Aan twee kanten van de barricaden

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‘Politics without politics: un-thinking democratic theory

Jodi Dean (2011) makes an interesting observation when she claims that the language of the Left has changed from talking communism to talking democracy. My book joins her in finding this development unsettling. As has been pointed out before, all too often "democracy" may serve as an excuse to avoid talking about structural inequalities, as much as talking "citizenship" avoids taking into account class differences and other social contradictions. The most problematic aspect of all this terminology related to talking democracy is that it reduces politics to a merely procedural and technical matter. Politics becomes the art of expert administration instead of the art of conflict emerging out of the antagonistic character of present social relations. ?i?ek (2002: 11) has a point in calling the result "politics without politics". This development equally challenges democratic theory. And it might be at the heart of the question why representation on the global level is so much contested. Transgressive summit protests challenge the mediated character of representative democracy and the pacification of dissent.

Hence, the street as a space of conflict and concrete struggles is important for democratic politics. What transgressive summit protest negates is global governance and the ***form*** of political representation. Disrupting the smooth daily functioning of global governance transmits the important desire for something different than the current order. In this sense, dissent indeed creates disorder, but only in so far as it negates order-as-the-established-order. Dissent creating disorder, however, is the innovator, not only tactically, on the streets, but also politically, on the level of creating promising conflict. The negation of the negation is the creation of something new. Liberal representational democracy negates the full ownership of conflict. Through creating conflict on the streets, summit protesters thus negate this negation of liberal representational democracy. They create political choices because it makes visible the antagonism between liberalism and anti-systemic radical democratic experiments from below.

Summit protesters continue to experiment with non-institutional forms of politics. In this respect, they carry on an important political development going back to the 1960s wave of anti-systemic struggle that is often written off or overshadowed by the de facto institutionalisation of most of the organisations that were involved. Summit protesters embody the unfulfilled promises of political liberalism. Pointing to the limitations of governing society by law, they show how global justice is not only an ethical question of "good principles", but also of ongoing struggle. If it is true that every problem has a tactical solution, then transgressive summit protest has been, indeed, a tactical solution to the problem of how to challenge unequal global power relations.

In my book I have shown how turning politics into the art of expert administration affects the contestation of global hegemonic forces. Annihilating the antagonistic character of the political and submitting it to a purely technical reason, authorities try to eliminate the two-sidedness of the barricade. Their fences are presented as having only one side: the side where politics is legitimately turned into an administrative act. All the rest is public disorder, mindless violence, or even terrorism: the constitutive outside of liberal democracy. In this sense, choosing sides is deemed unnecessary. There is no conflict, only experts with good (or bad) intentions. Unlike political conflicts, moral choices are not two-sided. From this perspective, as researcher, I have joined the "bad guys" who mindlessly threaten the established order.

Turning political questions concerning the current world order into a problem of administration, authorities eliminate anti-systemic dissent. However, since the political is predicated on antagonism in a conflictual social world, what authorities really eliminate is not only dissent - and a potentiality of history producing entirely different outcomes than those that became prevalent - but politics itself. The constitution of global hegemony operates through the negation of global dissent as its constitutive outside. Politics is whatever global hegemonic forces do, which transposes constituted power into an ontology of the present. This way, contemporary global politics, presented as result of administrative acts of global hegemonic forces, is effectively voided of the constituent power of dissent. As emerging behind the tactical adaptations of authorities, the ruling regime of social control is thus deeply interconnected to the struggle over global power relations. Through making social conflicts a question of technical administration, this interrelation is made invisible. Although embedded in the struggle for political hegemony, social control in European liberal democracies ***presents*** itself as ***politics without politics***.

I think we have two lessons here that democratic theories might want to take seriously. One is that if the flipside of democracy is social control then we need to incorporate social control studies into the study of democratic systems, especially in the global era. The other is that if currently prevalent forms of social control are using democracy to abolish politics, then we may not side with them and participate in this endeavour. A world without conflict would be a world without dissent and a world without justice.

In the meantime, the global order has not become any less topsy-turvy. Since 2007, a financial and economic crisis is haunting the (Western) world. The resulting EU austerity programs re-install the much-criticized neoliberal credo of privatization and deregulation. Failed free trade areas have been supplemented by bilateral trade agreement. The African continent is further being sold, and recent programs to tackle climate change turn out to be a new excuse for foreign investment and land grabbing in the Southern world. The wars in Aghanistan and Iraq still have disastrous consequences for the local population. The "war on terrorism" continues without direction against an undefined opponent. Pretty much anything an average summit protester might have warned us about ten years ago has turned into reality. Nevertheless, although recurring, especially during G20 meetings, the heydays days of summit protest seem to be over.

Most of my book can be seen as an analysis of the de-composition of global anti-systemic dissent. Composition, initially referring to the working class, concerns the construction and perception of a collective interest. Chapter 2 summarizes the process of composition preceding the period of summit protests discussed in this book. The process of de-composition has been accelerated by the tactical control repertoire of authorities. In the absence of tactical victories, it is always difficult to construct or maintain a common interest.

Nevertheless, there were many moments in the past decade that looked like a beginning of re-composing global anti-systemic initiatives. And there are many reasons to believe that this process of re-composition is continuing, and maybe even getting stronger, including new tactical repertoires and innovation. Direct action, as pedagogy of the oppressed remains a learning process that relies on tactical innovation created through studying the opponent’s adaptations. As the interaction throughout six summits in Europe reveals, protesters have found several opportunities to turn disruptive police measures into new opportunities for disruption. We also witness the emergence of climate justice initiatives on the global arena, often in close collaboration with (previous) summit protest networks.

Unleashed by protests, resistance and square occupations, the Arab world is going through major transformations, offering new tactical repertoires to be diffused. In Europe, in response to the current austerity measures, in many countries major squares are occupied as well. African migrant networks collaborate with European initiatives to insist on the freedom of movement and a world without borders. In Latin America indigenous and peasant networks oppose land grabbing as a result of climate compensation mechanisms...

Summit protests mark an important moment of the formation of global power relations. They provide moments in which global hegemonic forces manifest and consolidate themselves. This constitutive process of global hegemony can be uncovered as such because global anti-systemic initiatives attempt to confront and disrupt it. This makes summit protests spaces with global aspirations. Besides a new tactical repertoire, summit protesters have also mapped a new theory of power in the global age that can be transferred to future struggles.

Seemingly local events actually constitute global power struggles. The global is thus not a methodological device for abstracting or generalising local experiences, but an ontological one for understanding the material organisation of the conflictual social world in late capitalist Europe. Global power relations are not a matter of an abstract mind or good interpretation, but a material reality that finds expression in the supposedly local everyday world. The extralocal inscribes itself in the local, from where it can be accessed. Hence, it is not "the global" that can be accessed by the sum of its supposedly local parts, but it is the local that has to be understood as sum of extralocal forces whose cooperation is reflected in the material organisation of seemingly local events. Global hegemonic forces do not have one power centre. They are a flexible and shifting network with many nodes and the organizational and tactical choices of challengers have taken this into account.

This book demonstrates how the formation of global hegemony can be understood from the interplay of global dissent with global hegemonic forces. "The global" is not a predefined space but produced through contestation. However, I have proposed to see dissent as the innovator. The last four chapters have shown empirically how authorities constantly adapt to the tactical innovations of protesters, which, in turn, triggers new innovations by protesters. Hence dissenting forces form global power relations. This means that social analysis should offer an understanding of these power relations from the lens of dissent. For the (possible) ruptures within hegemonic relations cannot be grasped from the standpoint of ruling regimes. As Benjamin puts it: "The awareness that they are about to make the continuum of

history explode is characteristic of the revolutionary classes at the moment of their action" (Benjamin 1969: 261).

More than ten years after the Battle of Seattle, recurring disorder during global summits reminds us that social conflicts cannot be structured (exclusively) by law. How can this negation of antisystemic initiatives be molded into a form of democracy that does not abide by the (teleo-) logic of institutionalisation? Creating disorder, transgressive summit protesters make space for potentially different orders. How would a world look that does not start with law and order, but with dissent and disruption as an opening to non-institutional democracies from below?

Many people I spoke to about my research urged me to summarize my results in one sentence. If I really would need to do so, I would share a sad lesson: social control works. Although often functioning more subtly and less overtly, although focusing more on incapacitating and channelling and not on the baton stick or guns, social control stifles dissent, maybe even more successfully. However, there is another lesson more hopeful and hopefully helpful for the other side of the barricade, and that is: innovation matters. Although it is hard to determine the preconditions necessary for something like tactical innovation to occur, these "moments of madness" (Zollberg 1972) are a recursive phenomenon in police-protester interaction. This is to say: social control works until new tactical innovation has taken place, and thus matters innovation.

Taking this into account, my book turns into an argument against control and for anti-systemic dissent. Challenging the ruling regime of social control is an important aspect of challenging global hegemonic power relations. In "Postscript on the Societies of Control", Deleuze (1992) summarises the hope for a tactical solution to the problem of securitisation: "There is no need to fear or hope, but only to look for new weapons". The answers to the challenges described in this book need to be found on a tactical level. There are no easy answers, but, as reflected in the Zapatistas' ideas: struggle is the way forward. To pick up Deleuze's and Guattari's advice cited in the epigraph to this chapter, there is no reason to be sad about passed possibilities, but a need to connect our desire for a different and just world to reality.'

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