Urban Political Thought in the Time of Covid
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I have been doing research into alternative urban spaces and alternative forms of social media. But today I want to extrapolate some of the political theories that have emerged from this work. I want to explore, within the context of cities, the knot of global inequality, political movements, the errant power of the state, and the Corona virus.

After the financial crash in 2008 various anti-austerity and pro-democracy movements captured attention with protests in cities across the globe. At the time, the French philosopher Alain Badiou dubbed this moment the 'rebirth of history' as it questioned the liberal capitalist order, and despite being 'as yet blind, naïve, [and] scattered' it naturally resembled 'the first working-class insurrections of the nineteenth century'.[i] In the last decade urban protest across the globe has increased year on year, reaching its zenith in 2019 when, according to the Civicus Monitor, we witnessed unprecedented popular actions in Chile, India, Lebanon, the US, Columbia and Hong Kong, to name but a few.[ii]

Has Covid 19 brought a melancholic dilution to this tumult right at its point of overflowing actualisation? Some protests have continued, some have abated. Some have adapted new and creative methods. Yet public health has also been used to justify the violent repression of civic action, the censorship and surveillance of free expression, and new laws that enhance punishments and police powers.[iii]

As the Black Lives Matter movement in the US reveals, it is no longer easy to distinguish between a supposedly liberal regime and a brutal militarised one. But alongside their embrace of domestic militarism, liberal regimes should be critiqued for their more subtle means of depoliticising protest movements through meagre reforms and hopeful promises. Witness Macron's increase of the minimum wage and the cancelling of the fuel tax that incensed the Yellow Vests. The movement now recedes, yet these were just two of the more than 40 demands that its vanguard made.[iv] Consider also how we, the restless people, are defanged through what Todd McGowan calls the 'capitalist promise': things will get better if you trust in the system.[v] Take Richard Florida's recent essays for the Bloomberg City Lab, in which he promises cities will rebound bigger and better and speculates that Covid will reverse gentrification and other forms of urban inequality.[vi]

Movements in liberal societies should also be wary of mistaking urban management with urban politics. Globally, city management has embraced what James Peck and Nick Theodore call 'fast policy': a city must be smart, creative, sustainable, liveable, and resilient.[vii] To achieve these goals, cities absorb the data-related capacities of big tech, fusing platform urbanism with platform capitalism. Big tech becomes essential for the function of municipal services. Reciprocally, the city provides infrastructure to big tech. While this corporate-state ecosystem may solve some practical problems, it outsources democratic processes to the systems of management and hence can further depoliticise the people. We must, therefore, distinguish management from politics.

This dominant admixture of corporatism and management defines what Alain Badiou calls the 'capitalo parliamentary state'.[viii] For Badiou, politics is an emancipatory project, bent on

universal equality, and is therefore necessarily the enemy of such a state.[ix] Badiou rescues the concept of politics from its over-determined, everyday use. Politics is not a quotidian performance of identity, a force of spatiality, a form of normalising discipline, a casual affect, a transgressive detournement, a line of flight through the rhizome, parliamentary grandstanding or the increasingly pornographic electoral spectacle. Politics is rare.

Politics requires the patient labour of *thinking* into being an emancipatory transformation. Plato distinguishes truth from opinion, with the former requiring a singular form of thought. Socrates' discussion of the ideal city in the *Republic* expresses how opinion deals with what exists, while thought thinks what has yet to be. Political thought should thusly rebel against the defeatist claim that capitalist parliamentarism is the 'least-worst system', that it completes the end of history, that universalism is an erroneous euro-centric fetish, and that the only kind of politics is the consensus of opinion.

Here cities can play an important role. Take the emergence of what Matthew Thompson calls 'new autonomous municipalism': radical urban polities seeking self-governance and international solidarity beyond the state.[x] For example, following the anti-austerity protests in Europe over the last decade, many movements were depoliticized by virtue of their overreliance on party politics, with Syriza in Greece being a prime example. The Catalan collective Barcelona en Comú emerged from the 2015 Indignados movement. Yet it has survived as an autonomous municipality by virtue of its rejection of capitalo-parliamentarism. Perhaps we can see echoes with the Zapatistas in Chiapas and the Democratic Autonomy movement in Rojava.

Much of my current work focuses on how this form of political thought is mediated. We must be cautious of what Snricek and Williams call folk politics: localized forms of alternative living that counter the perceived ills of the city. Think forms of low growth municipalism. Think of platforms which seeks to replace companies like Uber with local alternatives. These spaces *do* produce incredibly valuable *practical* solutions to important problems: we need to keep experimenting with food sovereignty, open source urbanism, universal basic assets, cooperative self-organisation and so forth. But practical solutions are not the same as political solutions. They can easily fall prey to the vicissitude of elections. Moreover, I can imagine a world where zero carbon, self-sufficient urban systems serve a small elite. There is no guarantee a more sustainable city will be a less exploitative city.

What we need, I argue, is a political idea to accompany these practical ideas. Perhaps controversially, I believe it must be a global and singular idea. Yesterday I alluded to what Mark Purcell calls the local trap: the way in which autonomous municipalities can become reliant on exploitation that occurs elsewhere in global supply chains.[xi] As David Harvey argues, the commons is international, hence any commons-based movement is morally obliged to mobilise international change.[xii] Some cities are working hard in this regard. Barcelona en Comu created the Fearless cities network to build solidarities against austerity. The astounding and inspiring collective known as Cooperative Jackson is deeply involved in alternative economy solidarity networks. Indeed, from Jackson to Barcelona thought is circulating in the form of texts on economic democracy and self-determination, alternatively translated between Spanish and English.

But I am wary of a plural constitution of federated local projects, assisted by digital networking. This Bookchinian solution is ascendant at the World Social Forum. It is the central motif in the work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, who predict a networked multitude will overcome capitalism.[xiii] Yet I suspect this may reinstall a new kind of capricious parliamentarism at the federated levels without fixing key global problems like the international commons. Moreover, talk of governance via networks can all too easily duplicate techno-managerialism, whereby political will is replaced by the work of algorithms, as in Christopher Kelty's notion of recursive publics.[xiv]

Thinking a new political idea requires a certain nook in the city and in the emerging alternative digital media ecology, what I propose to call a thought shelter. Spaces of discussion, teaching, learning and creative production, thought shelters are essentially interlaced with and constituted by media.

Germinal thought shelters begin within protests. Yet protest is all about maximum visibility. Political thought is necessarily a form of militant thought pitted against the state. Hence it is inherently risky. It generates new ideas while under fire. Radical thought must minimise visibility, it requires tactical sheltering, with defensive measures implemented in both physical and digital domains. I am reminded of Gert Lovink and Ned Rossiter's argument that political organising in the wake of the Snowden revelations must involve, 'sustainable cells that operate as secret societies.[xv]

We can look back as far as the Paris Commune of 1871 for an example of political thought's intimacy with tactical, defensive sheltering. The Commune thought into being what was previously unthinkable: the worker as a political entity and the factory as a political site. Embattled against the regime at Versailles, this thought required the blockading of Paris and the fortification of the Hotel de Ville, which became the central thought shelter. Nevertheless, new ideas from within the commune were given a fleet hoofed envoi in search of an audience in cities beyond the barricades. Particular in their origin, these ideas were nevertheless universal in their address. They continue to resound today.[xvi]

Let me thus end with two consequences of this argument. In our discussions of both communication and cities we tend to value the fecund, viral, overabundance of communication. In contrast, I offer the importance of patiently examining a few singular principles to assert an idea that concerns the *organisation of emancipation as such*. We tend to also emphasise the inherent value of openness, publicness, and excess connectivity to express the pan-demos. In contrast I offer the importance of the closed and the encrypted, as thought's militancy must sometimes withdraw from the plaza.

[i] Badiou A (2012) *The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprisings.* London: Verso.
[ii] https://monitor.civicus.org/COVID19/
[iii] https://www.ijurr.org/spotlight-on/urban-revolts/the-spatiality-of-street-protests-before-and-during-covid-19/
[iv] https://www.ijurr.org/spotlight-on/urban-revolts/the-revolt-of-the-periphery-against-the-metropolis/

[v] McGowan T (2016) *Capitalism and Desire: The Psychic Cost of Free Markets.* New York: Columbia University Press.

[vi] https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2020-06-19/cities-will-survive-pandemics-and-protests

[vii] Peck J and Theodore N (2015) *Fast Policy: Experimental Statecraft at the Thresholds of Neoliberalism.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

[viii] This concept continually recurs in Badiou's translated work, including the aforementioned *Rebirth of History*.

[ix] This idea rests on Badiou's set theoretical ontology, best showcased in: Badiou A (2005a) *Being and Event.* London: Continuum Books. However a more accessible and concrete rendering can be found in his many smaller books, particularly: Badiou A (2005b) *Matapolitics.* London: Verso.

[x] Thompson M (2020) What's so New About New Municipalism? *Progress in Human Geography*. DOI: 10.1177/0309132520909480. 1-26.

[xi] Purcell M (2006) Urban democracy and the local trap. Urban Studies 43(11): 1921–1941.

[xii] Harvey gives this a significant treatment in: Harvey D (2012) *Rebel Cities: From the Right to City to the Urban Revolution.* London: Verso.

[xiii] Hardt M and Negri A (2004) *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire.* New York: Penguin Press.

[xiv] Kelty C (2008) *Two Bits: The Cultural Significance of Free Software.* Durham: Duke University Press.

[xv] Lovink G and Rossiter N (2018) *Organization After Social Media.* Amsterdam: Autonomedia.

[xvi] The Paris Commune is a key condition for Badiou's philosophy of politics as a truth procedure.