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Reoccupying the Political: Transforming Political Science
Guest Editors’ Introductory Overview

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The papers gathered in this collection emerged from a symposium concerned with the question of the political as subject, practice and epistemology. In part, the symposium evolved from a recognition of the political struggles across the globe that are reoccupying the political. Examples of these re-occupations include (but are not restricted to) Occupy in the USA, los Indignados in Spain, and the Movimento sem Terra in Brazil (Landless Workers Movement, MST). Occupations of rural and urban space are creating new forms of politics and political practices involving new temporalities and counter-spatialities that are typically characterised by commitments to dialogue, mutuality and autogestion. Multidimensional in character these movements encompass geographical, temporal, and embodied processes that eschew accepted institutional pathways. They challenge the idea that democracy must be organised and managed by political and intellectual elites with civil society politics confined to a politics of (and on) demand. They share a palpable desire for a politics in which people have control over decisions and processes affecting their lives. But just as importantly, these reoccupations of the political pointed to a second set of issues, namely how political science, as a global discipline often embedded within representational understandings of the political, produces both itself and its knowledge of the world. Hence an equally important consideration for those participating in the symposium was the exploration of implications of the multidimensional global reoccupation of the political for the methodological, conceptual and epistemological practices of political science as currently constituted; the nature of disciplinarity itself. The symposium thus provided an opportunity for scholars committed to critical engagement with such postrepresentational reoccupations of the political to prefigure a dialogical and open space of intellectual sharing, reflection and knowledge creation across difference.

There has been a plethora of new forms of democratic politics and practices present in both the Global South and Global North. These innovative forms of
popular democratisation often escape the confines of liberal representative understandings of the political common to mainstream political science. Rather, we encounter an explicit focus on the development of place-based horizontal forms of institutionality and democratic life in which communities make local decisions about matters of collective importance such as housing, health, urban development, and education. Emerging attempts to conceptualise these popular democratising experiences have developed a number of frameworks including prefigurative, autonomous, post-representational, indigenous, decolonial and horizontal politics (Sitris, 2006 (Horizontalism); Karatzogianni and Robinson, 2009 (autonomous); Lugones 2010 (decolonial); Motta 2011 (prefigurative)) Such accounts often question the need for political parties, party lines and ideological/political leaders, arguably the privileged analytical objects of political science. Instead this new scholarship experiments with collective forms of knowledge production and political theorisation that in many ways, both in content and methodologies, present a range of challenges to many of the taken for granted representational assumptions underpinning the discipline of political science/studies.

Despite the growth of this scholarship, and the ongoing experiences and events giving rise to it, there has been little recognition of its importance within mainstream political science. There is little systematic research conceptualising, theorising and engaging with these new forms of democratic life from within the discipline. Interestingly, and perhaps not unexpectedly, many of these experiments and practices are emerging from the margins of political theorisation and political power; from the Global South, and from social groups and communities who are often labelled as apathetic, anti-political and/or populist. The challenge therefore is for political scientists and political science as a Discipline to engage with this new scholarship and the political experiences out of which it has grown to question and reflect upon the taken for granted representational assumptions which continue to guide mainstream research. Engagement with these new forms of popular politics is also of ethical and epistemological importance, so that the discipline of political science maintains its
relevance and commitment to a disciplinary praxis that is democratising and
democratic.

In what follows we first of all explain how mainstream political science tends to
elide, invisibilise or misname these reoccupations of the political, precisely
because of the epistemological blindness (Sousa Santos 2007) of its foundational
conceptual myths (c.f. Jose, ‘A Brutal Blow’, in this issue). We then briefly
summarise extant engagements from outside of political science with these
processes of reoccupation of the political, to end with a demonstration of how we
speak back (building on but extending extant research) to the hegemonic ‘truth’
of political science through a research agenda of and with the margins. We end by
demonstrating how research of and/or from the margins will enable us to develop
and deepen our understanding, conceptualisation and engagement with these
new forms of democratic life, sensibility and subjectivity and thus contribute to
maintaining the political science’s relevance for 21st century horizons and
processes of democracy/democratisation.

Entering the Debate: On elision, invisibility and misnaming within Political
Science
Like all disciplinary knowledges, political science purports to mark out a
distinctive field of knowledge. Yet even amongst its practitioners there is no
discipline-wide consensus concerning the discipline’s boundaries let alone its
content and the acceptable or preferred means of arriving at it. Paradoxically,
there is agreement, or perhaps it is more accurately described as mutual
recognition, as to what makes political science ‘political science’ and not
something else. Nonetheless, ever since its inception, political science has
arguably been guilty of enacting numerous elision and exclusions of subjects,
objects and processes that are deeply political (and potentially democratic). Such
exclusionary logics of knowledge can be traced to its early practitioners in the USA
whose divisions over what should be taken as its proper objects of knowledge,
were framed within binaries of dubious provenance such as theory versus fact,
fact versus value, administration versus politics, political experts versus mass
publics and so on. Other issues and objects of analysis such as sex, class, gender,
race, and analyses of popular subjects as political subjects, were decades in the
wings. How could it be otherwise as political science emerged from the heads of
mostly older white men (with the occasional woman) after their own image (Farr
2003: 314-315)?

At the same time, and again most pronounced in the USA, political science's self-
construction as a discipline occurred as a result of the efforts of many of its early
luminaries to demonstrate the necessary relevance of the discipline for both the
understanding of and justification for particular configurations of power and
government. It offered more than just a way of knowing the political, the
knowledge it produced was produced as 'the' truth. That is to say that only certain
information, generated by certain people in certain ways, is accepted or can
qualify as political 'truth'. This is not something that can be attributed just to the
discipline's fetishisation of so-called positivist and quantitative methodologies,
though it must be granted that this is certainly part of the problem as per the
advice offered by Rehfeld (2010) to political theorists.

Commenting about political theory, though the comments apply with equal force
to political science, Brown (2002: 557) noted it 'has depended heavily on defining
the political as distinguishable (if not distinct) from the economic, the social, the
cultural, the natural, and the private/domestic/familial.' In this respect political
science is no different from its cognate disciplines. Once it has staked out its
territory it creates its boundary riders to ensure that its knowledge regimes of
truth remain protected, notwithstanding the fact that the boundaries are never
really settled and embedded in and reinforcing of a hierarchical politics of
knowledge. Within those boundaries positive conceptions of the political are
confronted by negative conceptions and by outsider 'others' in a seemingly never-
ending see-sawing of views that has been a 'widespread feature of Western
political discourse throughout the modern period' (Hindess 1997: 21).

In the past two decades this resilient binary has seen numerous variations of
different contenders within contemporary political analysis juxtaposed against
whatever has been assumed to be 'the political and the not-political.' Thus we
have, to note just a few, the numerous discussions of the ubiquity of the ‘anti-
political’ and discourses of ‘antipolitics’ (Schedler 1997), the ‘post-political
(Wilson and Swyngedouw 2015), variations on the theme of ‘depoliticisation’
(Strange 2014; Fawcett and Marsh 2014; Flinders and Wood 2014; Hay 2014;
Flinders and Buller 2006), and the ‘retreating the political’ (Lacoue-Labarthe and
Nancy, 1997). These various categories themselves prompt reflections on and
arguments over the definition of ‘the political.’ Yet in our view they remain
trapped within the dominant terms of reference and meaning-making of
mainstream versions of political science which assume the silence and lack of
political subjectivity of those excluded and self-excluding from the logics and
rationalities of representation.

Problematically, these binaries and the politics of knowledge within which they sit
reinforce and recreate a binary in which only certain types of practices, subjects
and relationships are considered to be political and democratic—those that fall
within and reproduce the hegemonic articulation of liberal representative
democracy. This disables conceptual and theoretical renovation and engagement
with ‘new’ forms of democracy that are developing from the political and
theoretical margins. Specifically, these others are arguably (mis)named as anti-
political, apolitical, post-political which reproduces the historic elision and
invisibilisation of forms of political subjectivity and organisation which contest
and transgress such historically specific forms of government and orderings of
power. This is noticeably the case in relation to forms of post-representational or
prefigurative politics, democracy and political subjectivity. It is for this reason that
we develop our approach from within what might be broadly categorised as post-
representational perspectives of and from the margins

**Research of and from the Margins**

There is a sparse and fragmented literature from within political science that has
engaged with post representational forms of the political, including that
developed within Latin American political science by one of us. However, the
literature that exists has tended to focus on political theory elements of the
discipline and contestations over conceptualisations of foundational concepts
within the study of politics such as democracy, power and politics (see for example, Robinson and Tormey, 2009; Hardt and Negri, 2005). There are area studies and individual case study engagements with these new forms of politics, particularly emerging from Latin America experiences which provide both empirically rich and theoretical challenging analysis (see for example, Motta 2014; Gutiérrez, 2014).

In contradistinction to political science, which has tended (apart from the fragmented exceptions referred to above) to elide, invisibilise and misname these new forms of the political, a literature has emerged in relation to these new forms of popular politics. However, it has situated itself mostly within the social movement studies, critical sociology and/or critical education and development studies. Accordingly, the focus of these analyses have been on thick ethnographic description (Sitrin, 2006), theoretical analysis in engagement with critical schools of analysis in historical sociology such as Situationist and heterodox-Marxist thought (Dinerstein, 2014; Shukaitis, 2015), engagement with the pedagogical aspects of such politics (Hall and Winn, 2016; Amsler, 2015); and critique of the ‘modernist’ assumptions within mainstream development literature (Escobar, 1995).

Our symposium builds upon this literature by orientating the discussion of prefigurative politics and democracy to the discipline of politics. It aimed unashamedly to include and engage with research emerging from the margins of political science’s mainstream. As will be seen, the papers, when considered as a whole, constituted a broad research agenda. Yet it was informed by an approach that, as Brown and Strega (2005: 7) have argued in relation to social science research in general but which is eminently applicable here,

  takes seriously and seeks to trouble the connections between how knowledge is created, what knowledge is produced, and who is entitled to engage in these processes...and attempts to foster oppositional discourse, ways of talking about research, and research processes that explicitly and implicitly challenge relations of domination and subordination.
In various ways the symposium recognised this challenge by developing one of the first systematic engagements within the discipline of political science. Broadly comparative in nature the papers engaged variously with conceptual and empirical issues. Thus some papers developed theoretically rich, fine-grained empirical analyses of instances of reoccupation of the political while others pursued methodological and epistemological reflections as to the implications of these emergences for the study of politics and the figure of the political scientist. Working both within and straddling the disciplinary borders, papers drew on a variety of approaches: including but not limited to decolonial, feminist, post-structural, activist theory, and neo-Marxism. In various ways the papers gathered here engaged with those normally absent in and from conversations and reflections about the limits, values, methodologies and subjects of the discipline of political science.

Participants at the two-day symposium engaged with these new forms of the political by asking questions about the foundational concepts, assumptions and research practices of political science as a discipline. The symposium explored how such practices, horizons and subjectivities decentre taken for granted assumptions about the nature of democratic institutionality, the guiding theoretical assumptions underling legitimisation and organisation of authority and power, the taken for granted assumptions about the subject of democracy, and the types of knowledge and knowledge processes that create the democratic agenda. In attempting to answer these questions participants worked to create analytic and conceptual connections across a fragmented and sparse terrain of engagement within political science by developing theoretically and empirically rich analyses within a comparative lens. Some of the fruits of that engagement are represented in the papers revised for this collection. The more empirically focused contributions include analyses of movements against mining in Australia (Arashiro ‘Mining, Social Contestation and the Reclaiming of Voice’), of the growth and contradictory nature of cyber movements (Owen ‘Monitoring Social Media and Protest Movements,’ in this issue), and of the Occupy movement in the US (Moore ‘Transformation of the Occusphere’). A second group of contributors engage with these thematics by exploring and troubling the underpinning
cosmological (Dutton ‘The Gift of the Political) and epistemological (Jose ‘A Brutal Blow’ and Seppälä, ‘On Outsourcing the Political’) assumptions of political science opening our methodological horizons to ‘other’ ways of engaging with/researching popular politics and becoming political scientists. Bridging these two groups is Motta’s ‘Latin America as Political Science’s Other’ which offers an empirical discussion of indigenous and popular movements in Chile, Argentina and Venezuela yet in so doing provides a vivid example of how such activities challenge the business as usual dynamics of Latin American political science which reproduce onto-epistemological violences, and hence of political science in general.

In keeping with the spirit of the research agenda and critical, yet plural, political commitments informing the symposium these papers exhibit diverse concerns as to their individual focus, content and approaches. The strength and value of the collection lies in the diversity of its individual offerings because the papers, each in their own way, aimed to open a conversation about both the nature of these new forms of politics and the ways they challenge taken for granted assumptions in the study of politics. Our intent was not to reproduce a Monological closure of epistemological possibility and practice, and thus mirror the very terms of the conversation that structures hegemonic disciplinarity. Rather we wished to co-foster some of the conditions of possibility for an opening to epistemological plurality and diversality. Of central significance was and is, a scholarly practice that seeks not only to change the content of that conversation but challenge and transgress the terms within and by which such a conversation is made possible, and this means ‘going beyond disciplinary or interdisciplinary controversies and the conflict of interpretations. As far as controversies and interpretations remain within the same rules of the game (terms of the conversation), the control of knowledge is not called into question’ (Mignolo 2009: 4).

In aiming to change the terms of the conversation which currently structure what can be spoken and thought as the political, and especially in talking about re-occupying the political, the authors are thus not suggesting that there is some essential ‘political’ to be occupied. Rather, they are pointing to ways in which
people are reinventing what it means to be ‘political’, ways in which people are refusing to accept what is dished up to them daily as the ‘political’ and the implications of this for what it means to produce knowledge about politics. Some of the papers engage by providing fine-grained and theoretically rich analyses of extant experiences of these new forms of politics (both of their newness and also those elements of their practice which mirror ‘older’ dynamics found in liberal democracy such as co-optation demonstrating ‘old wine in new bottles’).

Thus Zuleika Arashiro’s paper provides an analysis of how diverse groups are combining, despite different cultural orientations, sociabilities, motivations and organising principles, to pose effective political challenges to those interests aimed at expanding mining and coal seam gas activities and in the process reconstitute innovative forms of political community and democratic life. Arashiro examines these forms of political organising and shows how the community basis for their actions is anchored in grass roots activities that belie the dominant political science view of depoliticisation of communities. Far from accepting the views of elite political operators from both sides of politics in Australia, these various community-based organisations have mobilised beyond the narrow boundaries endorsed by formal electoral activities and representative agents. Their practice hints at the formation of new forms of participatory democratic institutionality and new democratic subjects, including a marked ‘feminisation of mobilisation’. The analysis developed by Arashiro importantly takes its lead from a methodological commitment to listening to research participants. In this case this listening meant listening to the local residents and their attempts to articulate a vision for their communities that is not limited by or to their particularities, but to a recognition of the commonalities that those particularities presuppose.

A half a world away, and primarily within an urban rather than rural landscape, Tod Moore examines the phenomenon of the Occupy Wall Street protest of September and November of 2011. The focus is not so much with the Movement as a movement but with what its initial emergence and network form both signified and continues to signify. In Moore’s view what has emerged is an ‘Occusphere,’ a space on the Internet and various social media networks, in the
symbolic realm of political consciousness and the concrete everyday place of political interaction, which articulates an anti-capitalist politics. This is a form of politics that is not beholden to, nor constrained by, traditionalist understandings of the political (of hegemonic and left articulations). Rather, it redefines the political by its use of virtual, conceptual and embodied political spaces that have made possible a rearticulation of the relationship between inequality and capitalism. On Moore’s view, much like that developed by Arashiro, the emergence of the Occisphere signals new forms of political mobilisation, sociability and understanding that challenge the ballot box logics of representative agents, and hence the commonly accepted understandings of ‘the political.’

Moore rightly acknowledged that such challenges were partially enabled by the technology of the Internet and various forms of social network sites (SNSs) such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube. There is considerable empirical support for this view, at least insofar as these SNSs make possible the instantaneous distribution of information between previously unconnected individuals and groups. In many respects this also enhanced their mobilisation into potentially effective political forces. Yet as Stephen Owen argues in his paper, it would be a mistake to conclude that SNSs thereby had put an end to the information asymmetry that has long characterised political activity for many decades past. For the powers that be, however we might define them, SNSs provide them with a multitude of resources and data with which to counter those who would challenge the state and its control of the political. As Owen demonstrates the challenge of maintaining political order is very much about ensuring that the prevailing understandings of ‘the political’ remain dominant (a point also developed by by Jose in his paper, though from a quite different perspective) and thus that the emancipatory potential of social media is recuperated in the service of this domination in new insidious forms of self-surveillance as subjects come to internalise the logics of the surveillance state.

Sustaining the hegemonic ascendancy of ‘the political’ is also a theme developed by Motta, but with a view to demonstrating the complicity of Latin American focused political science (LAPS) in the reproduction of coloniality through its
representation, conceptualisation and analysis of Latin America as object of research and intervention. Motta’s analysis takes its lead from a commitment to prefigurative epistemologies (Motta 2011; 2017) which are embedded in deep ‘epistemological’ listening to and co-creating knowledges with those working at the grass roots level of everyday democratisation and transformation within Latin American politics. Although half a world away from the communities discussed by Arashiro, (and indeed by Moore and possibly Owen), Motta shows how these grass roots reoccupations of the political bring to light oppositional logics and rationalities that expose the dehumanising logics of the foundational myths and disciplinary boundaries of LAPS. Motta demonstrates how these everyday forms of democratisation are themselves the proper subjects of Latin American political science, both as agents and forms of knowledge. At the same time, Motta shows how these subjects are dehumanised and delegitimised and, as such, remain as Latin American political science’s other. For Motta, LAPS operates with a very narrow understanding of ‘the political’ that needs to be transgressed and transformed. In making the case in relation to Latin American political science Motta also alerts us to the possibility that political science within the Anglo-sphere might be similarly vitiated by an understanding of ‘the political’ that reproduces the exclusion and elision of the democratic agency and political subjectivity of the raced and feminised Other. It suggests the need for a return to an ethics of gift and an epistemology of dialogue which enables the visibilisation and constitution of multiple forms of politics and democratic life.

Indeed, Michael Dutton provides a discussion of the idea of the gift as well as a quite distinctive take on the othering that is mostly invisible within Anglo-American understandings of ‘the political.’ Within almost every major discussion of how we should understand ‘the political,’ the authority of Carl Schmitt is invariably invoked, or at least his ‘friend/enemy’ distinction (Schmitt 1996). In a sharply argued but erudite analysis, Dutton demonstrates that Schmitt’s approach is inadequate, if not unconvincing. Looking to the Chinese traditions of Confucianism Dutton shows how ‘the political’ is able to emerge, not as a consequence of distinguishing between friend and enemy and predicated on hostility, but as a part of the cosmological relationship between the clan and the
sacred, in which ‘the political’ should be understood as a gift. Conceptually speaking this is a radical re-occupation of the idea of ‘the political.’

Similarly, though from an entirely different way of approaching the problem, Jose examines José Saramago’s attempts to rethink how a signature metaphor of Western political thought, namely that of ‘seeing the light,’ informs our understanding of ‘the political.’ Jose argues that two of Saramago’s novels, *Blindness* and *Seeing*, provide a fruitful means to encourage us to recalibrate how we might know ‘the political.’ These novels call into question the epistemic signatures that frame our commonly accepted understandings of ‘the political’ and in so doing provoke us to question further how we might move towards unlearning the epistemology of ‘the political.’ In this respect, Jose shows us how Saramago’s approach enables us to see the need for a fundamental epistemological shift to enable contemporary political science to move beyond its current restrictive borders.

Like the analyses offered in the Papers by Dutton, Jose and Motta, Tiina Seppälä’s paper is also concerned with the relationship between political science and ‘the political.’ Seppälä notes how there has been a growing tendency within political science to outsource ‘the political.’ That is, instead of engaging with social movements and other agents of political activities, political scientists have increasingly reserved for themselves the position of non-engagement, of remaining seemingly objective observers who merely record what they see. In a sense it could be argued that in this process of outsourcing political scientists are themselves de-politicising the field. Seppälä argues that instead of expecting others to ‘reoccupy’ the political, political scientists should politicise themselves – and do so in a close relationship with social movements through the prefigurative knowledge practices of unlearning and solidarity based on the ‘ethics of sharing.’ In so doing political scientists will help to transcend the binary between political theory and political practice and reoccupy the figure of the political scientist so that they might embrace and embody epistemological diversity as opposed to epistemological monologue.
In sum, this special issue troubles and decentres the hegemonic truth regimes of political science by bringing practices and discussions on the margins of political theorisation and conceptualisation to the centre of our scholarly attention. Accordingly its politics of knowledge can be labelled as research from the margins that acknowledges that knowledge production has long been organised, as have assessments of the ways producing knowledge can be legitimate, so that only certain information, generated by certain people in certain ways, is accepted or can qualify as political ‘truth’. In political science the truth regimes of the discipline are increasingly colonised and framed by positivist methodologies. This issue speaks back to such ‘truthing’ by developing other histories and stories to tell and co-fostering an epistemological practice of listening with and together. This we hope, enables an embrace of place-based experiences of post-representational democratisation and an opening to multiple political sciences, research practices and subjects of politics.

References


