted to the labour-capital relationship by traditional Marxist analyses. Alongside the work of writers such as Habermas, Gorz, Offe or Melucci, Touraine aimed to identify the new fault lines in post-industrial society. New social movements opened up new terrains of struggle beyond class conflict. The feminisms of the 1960s and 70s, the student revolts, the anti-nuclear and anti-war movements all abandoned the traditional emphasis on economic class interests in favour of a more ‘post-industrial’ and cultural outlook on political struggle. In Habermas’s words for example “the new conflicts are not ignited by distribution problems but by questions having to do with the grammar of forms of life” (Habermas, 1987: 392). At the heart of such an approach lies the analysis of a changing pattern of social organisation. Touraine, in particular, considers a shift from an industrial to a programmed, post-industrial society (Touraine, 1971). The repertoires and interests of new social movements corresponded to the emergence of post-Fordist and de-centralised patterns of production and consumption. Melucci, for example, abandons the concept of class relationship as economic reductionist and instead regards the new antagonism as a struggle over information. As such he holds that “[t]he action of movements

reveals that the neutral rationality of means masks interests and forms of power” (Melucci, 1994: 102). For the new social movement theorists, movements oppose the instrumental rationality of administered society and seek to defend an alternative mode of living.

Touraine’s sociology of action is situated between two seemingly opposing sociological perspectives, between structure and agency. His ‘actionalism’, as he terms it, intends to place the social actor at the centre of analysis. Rather than a systems theory of society, Touraine reintroduces the agency of actors into the framework of analysis, rejecting the opposition of objective (system) and subjective (actor). Accordingly, a society’s central mode of organisation, its historicity in Touraine’s words, not only gives rise to a particular form of struggle, but is also understood as a dynamic process of human activity. Touraine is thus concerned with, as are other theorists of the new social movements, identifying the historical subject of systemic change that is capable to formalise revolutionary values in collective action. While in industrial society, struggle was centred on ownership and redistribution of material wealth, Touraine analyses post-industrial or programmed society as shaped by technocratic concerns:

A new kind of society is being born. If we want to define it by its technology, by its ‘production forces’, let’s call it the programmed society. If we choose to name it from the nature of its ruling class, we’ll call it technocratic society. (Touraine, 1971: 27)

In programmed society economic decisions are no longer purely based on accumulation of capital through the direct exploitation of profitable labour. Decision-making is more bureaucratized and rationalised on a societal scale unseen before. It is a result of scientific and technological investment, something that did not define the period of industrial society where investment was focussed on direct profitability. Society is therefore more able to ‘act upon itself’, as communication and knowledge have taken the central role of exchange:

Technocracy does not mean the replacement of political choices by technical choices. Such an idea does not correspond to any society and can only suggest a utopia of little importance. No society can reduce ends to means and function without making choices among objectives or, in other words, without the exercise of power. Technocracy is power exercised in the name of the interests of the politico-economic production and decision-making structures... (Touraine, 1971: 98)

Recent formal responses to the eurozone crisis are telling. The appointments of, for example the former university rector and EU Commissioner Mario Monti both as Prime Minister of Italy and Minister of Economy and Finance, or of ex-European Central Bank employee and Harvard professor Lucas Papademos as Prime Minister of Greece, can be thought of very much as an a-political, technocratic response. Their service is not to a political ideology, it is to the economy, and to economic growth, as a whole.

It is more difficult to define the social movement, the group of people whose interests are vetted against those of the technocratic class. Touraine no longer defines the new class, the new social movement, in terms of the property relation of wage-earners and owners of means of production. Instead, the new “dominated class is ... defined ... by its dependence on the mechanisms of engineered change and hence on the instruments of social and cultural integration” (Touraine, 1971: 54). For Touraine, the new social actors at the forefront of student and workers struggles in 1960s France were not those most removed from the centres of elite decision-making. On the contrary, they were those that stood in a new particular relationship to the social transformations taking place. If the traditional labour movement as a class of wage-earners had stood in a relationship of exploitation with the capitalist class, so the new social movements were populated by those

that related most closely to the new struggles over control of information and knowledge. The predominance of social tension in the universities, the urban centres and in the most advanced industries was a sign of this.

Nonetheless, more than other theorists of new social movements (notably Gorz), Touraine insists on the continuing importance of class struggle for a sociological analysis of social movements. His sociology of action is decidedly still a conflict theory. For him, new forms of production and the centrality of information did not lead to a dispersal of struggles to the point that their common purpose is indiscernible. Rather the social movement is still present in the centrality of conflict. Thus, while the central orthodox Marxist tenet of class antagonism can no longer be maintained, the new central question relates to the continuing possibility of anti-systemic conflict. Touraine remains true to a critical materialist study of movements by focusing his attention on the historical agency of movements – via his conception of historicity. He defines historicity as “the symbolic capacity of social actors to construct a system of knowledge and the technical tools that allow them to intervene in their own functioning, act upon themselves, and thereby produce society” (Touraine, 1977: 6). So social movements are not independent from society in which they act, but stand in a dialectical relationship to it: “Social life is not ordered by natural or historical laws but by the action of those who fight and negotiate in order to endow the cultural orientations they valorize with a firm social form” (Touraine, 1988: 18).

As such the discipline of sociology is tied in to the emergence of a social movement. In Touraine’s words, the “proper object of sociology [is] the formation of collective action through which the consumer will become the producer, a maker of his society and culture” (Touraine, 1971: 26). The re-emergence of politics in antagonism to the post-industrial society that was signalled by May 1968 calls for the reinstatement of a social research programme that questions the present political economy, that investigates power relations, and that seeks answers for a different future, a future that is not predetermined by the current system but that is open to be shaped and re-shaped. The identification of new social movements that can open up new visions and alternative paths of social development in the framework of post-industrial, programmed society emphasises the contest of different political and cultural trajectories.

The social movement in post-political society

The application of this earlier work of Alain Touraine to study contemporary movement must note the economic processes that have moved us beyond a programmed society towards a ‘post-politicisation’ of society. We might want to analyse the post-political condition of the present as more than simply the triumph of neo-liberalism. Of course the collapse of real-existing socialism and the rise of an economic consensus based on market ideology contributed to the foreclosure of actual and practical possibilities to imagine alternative forms of social organisation. What is even more, however, the present crisis of neo-liberalism has done little to change that fact. Despite the awareness of income inequality, corruption, lack of accountability and so on, as well as discontent directed at austerity programmes, it remains hard to think a way out of the current crisis.

The global economic crash has proven the ‘end of history’ thesis wrong. While it found advocates in global institutions, university economics departments and financial sectors, today the project itself is in crisis. And yet, neo-liberalism, despite having lost its all-powerful ideological grip and political advocates, continues to reign – in the words of the Turbulence Collective – ‘zombie-like’:

Neoliberalism is dead but it doesn't seem to realise it. Although the project no longer 'makes sense', its logic keeps stumbling on, like a zombie in a 1970s splatter movie: ugly, persistent and dangerous. ... Such is the 'unlife' of a zombie, a body stripped of its goals, unable to adjust itself to the future, unable to make plans. A zombie can only act habitually, continuing to operate even as it decomposes. Isn't this where we find ourselves today, in the world of zombie-liberalism? The body of neoliberalism staggers on, but without direction or teleology. (Turbulence 2009: 5)

This seems to be the current nature of the post-ideological or post-political society. Despite the apparent crises perpetuated by the dominant economic framework, alternative visions remain largely hidden from public view. Writers like Rancière or Žižek explain this as the foreclosure of what is properly political; whereas the political sphere promotes the ability to fundamentally debate and question the way society is organised, and the way we live collectively. The critics of post-politicisation processes emphasise the importance of antagonism or disagreement between different visions of the social and the economic. But more than that, they charge post-politics with denoting and delimiting the very localities and subjectivities of the political realm.

Political 'consensus', especially over question of economics and ecology makes it impossible to hold fundamental discussions over issues of power relations. Instead of politics, the post-political society is one of administration and management of the existing society and of socioeconomic relations and matters of ecological concern. Rather than ideological debate being the driving force behind social change, it is bureaucrats and technocrats that act as gatekeepers and promote certain interests over others. So the processes of post-politicisation are not to be equated with de- or a-political conditions. On the contrary, they simply describe the complete monopoly over the political by the liberal democratic and neo-liberal consensus.

Moreover, increased populist measures to enhance participation in formal democratic processes are not enough. In fact they often go hand in hand with attempts to keep politics out of policy:

The identification of formal democracy with the liberal economy in fact manifested itself more and more in the so-called democratic regimes. It appeared as the internal exhaustion of democratic debate. The end of the socialist alternative, then, did not signify any renewal of democratic debate. Instead, it signified the reduction of democratic life to the management of the local consequences of global economic necessity. The latter, in fact, was posited as a common condition which imposed the same solutions on both left and right. Consensus around these solutions became the supreme democratic value (Rancière, 2004b: 3-4).

In contrast to the real democracy demanded and enacted by the global occupy activists, liberal democracy has carried with it the spectre of the 'end of politics' since the collapse of real existing socialism. Not that real existing socialism was the only alternative imaginable, but its collapse and the triumphant rise of neo-liberalism as the only thinkable economic logic has had as an effect the foreclosure of political utopia. This does not mean that democracy in itself is not a field where differing positions are possible. Formal democracy is still contested, yet only so far as it needs to be tweaked and perfected – via the inclusion of participatory elements and populist measures such as referenda or citizen consultations.

Consensus, for Rancière, is the negation of politics, and therefore of social change. Politics (the notion he terms *le politique*) instead needs to be understood as antagonism, as disagreement. This disagreement is precisely a necessary outcome of differing values and notions of 'the common'. Politics is nothing other than the playing out of competing visions of what is common to all. In contradistinction to the idea of politics as disagreement stands the consensus promoted and upheld by what Rancière terms the 'police order'.

The police order denotes the ‘proper place’ in which politics takes place. It not only delimits the realm of the political and guards its boundaries, but also fixes the persons proper to this realm who are party to the political. The *indignados* pose a challenge to this police order. They react against the idea that it should be left to experts (economists, elected representatives and so on) to decide on the best representation of the common. The proclamation ‘we are the 99 percent’ represents an ‘axiomatic claim of equality’ by the majority to take part in the political determination of public matters.

The police order defends the very perimeters of the possible and the impossible, a certain “distribution of the sensible” determining “the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience” (Rancière, 2004a: 13). It involves “not so much the disciplining of bodies as a rule governing their appearing, a configuration of occupations and the properties of spaces where these occupations are distributed” (Rancière, 1999: 29). This can at times play out very literally as the policing of protest and public assemblies. In fact, the occupation of spaces, and their transformation into political arenas of their own right, seemed to threaten the police order more than the protests directed at established channels of politics:

Police interventions in public spaces consist primarily not in interpellating demonstrators, but in breaking up demonstrations... It consists, before all else, in recalling the obviousness of what there is, or rather of what there is not, and its slogan is: ‘Move along! There is nothing to see here!’ The police is that which says that here, on this street, there’s nothing to see and so nothing to do but move along. It asserts that the space for circulating is nothing but the space of circulation (Rancière, 2010: 37).

It is the very act of reclaiming public space that poses the challenge to this order in the first instance. The occupations of squares, parks, streets and buildings – turned into publically accessible sites of not only protest but debate and participation – in themselves represent the axiomatic claim that public spaces are the loci of political deliberation and action.

The Occupy movement and the protests of the *indignados* did not begin in a predefined political space, or in the attempt to capture an established political realm for its own ideas. It is no coincidence here that it rejected parliamentarianism. In many instances, political parties and established trade unions were not permitted to promote their agendas or organisations in the occupied spaces and squares. Instead politics began with the struggle for space, with the struggle over the realm where one could legitimately speak of an exercise of democratic deliberation. Hence, the slogan ‘this is what democracy looks like’. As such the new mobilisations are centred on questions of “what can be seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time” (Rancière, 2004a: 13).

Prefiguration, deliberation and consensus

Where the fundamental aspect of post-political society relates to a hegemonic closure of deliberative space, a social movement would be precisely the challenge to that paradigm. We posit the hypothesis that the global Occupy movement, and similar new mobilisations, both mimic and challenge post-political society. The movement is characterised at once by a re-politicisation and deliberation of the fundamentals of what Touraine establishes as the programmed society, namely economic growth. On the other hand, the movement remains post-political and decidedly post-ideological. It refuses to define itself in traditional terms as either left or right, it does not exclude on the basis of political ideology, and the slogan ‘we are the

99 percent' very much belongs to a discourse that stresses consensus rather than conflict. Moreover and fundamentally, the self-understanding of many participants paints the movement not as a protest but as a prefigurative enactment of direct democracy.

Prefiguration

The idea of prefiguration is often tied in with anarchist political theory. Rather than a Leninist conception of history, in which revolution is the final outcome of stages of class struggle, prefigurative theory makes the case that the means and ends of struggle should not be separated. Social change, or revolution, here is an act of the present, not a goal to be achieved in the future. In activist politics, prefiguration thus denotes the desire 'to be the change we want to see', or 'to build a new world in the shell of the old'. In his pamphlet *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*, David Graeber, who was also a key organiser of the Occupy Wall Street protests, describes the anti-globalisation movement in terms of a prefigurative politics:

When protesters in Seattle chanted 'this is what democracy looks like,' they meant to be taken literally. In the best tradition of direct action, they not only confronted a certain form of power, exposing its mechanisms and attempting literally to stop it in its tracks: they did it in a way which demonstrated why the kind of social relations on which it is based were unnecessary (Graeber, 2004: 84).

Graeber also defines direct action in prefigurative terms:

For those who desire to create a society based on the principle of human freedom, direct action is simply the defiant insistence on acting as if one is already free" (Graeber, 2011)

Prefiguration is thus a performative act. Its utterance or performance is inseparable from what it pronounces. In the context of Tahrir Square or the Puerta del Sol, where thousands of people participate in General Assemblies, enact the 'human microphones' or participate in decision-making by signalling their approval or disapproval using hand signs, the speech act 'this is what democracy looks like' adopts a performative meaning and indeed creates the possibility for 'real democracy' to occur. This does not mean that real democracy exists in the uneven experiments of the squares and parks; rather the participants begin to experience a different kind of democratic structure. Where it is successful, prefigurative politics breaks through the post-political deadlock; the police order that denotes where politics is possible and where impossible becomes subverted.

The occupation of space, of squares and public parks, has acted as a prefigurative element to the Occupy movement. The movement is explicitly not demand based. It does not ask concessions or policy implementations of an already pre-established political order. It acts out these politics itself, without the necessary executive power to act. We might want to quote here, at length, a letter sent from some occupiers of Tahrir Square to those of Wall Street:

So we stand with you not just in your attempts to bring down the old but to experiment with the new. We are not protesting. Who is there to protest to? What could we ask them for that they could grant? We are occupying. We are reclaiming those same spaces of public practice that have been commodified, privatised and locked into the hands of faceless bureaucracy, real estate portfolios and police 'protection'. . . . Why should it seem so natural that they should be withheld from us, policed and disciplined? Reclaiming these spaces and managing them justly and collectively is proof enough of our legitimacy.

What you do in these spaces is neither as grandiose and abstract nor as quotidian as ‘real democracy’; the nascent forms of praxis and social engagement being made in the occupations avoid the empty ideals and stale parliamentarianism that the term democracy has come to represent. And so the occupations must continue, because there is no one left to ask for reform. They must continue because we are creating what we can no longer wait for (Comrades from Cairo, 2011).

These protests act as an ontological force, a presence of social actors that act out the changes they want to see. In terms of ‘real democracy’, the deliberative practices in consensus decision-making that we have seen on the squares, implemented by thousands, are not simply a tool to achieve an aim. It is the very process towards achieving outcomes that is construed as a goal in itself.

Hence, the slogan ‘this is what democracy looks like’ is inconsistent in itself. On the one hand it is to be taken in a literal sense; while rudimentary in fashion with recognised limitations, the process prefigures the possibility of a ‘real democracy’ that draws participation from the 99 percent. On the other hand, it is perhaps limiting to think of it in a prefigurative sense. What does it mean when protesters carry placards and banners proclaiming ‘we are an image of the future’? They might declare, in a performative sense, the possibility of historical change. And yet, the gatherings and assemblies are just as much an image of the present. Prefiguration here could be charged with employing the language of ‘dropping-out’, of asceticism, of the creating of spaces that would somehow lie on the outside or beyond the social reality of the present. It might make more sense to treat the global experiments in real democracy as negative expressions of discontent (see for example Noys, 2010; 2011). Rather than on the impossible showcasing of an alternative and future participatory democracy, our emphasis would be on how the new mobilisations expose the contradictions within the presently existing society.

Deliberation

The Occupy Wall Street protests in the United States were publicised by an advert in the anti-consumerist magazine *Adbusters* asking ‘what is our one demand’. Much has been made of the fact that the Occupy movement ought to remain free from demands. Rather it is a deliberative process where all citizens can engage in rational debate, especially about those (economic and financial) policies that they are affected by.

Demands have of course resulted from this process of deliberation and discussion. They often relate to greater transparency, redistribution of wealth and regulation of the financial sector. In Spain, the movement of the *indignados* had already phrased their one demand: ‘real democracy now’. But this was not to be delivered by political parties or parliaments, but a performative and prefigurative act that was carried out through its utterance by thousands of people in the streets. Here deliberation stood at the forefront of the movement.

We can point here, maybe most usefully, to the social movement theory of Jürgen Habermas (Habermas, 1981; 1987). Habermas’s theory of communicative action considers democratic politics to be a result of the capacity of rational deliberation and interaction. This definition of the democratic, or of the political, follows logically from the human capacity to debate and discuss, to listen and speak. The occupied squares of Madrid or New York, the human microphones, or the General Assemblies, are all manifestations of this deliberative realm; they are expressions of human interaction against instrumental rationality. The construction of such a deliberative and rational space for the 99 percent is not accidental. It is the very means to achieve participation and an objective assessment of diverging arguments, through the objective distinction of fact and value. It is performative in the sense that it assumes that participatory processes would allow for arriving at a consensual agreement that reflects not only the view of the majority but that of the 99 percent.

But this Habermasian focus on communication, deliberation and language is unsatisfactory, as much as it appears to guide the project of General Assemblies and consensus-decision making. As Rancière (2004b) writes, it is always an argument and disagreement over what could constitute a ‘common’ value. The assumption that if open debate will only go on for long enough human interests must converge is symptomatic of a consensual style of post-politics. At the same time of course, the deliberative practices of the new mobilisations do nonetheless present an antagonistic challenge to the formal democratic and economic consensus. Democracy is the participation of those who are not properly constituted as political actors. By attempting to take hold of political debate and redefining the boundaries delimiting the spheres where politics is possible and not possible, the new mobilisations constitute a social movement grappling with the possibility of social change.

Consensus

A related question is that of consensus. Consensus-decision making has been championed by feminists, anarchists, eco-movements and others as a method adapt to the current situation of horizontal movement struggles. The recent mobilisations have popularised the method and its principles.

As a tool for movement participation, consensus decision-making practices have been powerful. However, combined with the slogan ‘we are the 99 percent’, this has presented problems. Consensus is also a key fragment of the post-political era. In Touraine’s terms, consensus would move the question of politics away from the idea of power towards the discussion of the best form of decision-making. The content of these decisions is not central, but rather the way they have been achieved. Critics of post-politicisation processes thus point out the limits of such attempts at participatory decision-making and instead postulate the values of conflict and, in Chantal Mouffe’s terms, ‘agonistic pluralism’ (Mouffe, 2000; 2005). Mouffe reiterates the point that increased participation does not necessarily lead to more direct forms of democracy. The use of new social media that has been heralded by many as a key contributor to the new mobilisations is a case in point. Mouffe charges it with creating voluntarily exclusive arenas in which people are not confronted with views they disagree with. Nonetheless, public space is important for Mouffe, which she understands it as agonistic. The squares and streets of Cairo, for example, became political spaces where new democratic visions were being expressed, clashing (at times all too literally) with the established regime.

The critique of consensus models of democracy thus does not object to the use of deliberative practices that lead to passionate expressions of a movement’s diversity or of opposition to established channels of governance. Rather it warns against a notion of (formal) democracy that sees questions of social, economic or ecological importance not in political terms, but as problems to be solved and administered by means of an instrumental rationalism. Where Occupy activists argue that political ideologies and traditional categories of left and right are to be transgressed, in the name of ‘we the people’ or ‘the 99 percent’, this has the effect of banishing partisan and oppositional politics in favour of a post-political technocratic and populist response to the existing democratic deficit. Assuming that political harmony must result from rational processes of deliberation and seeking consensus sets up the reconciliation and ultimate foreclosure of what is proper to politics.

The argument is also made by Žižek, though it points more to a Leninist conception of politics, when he writes:

...in Greece, the protest movement displays the limits of self-organisation: protesters sustain a space of egalitarian freedom with no central authority to regulate it, a public space where all are allotted the same amount of time to speak and so

on. When the protesters started to debate what to do next, how to move beyond mere protest, the majority consensus was that what was needed was not a new party or a direct attempt to take state power, but a movement whose aim is to exert pressure on political parties. This is clearly not enough to impose a reorganisation of social life. To do that, one needs a strong body able to reach quick decisions and to implement them with all necessary harshness (Zizek, 2011b).

The Occupy movement does not present a political manifesto, a defined and demarcated alternative. Rather it seeks to, in an inversion of post-political domination, to re-open a deliberative space for discussion. The question is whether we should situate this deliberation within the realm of the process of post-politicisation, or within the counter-hegemonic narrative.

A deliberative and prefigurative space such as the encampments on public squares could easily be understood as symbols of the post-political. Rather than offering a challenge to the neo-liberal they create a narrative in which the process and method of discussion receives more emphasis than the eventual outcome. The challenge to the post-political does not lie in the prefigurative enactment of democracy in General Assemblies using consensus-decision making understood as an affirmative process, but in its negative conception as an antagonistic, if contradictory, challenge to technocratic society.

Conclusions

At this stage of the research the conclusions to be drawn from such an analysis are still tentative but they relate to the following two areas of concern regarding the call for 'real democracy':

- 1) Reflecting the post-political condition from which they emerge, the new mobilisations are concerned with administration and regulation of economic processes, rather than their ideological/political assessment. Democracy here becomes synonymous with transparency and anti-corruption mechanisms.
- 2) Processes of deliberation and consensus simultaneously banish and seek to reintroduce political dissent, both silencing and to amplifying disagreement within the movement. Democracy here is not conceptualised as a pluralistic contest between competing ideologies, but as a prefigurative process.

There is much that we can take from Touraine's analysis of programmed society. A social movement is not condemned to the fringes of society; instead we must understand it as society itself acting upon itself. If we understand current dynamics as linked to processes of post-politicisation, i.e. the further move towards technocratic solutions offered to the present crisis of neo-liberalism, we must analyse the new mobilisations as both challengers and products of the post-political condition. What we cannot detect is a new privileged subject, and new underlining fault line such as that sought by Touraine and others. Instead, the Occupy movement and related mobilisations are contradictory in themselves, and at times reflect the post-political dynamics that they have emerged from.

Moreover, while for Touraine technocratic governance gave rise to anti-technocratic opposition movements, this is not quite as unequivocal with regards to the gatherings in, say, Madrid or New York. Can one speak of a social movement if its global nature is hardly apparent, and its internal logic ravaged by contradiction? The divergences between different groups of participants are so profound that it hardly makes sense to speak of even localised movements. Nonetheless, heterogeneity evident in Puerta del Sol or on

Wall Street, or declining numbers at their General Assemblies, do not necessarily signal a decline of the social movement in post-political society. A social movement cannot be reduced to simply a succession of occupations, demonstrations and direct actions. The Occupy Movement as a social movement might not progress in a linear fashion; disruptions, discontinuities are part of it.

The new mobilisations are indeed manifestations of a social movement, i.e. they are social actors attempting to take control of the possibility and impossibility of doing politics and of social change. Its aims, as contradictory as they may seem, must not be understood in terms of consciousness and ideology of its participants. Nonetheless, its actions are political in the sense that they present a challenge to and a possible going-beyond the post-political condition that they have been born out of. It is from the contradictions and inherent conflicts of society that these mobilisations have emerged, and as such they are both delimited by it and a vision of something new. In Rancière's terms, the move from the social to the political is an act of dissensus; it represents the negation of the formal divide between the political and the private. Or in Žižek's words: "Their basic message is: the taboo is broken; we do not live in the best possible world; we are allowed, obliged even, to think about alternatives" (Žižek, 2011a).

References

- Badiou, A.: 2005, *Meta-Politics*, (London: Verso).
- Comrades from Cairo: 2011, 'To the Occupy movement: the occupiers of Tahrir Square are with you', <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/oct/25/occupy-movement-tahrir-square-cairo>, accessed January 2012.
- Graeber, D.: 2011, 'On Playing By The Rules: The Strange Success Of #OccupyWallStreet', <http://www.nakedcapitalism.com/2011/10/david-graeber-on-playing-by-the-rules-%E2%80%93-the-strange-success-of-occupy-wall-street.html>, accessed January 2012.
- Graeber, D.: 2004, *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*, (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press).
- Habermas, J.: 1987, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Vol.2: System and Lifeworld*. (Cambridge: Polity).
- Habermas, J.: 1981, 'New Social Movements', *Telos* 49, 33-7.
- Melucci, A.: 1994, 'A Strange Kind of Newness: What's "New" in New Social Movements?', in Enrique Laraña, Hank Johnston, Joseph R. Gusfield (eds.) *New Social Movements: From Ideology to Identity*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press), pp. 101-30.
- Mouffe, C.: 2005, *On the Political*, (Abingdon: Routledge).
- Mouffe, C.: 2000, *The Democratic Paradox*, (London/New York: Verso).
- Noys, B. (ed.): 2011, *Communization and its Discontents: Contestation, Critique, and Contemporary Struggles*, (New York: Minor Compositions).
- Noys, B.: 2010, *The Persistence of the Negative: A Critique of Contemporary Continental Philosophy*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press).
- Rancière, J.: 2010, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, (London: Continuum).
- Rancière, J.: 2007, *On the Shores of Politics*, (London: Verso).
- Rancière, J.: 2004a, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, (London: Continuum).
- Rancière, J.: 2004b, 'Introducing Disagreement', *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 9(3), 3-9.
- Rancière, J.: 1999, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press).
- Touraine, A.: 1988, *Return of the Actor: Social Theory in Post-Industrial Society*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press).
- Touraine, A.: 1981, *The Voice and the Eye: An Analysis of Social Movements*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Touraine, A.: 1977, *The Self-Production of Society*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press).
- Touraine, A.: 1971, *The Post-Industrial Society. Tomorrow's Social History: Classes, Conflicts and Culture in the Programmed Society*, (New York: Random House).
- Turbulence: 2009, 'Life in Limbo', *And now for something completely different?*, *Turbulence* 5, pp. 3-7.

Zizek, S.: 2011a, 'Occupy first. Demands come later',

http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/oct/26/occupy-protesters-bill-clinton?CMP=twg_gu, accessed January 2012.

Zizek, S.: 2011b, 'Shoplifters of the World Unite', <http://www.lrb.co.uk/2011/08/19/slavoj-zizek/shoplifters-of-the-world-unite>, accessed January 2012.

Zizek, S.: 1999, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, (London: Verso).