Dimensions of Radical Political Emancipation

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March 4, 2019

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mal course of time and begins to pull on a particular thread – today the tax on diesel, in the recent past university selection, pensions, or reform of employment law – the whole tight web of inequalities structuring the global order of a world governed by the law of profit begins to unravel[22].

Conclusion

Political emancipation is not simply restructuring a certain sphere of social or economic relations. Nor it simply indicates the achievement of more rights by oppressed or marginalized groups, as it cannot be individual endeavor. Instead it is a holistic process that deconstructs all building blocks of the current Capital-Nation-State complex, replacing them with the basis of direct democracy. This process goes as deep as the replacement of capitalist/bureaucratic rhythms and zones with public space and time, as well as deconstruction of old bureaucratic roles/identities and creating new, much wider and holistic emancipatory ones in their place.

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[22] www.versobooks.com

If we begin with the state, we end with the state. Let us begin instead with the popular reunions[…], the various associations and committees[…].
-Kristin Ross[1]

Political emancipation, in the most authentic and democratic sense of the term, means emancipation from the specialization of politics. In other words, it is a project of direct democracy where society, not some extra-social source, self-institutes its form and self-limits its activity. The seeds of such political emancipation can be traced to many historic moments. Among them are the Paris Commune, May '68, but also the more recent one Zone à defender (zad). In all these cases we can see elements of direct democracy where politics is practiced "from below". We can also add, to a certain extent, the Yellow Vest movement with its recent adoption of democratic confederalist organizational structure[2], as well as its demands that increasingly ask for more citizen participation[3].

According to this understanding of political emancipation there can't be a single socio-economic class or vanguard to initiate revolutionary change. For example, when author Kristin Ross examines the creation of genuine public space and time during the Paris Commune, she refutes the role of industrial proletariat as the sole actor of social change[4]. There was also, she notes, a significant role played by semiskilled peasants, who had migrated from the provinces to work in the city, as well as by traditional artisans, that were located at the bottom of the artistic hierarchy of the time. Prosper-Oliver Lissagaray reminds us that women were also present in the Paris Commune in a very dynamic way: *the women*

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[1] Kristin Ross: Communal Luxury: The political imaginary of the Paris Commune (London and New York: Verso 2015), p.14

[2] www.thenation.com

[3] www.france24.com

[4] Kristin Ross: The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune (London and New York: Verso 2008), p.22

were the first to act. Those of 18ᵗʰ March, hardened by the siege — they had had a double ration of misery — did not wait for the men[5]. What was revolutionary during the Paris Commune was that each of these groups transgressed their bureaucratic roles and acted instead as citizens – as political beings that are capable of democratically determining their future. Ross observed similar traits in May '68, where she underlines the importance of other groups besides the students and the workers, like the peasants.

In both these cases target of the popular rebellions was not only industrial capitalism, but the symbols of bureaucratization and policing of everyday life that stagnated spatiality and temporality. What was revolutionary about them was that people chose to transgress their heteronomously determined roles and acted instead as citizens, recreating a truly public space and time. Below I will examine three dimensions of political emancipation in this line of thought: transgressions of bureaucratic roles and identities; creation of public space; liberation of time.

Transgression of Bureaucratic Roles and Identities

One important characteristic of popular uprisings is the effort of those "below" to transgress their bureaucratically determined roles, imposed on them by state, religion, capital etc. For example, French philosopher Maurice Blanchot writes that the specific force of May '68 derived from the fact that *in this so-called student action, students never acted as students, but as the revealers of a total crisis, as bearers of a power of rupture putting into question the regime, the State, the society*[6]. This refusal reveals a general crisis of political representation and hierarchy, which cannot make people stick to their imposed narrow roles. These non-students, i.e. people who

you to have destroyed the present and compromised the future, you still want to annihilate the past[19].

For Parisians, as long as the column stood above their heads, it signified the non-alterity of the future, the present and the past, i.e. a state of constant déjà vu. With its destruction time was open to creative action. Nothing was predetermined, thus future was possible once again.

According to Jean-Franklin Narot, May '68 had a temporality of its own[20], made up of sudden accelerations and immediate effects: mediations and delays had all disappeared. Not only did time move faster than the frozen time of bureaucracies; it surpassed the slow, careful temporality that governs vertical strategy or calculation. When the effects of one's actions infinitely supersede one's expectations, or when a local initiative is met with impromptu echoes from a hundred different places all at once, space compresses and time goes faster.

Ranciere writes, regarding the occupation of spaces by social movements like the Yellow Vests, that *occupying also means creating a specific time: a time slowed down in relation to usual activity, and therefore a time removed from the usual order of things; but simultaneously a time accelerated by the dynamics of an activity that forces constant response to challenges for which people are not prepared*[21]. In other words the temporality of everyday life is being liberated from the bureaucratic pressure of capitalist relations, but on long-term social level it is being speeded up as political change and creativity become possible. This double alteration of time changes the visibility of things and the sense of what is possible. Things that were passively suffered acquire a new visibility as injustice. As Ranciere suggests, *when a collective of equals interrupts the nor-*

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[5] www.versobooks.com
[6] www.babylonia.gr

[19] Kristin Ross: The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune (London and New York: Verso 2008), p7
[20] Kristin Ross: May '68 and its Afterlives (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2002), p65
[21] www.versobooks.com

democratic participation that resulted in political emancipation. Similarly to the committees of May '68, the current Yellow Vests movement has developed similar public space in the face of a network of popular assemblies that coordinated each other through confederal and democratic decision-making bodies[17].

The experience of zad is especially topical regarding the question of space. First and foremost because local communities gave certain space a value on grassroots level, beyond the logic of bureaucracy and capitalist markets. The land on which zad took place was undervalued by state authorities and market mechanisms as *almost a desert*[18]. The zadists gave much higher value to it, transforming it into a space to be defended.

Creation of Public Time

The question of time is crucial for political emancipation. Direct democratic processes and attitudes alter temporality, which is evident during popular uprisings or by social movements. Its target is the creation of public time in which the past, the present and the future are not being predetermined heteronomously by authorities that are situated above society, but are being formed through political deliberation, in which all people can participate.

During the Paris Commune, the choice of the communards to topple the Vendome Column was not only an attack on hierarchical verticality, but also an effort to liberate time. The effect this monument had on the temporality of the city was that it froze it. For the poet Catulle Mendes the Vendome Column represented a determined time. He writes to the rebelling citizens: *It wasn't enough for*

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[17] www.thenation.com

[18] Kristin Ross: The Long 1960s and 'The Wind From The West' (Crisis & Critique, Volume 5, Issue 2) p325

transgress their role, became bearers of rupture with the dominant regime, putting into question the state and the current capitalist structure of society.

Similar traits can be observed in the Paris Commune as well. The communards attacked not only the monarchy, but all forms of hierarchy within the French society. For a clear sign for this Ross points at their choice to attack the Vendome Column (with Napoleon's statue at its top)[7]. This column at Paris's center represented for Parisians the vertical structure of French society, and its destruction symbolized the destruction of hierarchy.

There were also similar traits in the individual attitudes of some of the communards. An important example is Napoleon Gaillard. Before the Paris Commune, he worked as a shoemaker, but after Parisians took over the city, he began making barricades on the city streets, which he viewed as a form of art[8]. A proof of that is his insistence to sign each of his barricades and take picture next to them, something which only people who were officially considered artists did prior to that. He transgressed several roles at once, something which was a cause to much distress to the likes of those who were hostile to the commune. One of those enemies was the poet Catulle Mendes, who was mourning not the drop in production, but rather his anxiety stemmed from the attack on identity. He is worried for *what happens to a state if the shoemakers and the artists are not in their proper place*[9]. Mendes is worried for not being able to identify, during the days of the commune, who is a worker and who is an artist. This bureaucratic logic of narrow identity can be traced back to Plato, for whom in a well-constituted state a unique

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[7] Kristin Ross: The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune (London and New York: Verso 2008), p.5

[8] Kristin Ross: The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune (London and New York: Verso 2008), pp17-18

[9] Kristin Ross: The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune (London and New York: Verso 2008), pp13-14

task is being attributed to each person; a shoemaker is first of all someone who cannot also be a warrior[10].

Similar conclusions are being drawn by philosopher Jacques Ranciere in his magnum opus Nights of Labor, where he observes that the greatest threat to the dominant order was when workers transgressed their roles as workers. According to him, when workers fought on the streets or sang revolutionary songs, they were still within their identity as workers[11]. It was when they stayed late at night (a temporality supposedly available only to the higher classes which did not had to wake up early for work) and wrote poetry, philosophy etc., that they attempted to destroy the building blocks of the dominant order, i.e. the strict bureaucratic roles and identities, and instead open space and time for creative citizens that can collectively manage their society beyond capitalist and bureaucratic relations.

A more recent example can be found in the zad – the infamous anti-airport occupation of a piece of land in Notre-Dame-des-Landes, France that with the time developed into experiment in communal and direct democratic coexistence. It consists of what Ross calls a coalition of highly unlikely protagonists[12] — a colorful mixture of anarchists, trade unionists, local farmers (whose views could at times be even considered as conservative), and many others. All these groups however, during the democratic experiences that emerged within the occupied space, transgressed their ideological or spatial identities and gave way to political emancipation that was characterized by active democratic participation and sharing of responsibilities. As Alex Kelly writes, *the complexity and richness of possibilities evidenced in these collaborations – when people at once defend and create together – are the very things we need to examine and work our way through*[13].

Creation of Public Space

The question of space is crucial for the development of emancipatory politics. In this respect the French philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre developed the concept of the right to the city — the collective reclamation of urban space[14]. The characteristics of this notion can be observed in many of the above mentioned historic experiences, as well as in current movements and struggles.

During the Paris Commune the urban space of whole Paris was transformed. The streets became not only spaces for transition, but also, as we saw earlier, into places for art. The sections, initially created by a decree sanctioned by King Louis XVI, become public assemblies that allowed for genuine public space to appear[15]. Furthermore the relationship between the city and the provinces was redefined with the communards issuing a call for solidarity to all of France, and also delegations from rural areas being invited to Paris.

Such redefinition of space happened on the streets of Paris during May '68 as well, but also in the farmlands of Larzac. A stark example of the creation of public space was the establishment of Worker-Student Action Committees that provided the environment needed for linking the university and the factories[16]. This was a space, very different from the bureaucratic trade-union life within factories where workers could run up against mundane procedures, control, surveillance, and maneuvers of all sorts, but also differed significantly from academic life. It offered a space for

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[10] Op. Cit. 9

[11] Jacques Ranciere: Nights of Labor: The workers' dream in nineteenth century France (Philadelphia: Temple University Press 1989) p.xxix

[12] www.versobooks.com

[13] Victoria Brunetta & Kate O'Shea (Editors): Durty Words: A space for dialogue, solidarity, resistance and creation (Limerick: Durty Books 2018), p.275

[14] www.rioonwatch.org

[15] new-compass.net

[16] theanarchistlibrary.org