



Engaging

(for) Social
Change

Towards New Forms
of Collective Action

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and Srđan Prodanović

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Engaging for Social Change: Introduction

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At the moment we are writing an introduction to this volume. We are committed to writing it to the best of our abilities, as well as finishing the task on time as we made promises to the contributors, colleagues and the publisher to do so. One could argue that we are engaged in writing the introduction, or perhaps that the task of producing it demands engagement with the structure of the book, different themes and the underlying core ideas which surround the relation of engagement and social change. At the same time, we are writing this introduction as part of a wider project of social engagement studies which aims to analyze the heuristic value of this term for investigating the boundaries between theory and practice, or more broadly, agency and thought. Yet, however distant these “two aspects” of engagement might initially seem, they are conceptually much closer than they appear. For example, when we write about the act of writing the Introduction, we become engaged because we see how the assemblage of our commitments and obligations effects our overall projections.

This small sketch illustrates a rather important point regarding (social) engagement. “Engagement” is often used as a term synonymous with political protest, new social movements or civic activism. However, engagement can also be conceptualized as one fundamental type of human action, even as the most basic mode of human existence (as in the phenomenological tradition of conceptualizing human existence as “engagement with the world”). The fruitfulness of the concept of engagement lies precisely in this potential to bridge different levels of abstraction within our reflection on social reality – from social ontology and philosophical anthropology to social movements studies and the analysis of novel forms of political action – and thus to transcend disciplinary boundaries¹.

It is also worth noting that the reflection on “engagement” seems to inherently press us toward developing a holistic perspective on contemporary social reality, one that needs to simultaneously address a continuum of questions: what type of action does the term engagement refer to; how is group (collective) engagement possible in light of the irreducible idiosyncrasy of individuals; is engagement inherently intersubjective, is it always “engaging” the beliefs, intentions or affective states of others, whether they are physically present or not; what is the relationship between engagement and social change?

1 This premise of the heuristic fruitfulness of engagement was at the basis of our motivation to establish “social engagement studies” as an interdisciplinary endeavour some years ago. It would be an oversimplification to describe this collection of papers as a “sequel” to *Engaging Reflexivity, Reflecting Engagement*, the 2016 special issue of *Philosophy and Society* that had the aim of laying the foundations of social engagement studies. Tasked with this foundational role, the earlier collection had an even broader scope than the present one, with a thematic spectrum that ranged from “hermeneutics of engagement” (Željko Radinković), through social-ontological reflections on the “import” of engagement (Igor Cvejić) and the relationship between engagement and “commitment” (Petar Bojanić and Edvard Đorđević), to the social- and political-theoretic analyses of “engaging solidarity in citizenship” (Jelena Vasiljević), “engagement against secrecy” (Mark Losoncz) and the role of intellectuals in engagement (Gazela Pudar Draško).

This last question opens up a whole horizon of political- and social-theoretic concerns which provide the backdrop for this collection of papers, which aims to explore in greater detail the relationship between engagement and societal transformations. Could engagement, for example, be theorized along the lines of the social actors' reflection on the existing norms and rules of social action; can actors reflect on norms of conduct only as citizens in the public sphere, or could they also be reflexive as bearers of institutionalized social roles (professional or other); does engagement need to have a vision, i.e. are comprehensive visions of the good society indispensable for any kind of engagement, or does it suffice to simply focus on concrete societal problems; are institutions with "built-in" engagement possible; to what extent is it still fruitful today to differentiate between "progressive" or "emancipatory" forms of engagement and those that are "reactionary", "apologetic" or "pseudo-emancipatory", ones that produce new forms of social injustice, exclusion and violence while targeting existing ones?

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Terms like "emancipatory" or "reactionary" inevitably call to our attention another crucial concept that is hard to ignore within any reflection on engagement and social change – namely, that of *domination*. What does it mean, in terms of progressive social change, to be "engaged for non-domination", i.e. for overcoming all forms of domination, and can there be collective engagement without one or another form of domination that is constitutive for the very collective that is engaged? What type of "added reflexivity" is needed for any form of engagement to escape the danger of reproducing forms of domination, both within the engaged collective and in the broader social reality; could a thoroughly "non-authoritarian" engagement still successfully challenge and dismantle the most complex forms of domination in contemporary capitalism (those that require some

form of “diagnosis” or “uncovering”, and thus also a degree of epistemological privilege on the part of the engaged collective); and are we today witnessing “complex” regimes of domination (Luc Boltanski), in which the very reproduction of institutionalized forms of domination (systematic power asymmetries between social actors and repression of human potentialities) unfolds in the form of a constant invitation to actors to “get engaged”?

These are among the questions that orient the contributions to this volume, which itself reflects the complex and not immediately surveyable terrain of “engagement”. Though very diverse, all contributions exhibit to some degree the mentioned necessity of a “holistic” reflection on social reality that underpins social engagement studies. On whichever “level of abstraction” they seem to be operating – whether they are dealing with painting, literature or urban ethnography as forms of engagement, with ways to “realistically” pursue social change, with intersubjectivity and emotions, the two “situated experiences” of engaged research, with norms, practices and mechanisms of attunement, or issues of contingency and “complex domination” – the contributors to this volume are all grappling, more or less explicitly, with questions such as the nature of social reality, the constitution of intersubjective relations, epistemological privilege and the overcoming of authoritarianism.

Bearing in mind this unifying thread, individual contributions can roughly be divided into four thematic blocs. The first one responds to the basic question of what we actually mean when we say that someone (or some group of actors) takes a course of action with the aim of effecting social change. In other words, what do we – ontologically, psychologically and normatively – mean when we say that someone has “become engaged”, and, in particular, “engaged

for social change” (as it is, in principle, also possible to “engage” for the preservation of the status quo)? Four innovative and nuanced responses take shape in the first section of the volume, titled “Engagement and Change: Pathways of Theorization” – Igor Cvejić’s, James Trafford’s, Bojana Radovanović’s and Robert Gallagher’s. What connects these four responses is the authors’ common concern with what might, broadly speaking, be termed the “liberal paradigm” of conceptualizing social reality, political action and pathways to social change. This loosely knit paradigm which traverses the boundaries of social and political theory is defined by notions such as individual rational choice, payoffs for different courses of action, mobilization around group-specific interests, and the dichotomy of state/civil society. Cvejić, Trafford, Radovanović and Gallagher interrogate, in diverse ways, the adequacy of this paradigm for understanding human motivation for action, the nature of societal norms and their place in orienting action, mechanisms of collective political mobilization and ways in which the structure of a given political community (its “socio-economic order”, to use a term largely absent from the liberal paradigm) shapes the capacities for individual and collective engagement.

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The volume thus opens with Igor Cvejić’s enticing response to the questions of how and why we get collectively engaged for social change, centred around the concepts of “phenomenal coupling” and “affective atmospheres” that Cvejić borrows from Jan Slaby and Philip Wüschner and that belong to the broader discussion about the “extended mind” hypothesis. Building on the basis of a philosophical perspective that sees emotions as “intentional” and “enactive”, Cvejić argues that a particular “affective atmosphere” such as a protest event plays a crucial role in transforming our habitual sense of the impossibility of social change (“I

can't") into a sense of capacity ("we can"), as a particular protest movement can, in Cvejić's words, "change the social and political space of a possible action" through the phenomenal coupling of our individual emotions with the collective fervour of a movement.

James Trafford's refined "reconsideration of relationships between power, collectivity and norms beyond the horizons offered by liberal political theory" ties in with Cvejić's analysis insofar as Trafford's account of societal norms arising through gradual sedimentation of interactions elaborates Cvejić's point about our habitual feeling that "social change is impossible". Relying on perspectives of Elder-Vass and Bandom, Trafford formulates an account of societal norms as gradually shaped through "mechanisms of mutual attunement" between the expectations of social actors which operate in everyday interactive situations. On the grounds of this "attunement" model of norms, Trafford argues that events such as the UK riots of 2011 that might seem as apolitical and lacking any normative claims at a first glance are in fact normative and political phenomena, expressions of a complex moral learning process through which citizens begin to understand mechanisms of social domination (such as "social cleansing" and the "criminalisation" and "subjection of black people") operating behind the facade of liberal democracy.

Bojana Radovanović's contribution might be seen as complementary to Trafford's pragmatist account of political action and social change and Cvejić's emotions-based model, as Radovanović conceptually delineates social engagement from related phenomena – volunteering and activism – on the basis of *reflexivity*. Radovanović problematizes the classical liberal dualism of "volunteering" and "activism" by identifying a common logic in both phenomena – the logic of social engagement, the "spectrum of ways in which

citizens reflect on values, norms and rules of their own actions”. But Radovanović’s meticulous analysis does not stop at this definition – in her attempt to cash out the logic of engagement as a relationship to norms and rules of conduct, Radovanović reaches the conclusion that the condition of reflexivity (of every engaged actor in a collective) is too demanding, as we cannot have access to actors’ internal states. She therefore proposes that we identify an engaged group through its ostensibly active relationship to a norm or rule of conduct – namely, its striving to change it, or preserve it if it is endangered.

How do these complex “conditions of engagement” – phenomenal coupling, affective atmospheres, mutual attunement, and reflection on norms and rules of conduct – fare in present-day liberal-democratic societies? What happens if the pressures of the neoliberal age are so strong that there simply is no opportunity (literally “no time”) to stage a protest, or to reflect on norms? Robert Gallagher’s forceful argument about the necessary “foundations of engagement” completes the above picture by Cvejić, Trafford and Radovanović. From a particular “Aristotelian-Marxist” perspective, Gallagher argues that capitalism, conceived as a socio-economic order that progressively transforms all social relations into relations of “exchange value”, destroys the most important precondition of social engagement – the Aristotelian “shared phronetic perception”, our “agreement in the perception of moral phenomena”, an agreement of the kind that existed, for example, in ancient Athens. For Gallagher, social engagement essentially means the practicing of *phronesis* in a “community” of citizens deliberating on matters of public concern. Aristotle’s nemesis for Gallagher is Rawls, who legitimizes the world of capitalist domination (which works through making everyone fully dependent on the selling of labour in the market) by

discarding community and the more demanding forms of civic participation in favour of the liberal polity of overlapping consensus, in which we can “only agree that we cannot agree”. Gallagher insists that only strong programs of redistribution could once again create the preconditions (material independence) for social engagement – the practice of *phronesis* – in the contemporary world.

The second thematic bloc titled *Overcoming domination* starts with Mónica Cano Abadía’s contribution which tries to shed light on the complex relation between the ontological and political levels of social engagement. Starting from the premise that the process of being and becoming engaged implies openness to others, Cano Abadía focuses on Butler’s reading of Spinoza’s conceptualization of (trans) individuality in order to make way for new forms of political alliances which have no final form as they are founded on the precariousness of human life. According to Cano Abadía, these forms of alliances as instances of inherently performative “coalition-based agency” are exemplified in new social movements such as the Occupy Wall Street. In our own contribution (Ivković and Prodanović), we continue this line of inquiry into the inherently collective and yet non-reductionist modes of generating social change. We start from Luc Boltanski’s concept of complex domination which, to use his terminology, hides the rupture which the incalculable contingent world creates within the semantically secure and intersubjective (social) reality. We, however, argue that the emancipatory potential of this contingent rupture – which motivates the most radical forms of social engagement – remains rather limited because Boltanski seems to suggest that it can be understood only on the individual level through the so-called “existential tests”. We go on to offer a both non-reductionist and collective account of this rupture through the notion of “common knowledge” developed by David Lewis and Margaret Gilbert.

In a somewhat different tone, Carlo Burelli argues in favor of being realistic about social change, which entails that the end states of a course of action must be analyzed together with the means that are used to achieve them, likelihood of their success, as well as implications of their achievement. Burelli suggests that we can make a distinction between seven ideal types of our failures in being realistic about social engagement and change. The first “mistaken” agents involve the fanatic, who does not consider the cost of means, the saint who does not consider the benefit of end-states, and the naïve who does not consider likelihood of success – all three of them fail because they neglect some aspect of the course of action. The next three mistakes, according to Burelli, stem from the wrong evaluation of the course of action, enabling us to make a distinction between the wishful thinker (whose knowledge of consequences is distorted by his preferences) and the self-deceiver (where, by contrast, individual preferences distort the knowledge of end-states). Finally, there is the acratia agent who simply fails to act on his correct deliberation about courses of action.

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The third thematic bloc, bearing the title “Engaging Images, Engaging Words”, presents us with three pieces that reflect on less conventional means of engagement – means such as visual art (Miloš Ćipranić), photography (Adriana Zaharijević) or literature (Đurđa Trajković and Aleksandar Pavlović). The three contributions are imbued with a common sensitivity – namely, an awareness that there are limitations to theory and rational argumentation as possible motivators of engagement. In the first contribution, Adriana Zaharijević investigates how our affective reaction towards images of violence might produce a critical response to it, which in turn has the potential to collapse the traditional (academic) boundaries between the critical theorist and the “common wo/man”. Zaharijević aims to show that

the fact that the photograph of some instance of violence is independent of the linguistic articulation of the same violent situation makes in turn the frame of a photograph a good vehicle for introducing a disruption into the always dominant discourses which rationalize violent acts and behavior. This inherently inclusive critical endeavour, according to Zaharijević, must make room for “different validation of affectivity”, but also for “different forms of sociality” that overcome the numbness of horrors and invoke collective social hope.

Miloš Ćipranić’s chapter presents a subtle analysis of painting as a form of non-verbal engagement that goes beyond the classical conceptions of “engaged art”. Ćipranić elaborates his argument through a critique of phenomenological thinkers such as Sartre, Levinas and Merleau-Ponty, who tend to dismiss painting as “atemporal” and “non-conceptual”, and thus ultimately worthless in political terms. Ćipranić counters this critique with an argument that painting can be a complex form of non-verbal engagement, although he admits that some kind of verbal “orientation” in the form of a title or a short text accompanying the painting is necessary to historicize an otherwise transhistorically “engaged” image (of violence, war, suffering, etc), but insists that the visual component is irreducible to words in its unique capacity to stimulate reflection on social reality. Francisco Goya and Đorđe Andrejević Kun are Ćipranić’s examples of properly engaged visual art, one that neither ends up in pamphletism nor leaves the spectator completely disoriented as to what exactly he or she should be reflecting about.

If visual art does not allow for direct and unambiguously political forms of engagement due to its non-verbal nature, does it follow that, in literature, those who wish to be engaged should rush to use this potential of words to function as “ammunition”, to paraphrase Sartre, or are literary works

of art themselves susceptible to the danger of “misengagement”, even when they are not entirely pamphletist? Đurđa Trajković and Aleksandar Pavlović offer a nuanced and original response to this question in their investigation of “where the engaged literature is” today. Trajković and Pavlović start from an overview of some of the most prominent positions on what engaged literature should be – Sartre’s famous argument about literary words as “loaded guns” which sees engaged literature as directly intervening into politics and Adorno’s “corrective” to Sartre, which argues that engaged literature should keep a balance between literary quality and political clarity – Samuel Beckett is Adorno’s preferred example. Trajković and Pavlović reject both Sartre’s and Adorno’s views, not just as conservative (“vertical” and elitist) and epistemologically authoritarian, but as ultimately “incorporated” into the logic of contemporary capitalism. What is needed today is a more indirect and horizontal approach to literary engagement, one that Trajković and Pavlović identify theoretically in Jacques Rancière’s perspective and literarily in the work of the Argentine writer César Aira. Rather than providing us with blueprints for action, this form of engaged literature should create new “symbolic performative spaces” and enable “new relationships toward experience”.

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The last thematic section of the volume, the “Engaged Researcher”, reflects upon various ways in which social research and social engagement might be intertwined. The first contribution by Gazela Pudar Draško tries to (re)evaluate the notion of political culture. Namely, Pudar Draško offers an overview of the structural, subjectivist and practice approaches to political culture in an attempt to conceptually bind them together in a way that could be useful for future empirical research of this phenomena. In order to integrate the three dominant approaches, Pudar Draško

develops a three-level model of political culture which highlights social engagement as a separate characteristic of a given political culture which is affected by, but also not reducible to mental, intuitional or structural factors of the social order and change. This kind of structurational positioning of social engagement might, according to Pudar Draško, help us understand its complex relation to structural constraints and at the same time offer a path to further explore ways in which social engagement helps to reproduce both progressive and conservative social systems. The contribution by Álvaro Ramírez-March, Jaime Andrés and Marisela Montenegro starts from two concrete research situations. The first is the Community Social Centre Luis Buñuel in Zaragoza which was part of the Indignados movement, while the second is another pro-migrant solidarity and activist initiative which sprung up in Catalonia in response to the recent “refugee crisis”. In both cases, the authors used the concrete research experiences to challenge the conventional ways of knowledge production and open up the interesting question of the potential role that social research plays in the acts of social engagement. They argue that situated forms of knowledge – which takes into account the relational nature of knowledge – enables the engaged researcher to intersubjectively articulate different voices of engaged actors that are being studied which ultimately changes the context in which research is conducted. In a similar vein, Sara Nikolić develops, as part of her field research in Poland, a thick and detailed ethnographic map in which we find inscribed personal interpretations of routes, shortcuts and important places that were conveyed by Nikolić’s informants in their local neighborhood. Nikolić argues that precisely this detailed anthropological and ethnographic research which focuses on this easily overlooked sensory experience of “regular actors” shows us that the

private everyday meaning which actors attach to urban environment is of key importance if we are to achieve truly human-centered models of urban planning. Finally, in her short contribution, Jelena Vasiljević starts from her broader theoretical interest into different aspects of solidarity in order to present us some of the issues she encountered in her research of instances of social engagement in contemporary Serbia.

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Engagement and
Change: Pathways
of Theorization

Intersubjectivity, Emotions and Social Movements: “Phenomenal Coupling” and Engagement

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More than 150 years ago, Marx metaphorically used the concept of atmosphere to point out the material conditions of social change: “the atmosphere in which we live weighs upon every one with a 20,000-pound force, but do you feel it? No more than European society before 1848 felt the revolutionary atmosphere enveloping and pressing it from all sides.” (Marx 1978 [1856]: 577) As we can see, Marx’s answer to the question of whether we ordinarily feel the pressure of material conditions is obviously a negative one: it is somehow hidden, unrecognized, unarticulated and unfelt. However, one event changed this, the revolution of 1848 made the pressure appear: “The so-called revolutions of 1848 were but poor incidents – small fractures and fissures in the dry crust of European society. However, they denounced the abyss. Beneath the apparently solid surface, they betrayed oceans of liquid matter, only needing expansion to rend into fragments continents of hard rock. Noisily and confusedly they proclaimed the emancipation of the

Proletarian, i.e. the secret of the 19th century, and of the revolution of that century“ (*ibid*).

Following the work of Ben Anderson (who introduced Marx' earlier mentioned quotation into affect studies) on affective atmospheres, and primarily the concept of “phenomenal coupling” introduced by Jan Slaby and Phillip Wüschner, I will try to explain how an event such as a protest related to a social change could “appear” as a kind of pressure, a demand for appropriate engagement with the situation. Thereby, the “pressure” is no more hidden but altered into a kind of extended emotion, environmental structure, mental (counter-)institution. I want to suggest that protests (social movements related to a social change) could be understood as environmental structures (processes) which have affect-like expressive qualities and which change the (hodological) space of possible political actions, transforming a relation to a social change from “I cannot” into “I can” or “We can”.

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In the first part of the text, I will briefly sketch the history of the role of emotions in social movements studies. Afterwards, I will present the notion of “phenomenal coupling” as introduced by Slaby and Wüschner. In the third section, I will try, through the description of agency-centred accounts of emotions, to explain protests as a kind of environmental structure which changes the hodological space of political actions. In the conclusion, I will briefly address some issues related to the possibility of (dis)simulating emotions and hyperemotionalization.

A Brief Historical Overview of the Role of Emotions in Social Movements Studies

For many years the literature on social movements rarely studied emotions as an important aspect of movements. Up to the 1960s, research of protests was dominated by crowd-based theories. Their presupposition was that mass movements are motivated and driven by a kind of irrational force (like hypnosis, suggestion or emotional contagion, Cfp. Le Bon 1960[1986], Blumer 1939, Weber 1978[1922]), and thus they combined macrosociology of the masses with often pejorative (and psychoanalytical) views of participants. By the early 1970s, emotions were almost absolutely displaced from social movements studies. There are probably two main reasons for this: (1) the first is methodological, for it could be relatively hard to collect reliable empirical data on emotions and analyze them; (2) the second could be that many social scientists started to sympathize with protests and the connection with emotions was still treated as a negative mark of a movement – as irrational (cfp. Goodwin, Jasper and Polleta 2000, 2001; Goodwin and Jasper 2006). Thus, most researchers focused either on the atomistic “rational interests” of participants or on giving a structural explanation of social movements. Although the “cultural turn” (sometimes even explicitly) promised to dedicate at least a part of its focus to emotions, most of the crucial strategies of authors belonging to this theoretical direction were related to a cognitivist solution, e.g. terms like: “information society”, “belief systems and symbols”, “ideas and beliefs”, “ideas, ideology, identity” (Cfp. Goodwin, Jasper and Polleta 2000: 72). As Benford stated:

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those operating within the framing/constructionist perspective have not fared much better than their structuralist predecessors in elaborating the role of emotions in

collective action. Instead, we continue to write as though our movement actors (when we actually acknowledge humans in our texts) are Spock-like beings, devoid of passion and other human emotions. (Benford 1997:419)

To summarize, emotions have rarely been part of the research of protests, and even when they have been, they were explained as a kind of irrational force. There are several reasons for this. First, emotions were often treated as passive states (e.g. in crowd-based theories), while social movements were seen as an active (rational, organized and planned) action. Second, emotions were often treated as “private states” and even if they were treated as intersubjective states, this most commonly referred to the psychology of the masses and rough causal connections to firm identities (e.g. “a rise of national feeling”, populism, etc.). Third, emotions were usually hard to analyze, which caused many social scientists to avoid them. Most of the scientists dealing with them treated them as social constructions (as there are social norms which could be learned that influence emotional reactions, etc.), thus concentrating on epistemological and structural issues.

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The last few decades have witnessed many big steps forward. It is important to mention the partial introduction of “affected agency” through feminist studies (specifically to mark the vulnerability of women and other “weak-power” groups). Also, there is a wide range of problems which are starting to be addressed, including motivation and mobilization, “affective economies” inside movements, narratives which transform emotions. James M. Jasper mentions two important conditions for a social movement related to emotions (and intersubjectivity) (Jasper 1998). One is the problem of *reciprocal* emotions, emotions that participants have towards other members (e.g. love, friendship, solidarity, loyalty etc. and *vice versa*), the second one is the problem of

shared emotions, emotions which participants hold together but where the object is not another member (e.g. shared anger toward political institutions).

In what follows, I will try to address a specific and important understanding of the role social movements play in relation to emotional reactions and atmospheres. Social movements could be explained as types of environmental structures or processes that themselves have affect-like, expressive qualities by relying on the concept of “phenomenal coupling”. Moreover, social movements are a very specific kind of environmental structure whose main effect is to make (possibly radical) social changes seem possible. I believe that this perspective places the intersubjectivity related to social movements into its proper place, which I will try to explain in more detail in the following sections.

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Phenomenal Coupling: Slaby and Wüschner

“Phenomenal coupling” is a concept introduced by Jan Slaby and Philip Wüschner in 2014 and defined as: “the direct engagement of an agent’s affectivity with an environmental structure or process that itself has affect-like, expressive qualities” (Slaby 2014:41; Slaby and Wüschner 2015: 216) This phenomenon is related to the discussion about the “extended mind” as a parallel to extended cognition. According to theorists who argue for extended cognition, coupling is understood as a form of reciprocal causal interaction with the external item that reliably leads to enhanced cognitive performance – one that the agent would be incapable of carrying out on his/her own (Clark and Chalmers 1998)¹. Phenomenal coupling is understood here in a similar manner, with the main difference certainly being that we are

¹ For the application of this concept in the study of social institutions see Gallagher and Crisafi 2009

not engaged with information or beliefs, but with affective expressions which are rather “tools for our feelings”. Slaby and Wüschner gave a number of examples. The easiest examples to understand phenomenal coupling are emotions we experience in response to listening to sad music, reacting to a film, theatre or another artistic performance. Moreover, phenomenal coupling is also a part of more common everyday social interactions in the dynamic expressivity of fellow humans. However, the best way to understand direct engagement with affect-like environmental structures is in terms of affective atmospheres. Affective atmospheres could be defined as follows:

Affective atmospheres are *affective qualities in public spaces* – qualities realized in a distributed manner by several elements spread across a scenery, making up dynamic situational gestalts. They are experientially manifest as wholes, and their separate elements, if distinguishable at all, might be explicated only after the holistic impression has been received. As qualitative figurations of interpersonal space that are often purposefully arranged (Slaby 2014: 43, Cfp. Anderson 2009)

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It is important to recognize the fact that we can neutrally behold affective atmospheres. To some degree, affective atmospheres are detached from individual experience and not dependent on it. For example, one could recognize that the atmosphere at a party is joyful despite him being sad or detached, or one could recognize that the atmosphere at a funeral is sad despite him not grieving. Moreover, atmospheres are something we could usually agree upon intersubjectively, even if we are differently attuned to them. This partial detachability is what makes them more like an environmental structure engaging us than a sum of shared experiences. One of the examples of such affective atmospheres, provided by Slaby, are protests: “Getting worked

up into intense rage amidst a furious mob of protestors”; “We might have the feeling of temporary “dissolving” into the crowd of protestors or the party people on the dance floor” (Cfp. Slaby 2014: 36–37).

Before I try to give a specific explanation of protest as an environmental structure, I would like to first explain Slaby’s understanding of phenomenal coupling related to his agency-centred account of emotions at a deeper level. To explain phenomenal coupling as a form of agency, Slaby gives the following example:

Imagine someone pushes you from behind on the sidewalk in a rude way to pass by. What do you experience? First, you will probably feel an unqualified surprise, finding yourself in a state of alarm, maybe even shock. Your surprise will soon evolve into anger, calm down to annoyance, and might give way to a general frustration about modern life in the city. But now, let us look at what you *do*. Instinctively and almost mechanically your eyes will open wide, your heartbeat rises, and so on. But soon you will change your facial expression to a frown, you will look for the approval in the faces of others around you, if you find it, maybe you will exchange a smile with that person, if not, you might shake your head and decide to move to the countryside. (Slaby and Wüschner 2015: 217)

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There could be two possible mistakes leading to the misunderstanding of this situation. The first one is to break up an emotional episode into a different set of emotion-reaction patterns. For example, to see that your anger simply stops after you shared a smile with another person, as these are independent and separate emotions. This situation could be appropriately understood only as a whole. The second is to consider what you *do* as simple reactions to what you feel. Facial expressions, change of posture, head shaking are not causal events separate from your emotions, but ways in which your emotion unfolds: “ways in which you

actively *integrate* this episode into your life” (*ibid*). Thus, emotions bridge the passive reception of a situation with active entanglement in it: “They transform what *happened* to you into your active engagement with the world [...] So, transforming the ‘passive’ experience into an active engagement“ (*ibid*). Accordingly, emotions are neither merely passive, nor mere activity – phenomenal coupling should be understood as a form of agency, involving situation-agent dynamic interaction. In the following section, I will try to explain emotions as practical engagements with the world in more detail.

Emotions as a Sense of (In)Ability and Protests as Environmental Structures which Make a Social Change Seem Possible (‘We Can’)

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When considering agency-centred accounts of emotion, it is important to keep in mind several characteristics: (1) emotions are intentional, they are always “feeling toward the world” (Goldie 2000); (2) emotions are enactive – they arise in dynamic interaction between the activity of an agent and the environment as a practical engagement with it². For the purpose of this text, below I will concentrate on an account which explains an emotion as a sense of

2 To the best of my knowledge, emotions were first explained as engagements with the world in a text by Robert C. Solomon, in which he tried to defend his understanding of emotions as judgements. Solomon argues that emotions are intentional, not primarily being “about” something (like beliefs), but rather practically entangled in the world: “The scholastic concept of “intentionality” was also an attempt to make this explicit, to insist that the emotions are always “about” something (their intentional object). Thus, judgments have intentionality, but I think that the traditional notion of intentionality—and, I now suspect, the concept of judgment, too—still lacks the keen sense of engagement that I see as essential to emotions, keeping in mind that thwarted or frustrated engagements characterize many emotions. Emotions are not just about (or ‘directed to’) the world but actively entangled in it.” (Solomon 2004) Thus, engagement with the world here stresses the specific kind of intentionality – affective intentionality – which differs from the usual cognitivist notion of “aboutness” insofar as it presupposes practical commitment.

(in)ability. The main idea was introduced by John Lambie and Jan Slaby, although it finds its roots in Jean-Paul Sartre's account (Sartre 1994[1939]). According to Lambie ("first-order") emotions can be explained using a concept from geometry: hodological spaces.³ Thus, an emotional experience can designate a kind of perception of open and closed paths:

emotion experience consists of a kind of 'path space' or 'hodological space' that is, of the perception of paths in one's phenomenal world that are open or closed, to-be-taken, or not-to-be-taken. (Lambie 2009: 273)

In a similar manner, Jan Slaby explains emotions as a sense of ability by putting more emphasis on the phenomenology of emotions, practical agency and embodiment. Consequently, Slaby explains emotions as a corporeal practical engagement with the world (or its relevant aspects) in which an agent senses what is possible ("I can") or impossible ("I can't") in a given situation. Thus, emotions are also a kind of agent's self-awareness, a sense of his (in)ability:

affective states seem to develop within an '*I can*' or '*I can't*' schema of relating to the world – an embodied sense of capability (or its marked opposite, a specific sense of *inability* or *incapacity* in relation to something that confronts one). [...] Emotions disclose what a situation affords in terms of potential doings and potential happenings affecting me that I have to put up with or adequately respond to. These two distinguishable aspects – situational and agentive – are amalgamated together to form a unified state of dynamic situation–access. It is an action-oriented awareness of situation (where 'awareness' should not be construed too narrowly but instead as something inextricable from our practical access to what it is awareness of). (Slaby 2012: 152)

3 The concept of hodological spaces was applied previously by Kurt Lewin to explain phenomenal perception of the world (Lewin 1938).

Probably the best way to explain emotions as senses of (in)ability is through a negative (and horrifying) example of persons suffering from clinical depression. As argued by Slaby, Stephan and Paskaleva, the experience of a profound depression could be described as a sense of incapacity, in which a person feels unable to perform his/her usual (even everyday) actions (including body movements, communication etc.). In short, the whole situation-agency dynamic is paralyzed in the impossibility of acting (“I can’t”). This negative example could reveal the usual role emotions play in an active relation to the situation and why it is important to consider agency-centred accounts of emotions as practical engagements with the world (Slaby, Paskaleva and Stephan 2013; Slaby 2012).

We can now go back to phenomenal coupling and give an example of how we differently interact in different situations – in accordance with the relevant open paths:

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You watch a political debate at home with some friends. One of the discussants makes an appalling comment about something of importance to you. At home you will heatedly express your anger, pointing at the screen and maybe uttering one or two insults. Now, imagine yourself sitting in the audience of this same talk. Here you cannot point, scream, or insult—instead you might fiercely roll your eyes, shake your head, fold your arms, or sigh in disbelief. Next, imagine you are on stage in the discussion facing that imbecile yourself. Now you may lean forward, and stare your opponent down while simultaneously controlling your anger so that it will still support your sharp reply but without making you look like a fool. (Slaby; Wüschner 2015: 220–221)

If we look at the above examples, we could easily see that each of these situations in some way demands engagement but also blocks some possible reactions and highlights the appropriate way to react. Your anger will unfold differently

in various situations: it could get worse when you are unable to express it sitting in the audience or highlighted when you are at the stage, etc. To summarize, every situation has its borders of adequate engagement with it. Emotions disclose what the situation affords and phenomenal coupling reflects our striving to engage with the situation adequately.

Now imagine that these “appealing comments” are actually long-standing social (legal and political) rules adopted in the country you live in and defended by the regime. And you are on the street protesting them, with many others who share your anger, planning and acting upon a (possibly radical) social change. The question which should be addressed is how an atmosphere (related to a social movement) transforms one “I can’t” (which is our habitual relation to radical social changes) into “I can” or “we can”, thus opening spaces of possibilities and extending the borders of possible actions (e.g. how [and in which moment] something generally impossible, for example to kill Louis XVI, becomes [intersubjectively] possible for people in arms marching on the Bastille). This question is sometimes addressed in structuralist forms (which actions are possible in a specific situation) etc, but very rarely (if at all) with a reference to emotions in social movements research, although it is obviously the question of emotional engagement with the world.

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I want to suggest that protests (social movements related to a social change) could be understood as environmental structures (processes) which have affect-like expressive qualities and which change the space of possible political actions, transforming a relation to a social change from “I cannot” into “I can” or “We can”. The most important aspect of it, I believe, is when social movements are able to change the atmosphere in such a way that it changes the social and political space of a possible action. Good examples of this could be when some long-standing social rules,

regimes or norms of behaviour perceived as unchangeable begin to be perceived as changeable, thus introducing a radical social change. So, the social and political space of action is also (as every other situation) sensed as a kind of hodological space, with paths open-to-be-taken and closed paths. The given framework thus establishes the possibility of appropriate (intersubjectively shared or accepted) reaction. I therefore refer to radical social changes as processes which lead to such a change of framework, where previously opened paths suddenly become closed and impossible, something which is not sensed as pursuable anymore; and previously closed paths of socio-political action now become open and intersubjectively acceptable.

There are several advantages of this approach to social movements. First, it could help us explain how intersubjectivity changes when (radical) social changes happen. It is generally difficult to explain changes in shared appraisal patterns on a large scale. Speaking of social movements and protests as environmental structures which change the space of possible and impossible socio-political actions, demanding different appropriate engagements, gives us one tool for this. At the same time, it helps us understand the role of emotions in social movements. Beside the important role of reciprocal and shared emotions, affective economies and emotion-based identities for establishing a successful movement, emotions related to social movements play an important role in establishing the area of possible action. Second, understanding emotions as appropriate direct engagements with a situation helps us explain how passive reception of a situation is transformed into action. Finally, it could give us some methodological tools for empirical research of social movements by helping us make sense of “atmospheric data”, which could be explained as affective-like qualities demanding appropriate reactions.

Critical Reflections and Risks

In the previous sections I tried to argue for understanding protests (and social movements related to a social change) as environmental structures which have affect-like expressive qualities and whose main implication is to change the possibilities of political actions, transforming an impossible or inappropriate action (“I can’t”) into a possible one (“I can”). In the final part of the paper, I would like to address some challenges for a critical potentiality of this approach. First, we have to keep in mind that the expressivity of affects is not the same as direct induction of emotions (Konečni 2008). When something has affect-like expressive qualities (e.g. someone is crying) it doesn’t mean it induces the same emotions in the recipient. We could recognize a difference in the fact that person B (recipient of expression) could have different reactions to person A’s expression of affects: if person A is crying, person B could probably cry as well in emotional contagion, but person B could also be sad because of person A’s situation or be angered because person A has misunderstood the situation. In light of this, we should clarify that environmental structures with affect-like expressive qualities just demand (appropriate) engagement with a situation and thus create the space of possible action, but they should not be confused with direct emotion modulation. Second, it is also important not to overlook that emotions could be simulated or dissimulated. The concept of “phenomenal coupling” is particularly vulnerable to the possibility of being “distorted” through emotion-simulation, as it imposes affect-like expressivity on an actor with demands for appropriate reaction. In such a situation, it would not be unexpected that, as one recognizes the demands to which one is exposed, one simulates an appropriate emotional reaction or dissimulates an inappropriate reaction. For example, if I recognize that the music I am

exposed to is sad I could (consciously or not) simulate my sadness (*ibid.*), although I find myself joyful; or if I see a poor woman who begs for some money, I could simulate sadness without being actually engaged with the situation. Having this in mind, I will try to address two issues related to the possibility of mobilization and the creating of intersubjectivity through “phenomenal coupling”.

The first problem is what I like to call “all the world’s a stage” problem, but it could also be considered an issue of engagement. This issue is directly related to the possibility of simulating and dissimulating emotions. If there is a possibility to simulate a reaction, then one need not be engaged with a situation to have an appropriate reaction to this situation: this could easily be recognized on any social network where one could infinitely like, dislike or comment with full emotional expressivity without actually being engaged or by being merely pseudo-engaged with the topic. To tackle this issue and to research properly the effects of “phenomenal coupling” in social movements, we need to differentiate between those situations in which someone is engaged and those in which one is merely “acting”.

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The second problem that I want to address is hyperemotionalization. By hyperemotionalization I mean that there are so many structures in our environment with an affect-like expressivity that we cannot react emotionally to all of them, or at least we could react only to a small amount of them or only react superficially. As an example, the study of Sloboda and O’Neill shows that 44% of the analyzed events somehow involved music, but only in 2% of them listening was the principal activity (Sloboda and O’Neill 2001). An emerging problem, often overlooked from the philosophical perspective, could be that actual full emotional episodes are physiologically and psychologically costly (Cfp. Konečni 2008: 117). For this reason, it is hardly

possible to react to all affect-like expressive events in our environment and directly engage with them. This issue is also related to the previous one, since the more events we are encountering – which we can no longer appropriately engage with – the higher the possibility that we will simulate an appropriate reaction without making too much effort. Additionally, the fact that we are intensely exposed to different affect-like expressive qualities disperses possible reactions to these qualities and impairs the possibilities of intersubjective reactions on a larger scale.

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Social and Political Change from Below: Norms, Practices, and Mechanisms of Attunement

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Introduction

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As the reach of “the political” has begun to expand after its contractions through early stages of neoliberalism and the obliteration of collective political action, it is typical to find discourse pitting “consensus” political pragmatism against particular, or identitarian struggles. The latter are often characterised as irrational and partisan, as against ‘reasonable’ liberalism and technocratic rationalism. A politics of conviction is typified as antithetical to strategic political transformation by both centrist liberal politicians and media, and emergent socialist politics. Often instead, we are presented with a picture of socio-political change from above, which (supposedly) avoids paternalism insofar as its explicit aims cohere with a pragmatic liberal democratic project that side-steps the twin excesses of rampant free trade on the one hand, and religious fervour on the other.

This coheres with the familiar, if paradoxical, gesture in which liberal politics disqualifies inappropriate

socio-political behaviour in the name of reason, whilst fanatically protecting consensus political power.¹ In this sense, we can render explicit the partisanship of supposedly apolitical pragmatism:

The sense that society is a ‘level playing field’, that the ‘rules of the game’ are applied fairly, that the ‘referee’ has no interest in the outcome; these are amongst the normative and cultural presuppositions that a legitimate neoliberal state depends on. Where it becomes publicly apparent that the adjudicators are not external to the contest, but also actively pursuing their own agendas, a key aspect of neoliberal credibility disintegrates. (Davies 2018: 281)

As these ideals of apolitical neoliberalism falter, and their disavowed partisanship is laid bare, we might consider horizons of thought and action beyond liberal political theory’s presumptions of supposedly non-partisan pragmatism and compromise². We may be led, therefore, to reconsider political movements that have been excised from politics *proper* by exactly these same standards. As such, we might reconsider political change from below, which, typified by disruptive, partisan, and often violent action, is so often relegated to the result of irrational belief, the affect of crowds, or social pathology. But, in doing so, we should not simply accept this characterisation by turning to passionate intransigence to mobilise transformation against a stifling liberal mould.

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1 See, e.g. Olson 2004; Toscano 2017.

2 For example, we are well versed with the idea that liberal democracies rely upon the externalisation of multiple forms of reasoning, norms, and identity positions to prop up a specific set of reasoning practices as if they are universal (Benhabib 1992; Brown 2003; Butler 1989; Foucault 1980; Hall 1996; Mouffe 1999; Tully 2008; Young 1990) For example, according to Young (Young, 1990: 101) appealing to the impartiality of reason in liberal political reasoning, reduces a plurality of social positions to form a singular basis for subjectivity.

For, this would not do justice to political claims in the face of injustices, nor the normative source of political passions themselves³.

Rather, we should instead reconsider the relationships between power, collectivity, and norms beyond the horizons offered by liberal political theory, which would reroute political action through deliberation, consensus, and “civility”. This is the aim of this chapter.

To do so, we require first and foremost a *philosophical* account of socio-political action that is not fundamentally shaped by political liberalism. In this respect, in recent social philosophy, accounts of social change have shifted away from traditional approaches to individual payoffs and rational decisions, and towards normative rules of behaviour that are instantiated in social practices. For example, game-theoretic analyses attempted to explain social cooperation in situations where there is a dominated strategy through the addition of external motivating factors to individual payoffs. According to these approaches, collective social practices are side-effects produced by individual actions governed by instrumental rules. But these presuppose an antecedent account of intentionality and conceptual content to determine a possibility space upon which rational decisions can be made⁴. In other words, a base-level normativity is required of decision-theoretic approaches, whilst they simultaneously fail to account for social norms (Heath 2008). For these reasons, recent approaches have emphasised social norms as a basic means to understand cooperation and attunement.

3 See Heikes, 2010 and Erman, 2009.

4 See Rouse, 2015. For an account that uses evolutionary game theory to model social norms, where a norm is a pure equilibrium of a coordination game, see Burke and Young, 2011.

In what follows, I provide an overview of recent approaches to normative social practices, showing that they do not adequately explain what is the same among performances of a social practice, or how that could be maintained across iterations of that practice. In response to these issues, I briefly outline an account of norms grounded in, yet irreducible to, practices, which become attuned with each other not by shared semantic content, rules, expectations, or presuppositions, but through sanctions and mutual interaction⁵. Through analysis of the UK Riots of 2011, I show how this has ramifications for how we engage in practices that can change social norms, against the view that such violent counter-normative activity is inimical to politics proper.

Norms as Rules, Regularities or Practices

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According to the highly influential approach developed by Bicchieri, a social norm is a predilection to follow a behavioural rule, given the shared expectation that others will follow suit⁶. Her initial formulation puts it as follows:

Let R be a behavioural regularity in population P . Then more generally, R is a social norm iff R depends on the beliefs and preferences of the members of P in the following way:

- (1) Almost every member of P prefers to conform to R on the condition (and only on the condition) that almost everyone else conforms, too.
- (2) Almost every member of P believes that almost every other member of P conforms to R . (Bicchieri 1993: 232)

5 This is developed from prior work in: Trafford 2017.

6 On this genealogy, see: Guala 2017.

Here, norms are irreducible to, yet dependent on, behavioural regularities, requiring in addition that the regularity is characterisable as a rule in terms of preference to follow it given expectation that others do so⁷.

A more recent clarification adds the clauses that people involved know that a rule *R* exists, and also that failures to conform to *R* in situations in which that rule would be applicable will be subject to sanctions on that behaviour (Bicchieri 2005: 11). These additions focus on the way in which an individual's preferences are conditional on beliefs and expectations, where these beliefs may themselves be normative, requiring that "I believe a sufficiently large number of people think that I have an obligation to conform to *R* in the appropriate circumstances" (Bicchieri 2005: 15). Importantly, this renders the explanation of norms itself normative, rather than attempting to explanatorily reduce normative rules to underlying regularities or behaviours. This is even more explicit in her most recent iteration:

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A social norm is a rule of behaviour such that individuals prefer to conform to it on condition that they believe that (a) most people in their reference network conform to it (empirical expectation) and (b) that most people in their reference network believe they ought to conform to it (normative expectation).⁸
(Bicchieri 2016: 35)

This renders transparent the underlying requirement that the account of normative rules depends upon an explanation of individual normative beliefs, though these are never explained. As such, and depending upon how this notion of normative belief is to be cashed out, Bicchieri's approach is similar to others in the literature, such as that of Brennan et al., which provides an analysis of norms as principles

7 For a variant that nonetheless also requires that normative principles are grounded in normative attitudes, see Brennan, Eriksson, Goodin and Southwood, 2013.

8 Italics are as the original.

grounded in clusters of normative attitudes (Brennan, Eriksson, Goodin and Southwood 2013). This too does not attempt to provide an explanation reducing normative to non-normative notions, so taking normative attitudes as primitive.

However, there is a well-known difficulty with any such approach that would consider social behaviour in terms of the constitution and imposition of explicit norms. Broadly speaking, these are Kantian approaches to norms, which require social practices to occur in accord with meaningful rules. This is in distinction with merely causal events or processes, and where our actions are governed by our common presuppositions regarding the content of some norm or other (cashed out in terms of expectations or normative attitudes above). Generally, these accounts require explicit intentionality in following a norm, so that a social norm is constituted by one's beliefs about other's actions, and what other's think we should do; that is, by "social expectations" (Bicchieri, 2005 and Gibbs 1965). The problem lies primarily with the *genealogy* of norms, which look like they must be in place prior to their application, so that they may be genuinely binding upon our subsequent actions. As diagnosed by Wittgenstein, there is a circularity calling into question both how norms are justified, and how they could be binding upon subsequent applications. How, for example, could the application of a norm in a specific case also determine that it *should* be followed? And, how can we be sure that we have picked out the correct norm from these applications, given that they may be amenable to many alternative explanations? The problem is that for any application of a rule, there should be a means by which to count that application as correct or incorrect (Kripke 1982; Wittgenstein 2009). But, because rules are not self-interpreting, if all such correctness requires an explicitly represented rule,

or interpretation of it, we would need to appeal to another such rule or interpretation of a rule to determine whether *that* application was correct or incorrect. This is regress argument against any account of social norms in terms of regulatory rules: “if to act according to norms is to follow a rule, and rule-following can be done correctly or incorrectly, then a vicious regress of rules would render action according to norms impossible” (Rouse 2007). Against this background, an alternative, practice-based approach to social activities and norms has been pursued. These range from Giddens’ and Bourdieu’s sociological approaches, to Butler’s performative analysis of gender, bell hooks’ analysis of Black femininity, and Foucault’s analysis of power⁹. Typically, such approaches emphasise repeated, iterated, performances that become identifiable as normative over those same practices. These practices are understood to be more basic than explicit norms, and so provide a solution to the regress problem identified by Wittgenstein. There are several problems with this *regularist* approach, however, not least of which is that it runs into gerrymandering problems. Brandom (Brandom 1994) argues against this view, which in this case, would say that implicit norms could simply be “read-off” from regularities in practice. One problem with regularism is that we could force a finite set of practices to conform to several distinct norms, and for any “deviant” form of practice, it can be made to cohere with some norm or other. It does not seem plausible, for example, to read-off a social norm from aggregated behaviours of individuals over a specified social group. Any attempt to distinguish between correct and incorrect practices would seem to quickly break down, and the idea that we could “read off” norms from practice would seem to end-up with

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9 As Turner suggests, the turn towards practices in social theory encompasses a “large family of terms [...] such as tradition, tacit knowledge, Weltanschauung, paradigm, ideology, framework, and presupposition” (Turner 1994: 2).

our “writing-away” all those occasions in which we do not reason according to the norms that are supposedly implicit in our behavior.

The upshot is that norms are supposed either to be reducible to regularities, or to presupposed rules. But, in both cases, there is no way to make sense of what is the same among performances of a practice, or how that could be maintained across iterations of that practice (Turner 1994). An additional lacuna is that such accounts seem to falter in providing an explanation for *why* we follow norms, simply given the belief that most people ought to conform to them. For example, explaining normative rules in terms of normative beliefs or attitudes threatens to render them even further afield from our actual social and material practices than theories grounding behaviour in game-theoretic notions. Nonetheless, it is central to these accounts that:

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[T]he social pressure to conform, expressed in the social expectation that one ought to conform, is a powerful motivator. [...] If others believe one *ought* to conform, the reaction to nonconformity may range from slight displeasure to active or even extreme punishment.¹⁰ (Bicchieri 2016: 34–35)

One suggestion in the literature, which may be thought to bridge the gap between the abstract immateriality of rules, and what is typically characterised in terms of material compulsion or causal pressure, is thus the role of sanctions in maintaining conformity to norms. This is taken up as foundational to the constitution of social norms in the work of Elder-Vass.

The social world, according to Elder-Vass, is composed of overlapping and intersecting groups, the behaviour of which is multiply determined in the sense that, whilst social

practices are shaped by institutions and structures, those practices may not comply with, or reinforce those structures. The idea is that social systems are multiply determined, so that any event is the “outcome of a contingent interaction of multiple forces” (Elder-Vass 2015: 13), is compatible with an account of *complex* causality, such as that given in Bhaskar’s critical realism (Bhaskar, 2013). As Elder-Vass argues, this provides us with a powerful understanding of *causal powers*, where a “causal power is an emergent property of a thing or entity, a property that is possessed by all instances of a given kind of entity, by virtue of the characteristic composition and structure of members of this kind” (Elder-Vass 2015: 13). This is central to Elder-Vass’ account of social norms, as he is keen to avoid ascribing causal powers to a monolithic society or structure, but equally, he wants to avoid the common strategy of reducing causal powers to individual beliefs. Rather, an account of “some sort of collective pressure is required if we are to provide an explanation of the similarity between the social practices of different people” (Elder-Vass 2010: 119).

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It is in this vein that Elder-Vass constructs an account of ‘norm circles’, which have “emergent causal powers to influence their members, by virtue of the ways in which those members interact in them” (Elder-Vass 2010: 122). Accordingly, “a norm circle is an entity whose parts are the people who are committed to endorsing and enforcing a particular norm” (Elder-Vass 2012: 22). In this way, norm-circles build upon similar sociological concepts such as Bourdieu’s account of social fields and habitus (Bourdieu 1990). But, where Bourdieu runs into problems regarding both an emphasis on discourses rather than practices, and structure rather than agency, Elder-Vass positions norm-circles as balancing this with an account of the way our practices reproduce and transform social structures. Nonetheless,

as with Bicchieri, norm circles require of individuals that norms are explicable in terms of shared underlying, but individual, normative beliefs. That is, for norm circles to work requires the existence of some form of collective intentionality grounded in individual's beliefs:

They may support the norm by advocating the practice, by praising or rewarding those who enact it, by criticising or punishing those who fail to enact it, or even just by ostentatiously enacting it themselves. The consequence of such endorsement and enforcement is that the members of the circle know they face a systematic incentive to enact the practice. (Elder-Vass 2010: 124)

It is, therefore, through these individual beliefs that, together, members instantiate causal powers *as a group* rather than as mere individuals. Whilst the norm circle is, therefore, produced by these beliefs and related behaviours, it also acts back upon them: "What norm circles produce in individuals is a set of beliefs or dispositions regarding appropriate behaviour; the influence of the norm circle, we may say, is mediated through these beliefs or dispositions" (Elder-Vass 2012: 26–27). Both the norm circle and its causal powers are, therefore, emergent properties from the relations through which members of a norm circle act in support of a norm (Elder-Vass 2010: 124). But, even so, Elder-Vass requires that the norms of norm-circles are instantiated in the psychological states of members of that circle. That is, Elder-Vass relies on the ability to make sense of practices in terms of practical rationality, so that norm circles arise around social rules of conduct (Elder-Vass 2012: 22). Of course, these norms are understood to be grounded in practices rather than rational discourse, but ultimately Elder-Vass also fails to provide a theory of these normative beliefs themselves.

Interestingly, in this context, both Bicchieri and Elder-Vass think that, over time, explicit rules become sedimented in habits and dispositions (or other mental states typically understood as non-normative), suggesting that in most cases, rules are somehow automatically applied in given contexts. For Bicchieri this occurs via ‘scripts’:

Scripts are essentially prescriptive sequences of actions of varying levels of specificity that people automatically engage in (and are expected to engage in) while in particular situations. (Bicchieri 2016: 132)

But, as pointed out by Guala, “[t]he interesting issue is what relationship there may be between automatic script-guided behaviour, on the one hand, and the expectation-dependent preferences that are at the core of Bicchieri’s definition of norms, on the other” (Guala 2017: 107). In other words, if this were to aid the account, we would still require an explanation of the automatic and habituated responses, and the explicit expectations and beliefs supposed to ground those norms in the first place. Nonetheless, both this, and the above arguments against regularism and regulism, suggest a different avenue towards norms that is taken up in Brandom’s work, which effectively inverts the standard relationship between explicit rules and implicit socialized dispositions.

Brandom suggests a means to deal with Wittgensteinian problems facing the regulist and the regularist by arguing that social norms can be identified by the way we *sanction* each other’s ordinary linguistic dispositions. It is by taking an evaluative attitude towards each other’s utterances, and judging them to be correct or incorrect, that we go on to sanction these utterances accordingly, and through which explicit norms may become transparent. In other words, Brandom’s maneuver allows access to the resources of

sanctioning suggested by Bicchieri and Elder-Vass, without requiring there to be an explicit rule in place *prior* to sanctioning itself. But, as Brandom notes, sanctioning cannot itself be a matter of regularity, or disposition, since that would simply reintroduce the problem of regularist gerrymandering at the level of sanctions, rather than the level of first-order practices. As such, sanctions must themselves be normative, so we have “norms all the way down” (Brandom 1994: 44). That is, Brandom effectively *postulates* the existence of proprieties of practice as normatively primitive, which determine our abilities to evaluate and sanction, each other¹¹. Whilst this move ensures that norms are not reducible to regularities, it introduces a circularity where we would need to attribute to our attitudes a kind of appropriateness or inappropriateness in the first place. Resultantly, what becomes normative is just the name for the most authoritative means by which our dispositions, thoughts, and attitudes are oriented¹². This is to say, the social relationships upon which Brandom’s project rests requires the existence of social transparency and equality. We are all supposed to be on an equal footing, for Brandom, so the embedding of norms in sociohistorical and material structures is obscured, and the social context ends up playing a conservative role¹³. This is because sanctioning practices are inextricably related to social attitudes defined by membership in a specific community, where membership in a community is also understood to be normatively defined by means of those practices.

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11 See also the criticisms of Brandom and elucidation of the following in relation to norms of reason in Trafford, 2017 (see also Kiesselbach 2012).

12 See also O’Neill 1989.

13 As Habermas points out, the assessment of our attitudes is made, not by “an addressee who is expected to give the speaker an answer” (Habermas 2000: 345), but by a community that plays an authoritative role in considering what our utterances mean, and also which actions are taken to be correct or incorrect (Habermas 2000: 336).

In sum, we are left with two major concerns. The first is that we seem incapable of providing any account of the genealogy of norms; the second is that a shared social identity seems to be required to be in-place for any account of norms, whether developed by Bicchieri, Elder-Vass, or Brandom. Significantly, there is an obvious tension between a supposedly transparent social identity (which doesn't adequately deal with power relations across that socius), and the means through which norms can be transformed within and beyond it.

Mutual Attunement, Power, and Interactional Norms

In this section, I briefly outline an account of norms grounded in, yet irreducible to, practices, which become attuned with each other not by shared semantic content, rules, expectations, or presuppositions, but through sanctions and mutual interaction¹⁴.

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Whilst the above illuminates lacunae in existing approaches to norms, the emphasis on sanctioning and implicit practices leaves us with the idea that, through conservative practices of sanctioning, certain ways of talking and acting become much easier than others, and in which it becomes much more difficult to see things otherwise so that certain actions take on a more "reasonable" weight than others. As such, the intersubjective constitution and reconstitution of such normative spaces can, profitably, be understood through *mechanisms of attunement* with each other. In this light, and taking our cue from interactional linguistics (Gregoromichelaki, Cann and Kempson 2013), our linguistic interaction may be understood in terms of non-intentional coordination, where communication does not require the manipulation

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The following relies heavily upon the account in Trafford 2017; 2019.

of propositional intentions, and is often sub-personal, involving mechanisms by which agents “synchronise” together prior to the level of communicative intention¹⁵.

In making utterances in conversation, we may “start off without fixed intentions, contribute without completing any fixed propositional content, and rely on others to complete the initiated structure, and so on” (Gregoromichelaki and Kempson, 2013: 80). So, for example, our disposition to use a term in a certain way interacts with the relevant dispositions of other speakers in ongoing conversations, and in which we are synchronised with each other. In these contexts, the term will carry a meaning that is (partially) constituted by its contemporaneous use in that conversation.

Our linguistic dispositions and embodied practices signal and shape the appropriateness of each other’s responses, and so our talk *about* meaning, or *about* the norms shaping our interaction, may also be understood to exhibit dispositions that become implicated in the feedback mechanism insofar as it affects those meanings or norms. This is because, typically, conversations go on harmoniously, but where they fail to do so, perhaps where our use of terms does not cohere, we employ talk about meaning to sanction, develop, and consider that meaning in the context of conglomerate pressure to use the term in a specific way. Statements about meaning then also exhibit dispositions that affect the term’s meaning by signalling the correctness or incorrectness of our uses of it, and whose object is to coordinate our ongoing conversations.

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15 This view broadly coheres with “interactivism” and “interaction theory”, in which cognitive activity (including the construction of meaning) is inextricable from agents’ environment, both social and physical (Gallagher and Miyahara 2012; Seibt 2014). However, as noted in (Heras-Escribano, Noble, and De Pinedo 2015), such enactivism often flattens norms to biology, and requires amelioration with a social account of normativity, such as the one on offer here.

The idea is that interactions give rise to norms when the relevant interactional activities reinforce certain patterns of behaviour as acceptable or unacceptable in social practices, through recursively acting upon those underlying patterns. In other words, norms are just the regularities produced by adjustment and correcting mechanisms of feedback internal to interactions, and externally to material resources and institutional formations, where these lead to the reinforcing of stabilities in those interactions, and their recognition as being appropriate or inappropriate (Hill and Rubin 2001). This can be understood in terms of recursive feedback loops that are generated through the interactions between patterns of behaviour, and so are apiece with the mechanisms that also generate patterns of behaviour, through mechanisms of differential response. Our normative vocabulary, moreover, serves to further modify and reinforce our attitudes and activities in the context of those interactions, so making possible their coordinated activity. Norms, therefore, become sedimented through our interactions, since the cases in which explicit normative talk is required to keep our interactions coherent with each other are decreased over time by the convergence of our practices. As Kiesselbach puts it, this gives us a way of understanding “normative talk as essentially calibrational” (Kiesselbach 2012: 123).

If we think of the constitution of norms in terms of these mechanisms of attunement, then we can begin to see how intersubjective power is operational in their composition from the ground up. Norms are reinforced through feedback mechanisms often involving “soft” sanctioning practices such as encouragement in a certain direction, embodied and linguistic cues, and recursive feedback that puts pressure on us to act and talk in certain ways (Ahmed 2017: 49). In other words, much of the interactional nature

of dialogue and the institution of norms consists of primarily *sub-intentional* processes. By this, I follow the definition given by Brian O'Shaughnessy, to refer to actions that are done from neither a desire to do them, nor an awareness that one is doing them at that time (O'Shaughnessy 1980).¹⁶

As such, we can understand the role that our embodied actions, feelings, and habits play in the coordination and socialisation of our dispositions (Gregoromichelaki and Kempson 2013). In this light, it seems better to think of norms not as rules, but as constituting “a way of orienting bodies in particular ways” (Ahmed 2017: 43), or a direction of flow that acquires a momentum as a pattern that is reinforced, so becoming directive.

So, the normativity of practices is not expressed through regularities, nor by any rule-like norm to which they are always already supposed to conform. Whether our practices in the context of an interaction are appropriate is a matter of the way in which that practice interacts with others involved. We can understand these practices of interaction to inculcate norms, neither through a process of rational explicitation, nor by communal agreement, but often through the conglomerate pressure of a wider communal practice against the potential validation of divergent practices. As such, norms *arise from* more fundamental coordination and attunements with others, our environments, and resources. So, the harmonious nature of much linguistic interaction may be understood to be an effect of the sedimentation of norms through the sanctioning of linguistic practice, and, therefore, of the embedding of specific forms of power.

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16 This is consistent with linguistic research showing how [...] speakers can start an utterance without a fully formed intention / plan as to how it will develop relying on feedback from the hearer to shape their utterance and its construal and this provides the basis for the joint derivation of structures, meaning and action in dialogue (Gregoromichelaki and Kempson 2013: 192). For an account of how this view builds upon the classical work carried out by Goffman, Schegloff, and more recently, Ginzburg, particularly in the context of conversational analysis, see chapter 4 of Trafford 2016.

As norms become stable over time in this way, they become entrenched, structuring and generating new practices and norms that further establish them across multiple systems. We can think of this as beginning to constitute normative structure, which is constitutively dependent upon mutual attunement, and through which norms become increasingly stable. In this sense, “[n]ormativity is an interactive orientation toward a future encompassing present circumstances within its past” (Rouse 2007: 533), precisely because norms are constituted through the mutual accountability of practices in open-ended interactions “whose resolution is always prospective” (Rouse 2007: 533). Norms are fundamentally generative since they concern commitment to future practices as well as collateral commitments to present actions. Normative structures, where they are relatively stable, thereby become *generatively entrenched* (Wimsatt 2007), where this entrenchment is both constrictive and creative (Wimsatt and Griesemer 2007: 288). Feedback here, works both positively and negatively. Negative feedback reproduces, regulates, and fixes norms so that they become entrenched, whilst, once entrenched, positive feedback allows for their enhancement and development into other domains. So, on the one hand, some form of relative normative stability is required for any kind of meaningful activity whatsoever, so may be thought of as *generatively* constraining the endeavors of groups in that it forms a platform for the creation of further activity and its consolidation. On the other hand, the role of power in constituting stability helps to clarify why local contexts and norms often take on the appearance of setting the horizon of political activity. This gives us an account of norms that are grounded in, yet irreducible to, practices, which are attuned with each other not by shared semantic content, rules, expectations, or presuppositions, but through sanctions and mutual interaction. So, what makes a *shared*

practice is not similarity of behaviour or shared content, rather it is a complex system of interaction and attunement leading to the entrenchment of normative structure.

Convictions, Norms, and Novelty

56 Importantly, the above account provides us with the means to think of a shared political practice beyond dichotomies that either reduce it to individual practices, or inflate it to a “group mind”. To consider how, let us consider the 2011 English riots. The riots occurred between August 6-11th in 2011, with thousands involved in looting, arson, and police violence across England. They were rooted in protests in Tottenham in London who had been murdered by police on August 4th 2011, and were exacerbated by police refusing to meet with his family and other protestors. By August 11th, more than 3000 people had been arrested, with 1000 people subsequently issued with criminal charges, there were five deaths and 16 others were injured as a result. My intent is to show how the riots can be understood as forms of normative behaviour shaped through collective social interests. This counters typical analysis of the riots (and indeed riots in general) as reducible to irrational belief, the affect of crowds, or social pathology.¹⁷

In the popular press the riots were derided for their feckless irrationality, sheer criminality, and racial degeneracy in the same moment as these were employed as explanations of them (Dodd and Davies 2011; Moran and Hall 2011; Riddell 2011). Pronouncements upon them ranged from criminal, ‘pure and simple’ by then Prime Minister David Cameron, to members of a ‘feral underclass’ by then justice secretary Ken Clarke, to a sorry symbol of the ‘impotent rage and

¹⁷ Though see Clover 2016 for an excellent account that coheres with the one offered here.

despair' of the post-political age (Zizek 2011). The latter gives voice to the fact that, even from the point of view of more progressive political causes, whether institution-alised in the state or otherwise, the riots were often seen as inimical to these causes due to a deficit of normativity. That is to say, the riots were analysed as detrimental to politics *proper*, even by the standards of the radical left. For example, as one of the authors of *Reading the Riots* more recently pointed out, these judgments served to annex the riots from the domain of the political, and very quickly return to the status quo:

You don't need to look below the surface here because there's nothing to find. This is just people behaving criminally and immorally. As soon as the cops have learnt to do their job, it will all be fine. (Williams and Fishwick 2016)

On the other hand, the virulent force of the statements and subsequent sanctions on the rioters belie a recognition of their potential power. For example, Novello Noades, Chairman of the Bench at Camberwell Magistrate's court, argued for a directive to make custodial sentencing on rioters harsh because "the very fabric of society was at risk" (Bloom 2012: 92).

This double manoeuvre, on the one hand recognising the agency of rioters as disruptive to current social power, and on the other, sanctioning their activity as external to the domain of the socio-political proper, is central to understanding the relationship between norms, collective political action, and power. To begin to articulate this relationship, let us consider the connection between norm and conviction in the practices of the rioters themselves. To do so, I want to first outline the *elaborated social identity model* of crowd behaviour (ESIM), before drawing out the differences between that approach and the one described above.

I am centring on ESIM (Reicher, Spears and Postmes, 1995; Stott et al., 2018; Stott and Reicher 1998), as this model seeks to both account for collective behaviour and their subsequent change over the course of the riots. The latter is particularly important in analysing the 2011 riots, which were characterised across the board in clear distinction with their origins in a “peaceful protest” focused on the request that Metropolitan police meet the family of Mark Duggan, whom they had murdered. The demonstration positioned around this request can be captured in terms of a set of clear normative demands, both specific to police action in this case, and more generally regarding the criminalisation and social cleansing of black communities in the Borough of Tottenham in North London. In centring these demands around the requirement that the police meet Mark Duggan’s family, it is, the demonstration could be characterised as rational, normative, and peaceful, in distinction with the subsequent riots (Lewis 2011). It is this distinction that I mean to challenge in the first instance.

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The subsequent riots, which stretched not only across London, but the UK more generally, were characterised in typically irrational, antinormative, terms. Roughly speaking, the media represented the riots with a view of “crowd behaviour” as mindless and disinhibited. ESIM challenges both this sort of irrational “group mind” view, and an overly rationalistic view in which individuals’ behaviour is supposed to be determined only by their internal beliefs. For, according to advocates of ESIM, both the “individual beliefs” view, and the deindividuated view, of group behaviour are two sides of the same coin, both of which fail to gain traction on normativity (Postmes and Spears, 1998). In grounding norms in the social behaviours that are internal to group activity, ESIM also uses this to consider the distinction between a normative “inside”, and a seemingly external *antinormative* view:

Of course, what is normative to the crowd might be contrary to what is normative outside of the crowd. To the outsider, then, crowd behavior might seem mindless, antinormative, and disinhibited; to the crowd, however, it is rational and normative and has its limits. (Reicher et al. 1995)

ESIM expands upon this idea, proposing that self-categorisation is the basis for norms that are evident in collective action, where “shared self-categorisation provides definitions of appropriate and possible conduct, and so enables crowd participants to act collectively as well as defining limits” (Stott et al. 2018: 4).

Whilst the approach clearly overlaps with the one I articulate above, there are two major shortcomings with ESIM. First, the idea of self-categorisation is overly psychological, requiring still that individual beliefs are coalesced towards the constriction of normative behaviours through identification with others. Second, the distinction between internal normative behaviour and external antinormative behaviour is explicated as a matter of *perspective*, that does not have any grounding in material practices. The first issue leads to the view that behaviours are grounded in social identities, where these are also linked to social contexts. This is utilised by advocates of ESIM to argue that explaining the shift from peaceful protest to riot involves a shifting of the identity of the group involved, which was catalysed through changes in relations amongst the crowd (Stott et al. 2018). Whilst this begins to shed light on shared normative behaviour and its relation to social practices, it also retains the distinction between peaceful protest and riot and requires shared identity to be in place prior to collective action. The latter requires some form of transparency for social relations that elides the productive power of, often opaque, norms that are generatively entrenched. The theory of norms given above thus develops ESIM, considering

entrenched norms to be in place that sculpt the social practices of those involved, and having normative support for activities in certain contexts. Moreover, the theory provides an account of the emergence of new norms through material practices, primarily where there occurs misattunement between norms and emergent social experiences, bearing in mind that attunement between the latter is prerequisite of the role of power in constituting norms themselves.

According to the account given above, the shaping of meaning of our terms and our social relations are dynamic and generative processes, with norms requiring points of stability that are maintained by reinforcement and feedback through adjustment, calibration, and sanctioning. As such, whilst our concrete practices give rise to norms, these generate explicit reflection and confrontation of normative structure primarily where mechanisms of attunement break down. We can think of this process as a productive objectivation of norms, in which we clarify, and give structure to, practices that are under-determined by non-explicit practices. In general, the *explicit* construction of new norms occurs where there is disagreement and misattunement, so interactions do not go on as anticipated. These norms are neither instantiated in individual's psychological states, nor do they require an already extant transparent social identity. Rather, each interaction is a node at which tensions between negative and positive feedback are felt, forming a platform for the development and consolidation of norms. These generative nodes also embed material power and environmental affordances through the initial destabilisation of extant norms, and the kluge-like bootstrapping towards new commitments. Hence, there are lower level practices that sculpt these abstractions, which do not require a level of explanatory (typically mystificatory) unconsciousness, or an account of force and experience refractory to normative articulation.

These practices of articulation of explicit normative discourse involve the constructive objectivation of interests, positions, and beliefs, where the consolidation of shared norms feeds-back into their material conditions and underlying social relations. This collective re-engineering of norms builds on the idea that they are persistent patterns in social practices that are recursively reinforced. As such, norms are less like rationalised universals that we actively impose upon ourselves, and more like *attractors* that draw behaviours, movements, and practices into specific configurations.¹⁸

Positing a normative attractor in the form of a set of emergent convictions captured by the local and general demands of particularly black communities in North West London gives us significant explanatory traction on the normative character of the riots. Here, we need not make the sharp distinction between peaceful protest and riot, nor do we require an extant concept of social identity that could be rooted in individual's psychological states. Rather, in this specific case, the refusal of the police to recognize the requirement to meet with Mark Duggan's family interacts with an emergent *conviction* against social cleansing, criminalisation, and subjection of black people. This builds upon shared misattunements towards the consolidation of *counter-normative* demands and positions that give rise to new normative commitments. These, grounded in material practices and feedback between them across mechanisms of attunement, are compounded through the actions of the police in refusing to meet the initial demands for interlocutory recognition on behalf of Mark Duggan's family. In other words, far from indicating a radical break between peaceful protest and riots, this action feeds into the emerging trajectory of collective conviction that also underlies the subsequent riots. Emphasising the role of feedback loops in

18 Byrne and Callaghan, 2013: 26. The political theorist is just as implicated in the construction of these movements, whose role becomes to aid our understanding of struggles around power such that they could become strengthened and deepened.

material practices and social relations therefore allows us to shift beyond the distinction so often made in which the riots can be characterised as demandless, criminal, spontaneous, or irrational activities, in contrast with the proper politics of peaceful protest and rational dialogue. Rather, this activity is better understood in terms of complex practices that give rise to systemic tendencies that are consolidated through feedback loops in specific material and social contexts. Norms, here, are a means to coordinate these heterogeneous practices, material substrates, and actions.

This also tells against *explaining* the characterisation of the riots as irrational in terms of the social identities of those inside and the outside of those involved. Not only does this explanation render the normative behaviour of collective action amenable to simplistic criticism from the point of view of extant social norms, it also belies the role of power in these external characterisations to redress and maintain social order. For example, against the backdrop of cuts to local services, privatisation of social welfare, gentrification, and chronic underfunding to black communities and migrants, along with their ongoing criminalisation and targeting, we would expect to see misattunements in terms of material and socio-political interests, where material practices no longer cohere with norms and material situations in which people find themselves. The consolidation of counter-normative conviction therefore, is rightly not simply being put down to irrational exuberance, but rather as potentially destabilising and undermining of hegemonic norms. The virulent sanctioning, police violence, and legal censure, of that action in the aftermath of the riots does not result from the external misapprehension of its antinormative behaviour, but rather it awards it recognition as counter-normative, so requiring explicit and impositional power to recuperate the attunement of material practices in the interests of power.

Conclusion

In considering the specific example of the 2011 UK riots, it should be apparent that, rather than see such collective action “from below” as inimical to political activity proper, it may be more conducive to see it as continuous with wider shifts in the socio-political contexts of the UK. Analysis of this kind of collective action has often been criticised by the liberal left as destructive to institutionalised politics, as well as the more progressive left as forms of “folk politics” which fail to provide systemic responses to political situations (Srnicek and Williams 2015). In distinction, the approach to social norms discussed above allows us to see the riots as part and parcel with wider societal shifts in norms and practices, including grassroots movements in black and immigrant communities, disaffection with austerity programmes post-2008 financial class, and the new socialist movement inside the largest political party in the UK. This is suggestive of a reorientation of how we understand both the role of consensus power through mechanisms of attunement, and also how we account for building new capacities and normative structures beyond them. For, so long as such “anti-normative” behaviour is castigated as both irrational excess and “too” political (Toscano 2017), we will fail to account for the shifting of normative political systems against the interests of consensus power.

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Social Engagement, Volunteering and Activism: Boundaries and Overlaps

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Introduction

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Engagement entails a combination of attention and activity (Berger 2011). Etymologically, the noun *engagement* is related to the French verb *engager*, which means to bind or commit. We can be engaged as individuals (for example in our intellectual pursuits) or as collectives when we join forces with others for the same cause. Engagement may be turned towards and bring about social change, but it may as well be focused on the preservation of existing rules.

Civic (or civil, or citizen) engagement, a term that is most common in literature, refers to acting towards the amelioration of community concerns from a felt civic duty, responsibility or obligation, and it is usually equated with the term civic participation or civic involvement (Smith, Stebbins, Dover 2006). The term civic engagement (and synonyms) has been used more broadly by some to include all forms of volunteering, formal and informal, association participation, charitable giving, pro-environmental and various political and social behaviours (Cnaan and Park 2016).

Civic engagement has thus become a buzzword, both within academia and in public discourse. While encompassing many forms of behaviour, it does not clarify much. To avoid its ambiguity, Berger introduces three types of engagement: *political*, when the attention and activity are focused on influencing government actions, *associational or social*, referring to all forms of associational life without a political object, and *moral* that encompasses attention to and activity in support of a particular moral principle (Berger 2011).

Yet another concept that utilizes the term engagement, while avoiding the vagueness of civic engagement, has been developed – namely, the concept of *social engagement*. Starting from the assumption that the analytical potential of the concept of social engagement has not been fully realized in the modern humanities and social sciences so far, the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory focuses on the complex task of its conceptualization and operationalization.

The starting premise is that social engagement is always directed towards the other (person, group), and thus fundamentally a social phenomenon. Social engagement is conceived as a spectrum of ways in which citizens reflect on values, norms and rules of their own actions which form the basis of their institutional order and the whole social reality. On the basis of this reflection, citizens then act - either in the direction of changing certain norms and values, or in the direction of their preservation and empowerment. Thus, social engagement encompasses any collective practice that is characterized by a dual movement in a constitutive way: 1) reflecting on existing social values, norms and rules of action, and 2) acting in the direction of their change or preservation.

This paper endeavours to contribute to the conceptualization of social engagement, and particularly to its operationalization. More precisely, it aims at specifying what counts as socially engaged practice, and in what ways such practices are similar to, or different from, the activities that are called volunteering and activism. Some of the questions it addresses encompass: are volunteering and activism forms of social engagement? When is volunteering socially engaged? Is activism always socially engaged?

Volunteering

Volunteering is defined as an activity when time, labour and expertise are given freely to benefit another person, group or cause (Cnaan and Amroffell 1994, Cnaan, Handy, and Wadsworth 1996). There is little consensus in the literature over what counts as volunteering. The definitions of volunteering vary along four axes: 1) free will; 2) availability and nature of remuneration; 3) the proximity to the beneficiaries; and 4) formal agency (Hustinx et al. 2010).

Volunteering is a voluntary action, meaning that it is not required by law or done in response to threats, blackmail or other forms of coercion. There are no sanctions in terms of material fines or incarceration for refraining from volunteering. However, people often feel obligated to do something for the benefit of others or the common cause. We may consider it our (moral) duty to help those in need. Also, we may so strongly feel for the troubles of another that this compels us to provide aid. This is experienced as a form of internal pressure, where sanctions are in the form of guilt or remorse (Bowles and Gintis 2011, Richerson and Boyd 2005). In addition, our reputation often depends on whether we are helpful and there are certain social sanctions to

refusing to help, such as exclusion from the group (*ibid.*). Moreover, volunteering can be compelled by strong normative expectations to do so (Komter 2005). That is, we feel social or peer pressure to aid others. Since there are often certain internal and external pressures which compel us to dedicate our time for the benefit of others, volunteering is often somewhere between free choice and coercion. For such activities, Sebbins (2004) introduces the concept of obligation: “People are obligated when, even though not actually coerced by an external force, they do or refrain from doing something because they feel bound in this regard by promise, convention or circumstances” (Sebbins 2004: 7). However, it is an “agreeable obligation” (Rochester et al. 2010: 21), which in comparison to work or personal life is rather flexible.

Volunteering is not financially remunerated. Unlike market exchange, volunteering is not followed by a return favour, at least not immediately. However, organizations sometimes cover some of the costs related to volunteering, for example transportation costs. Material pay-back for volunteering, however, is not equivalent to the service provided nor is it the main reason for giving one’s time (Smith and Van Puyvelde 2016). When one gives her time, labour and expertise to benefit people she knows, it is usually done within a “gift relationship”, which implies expectations of gratitude and a return gift (Komter 2005). One can enter the gift relationship in order to gain more than she gives. However, since this return favour comes with a time lag, every instance of giving is experienced as a separate, non-compensated gift.

Although most scholars count only activities aimed at benefiting strangers, there are also those who under the term volunteering consider giving between individuals who know each other, while excluding household members (Hustinx et al. 2010, UNV 2001, Smith et al. 2016). It is also

recognized that, though volunteering should be of benefit to someone other than the volunteer, it can bring significant benefit to the volunteer as well (UNV 1999). The benefit that volunteer gets can range from subjective wellbeing through the increased reputation, to gaining skills valuable at the job market.

Finally, most scholars include under volunteering only time dedicated to formal organizations (non-profit organizations or other institutions). For example, Musick and Wilson (2008) and Wilson (2012) count under the term volunteering voluntary, unpaid, formal and public activities which benefit strangers. Public and formal volunteering is in this view distinguished from providing direct help. Should one for example prepare meals for an ill and elderly neighbour, this activity according to Musick and Wilson (2008) and Wilson (2012) is not viewed as volunteering, while cooking meals in the shelter for homeless counts as volunteering.

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However, there are definitions of volunteering which include informal practices of helping people directly, such as those definitions developed by the United Nations Volunteers in the *Expert working group meeting on volunteering and social development* (1999) and the International Labour Organization in the *Manual on the Measurements of Volunteer Work* (2011). Another encompassing definition of volunteering is offered by Smith (2016), who defines this phenomenon as “(a) a noncompulsory, voluntary (free will) activity or effort that is (b) directed by an individual toward a person, people, or situations outside one’s household or close family that is (c) intended to be beneficial to another person or persons, group/organization, the local community, the larger society, and/or the ecosystem at some scale of magnitude, (d) with the activity being unpaid (unremunerated) financially or in-kind to the full, current, market value of the activity performed, leaving a *net cost* to the volunteer.” (Smith and Van Puyvelde 2016: 61).

Those who count direct help within the concept of volunteering, usually make an analytical distinction between formal and informal volunteering (Leigh et al. 2011). While formal volunteering is managed and coordinated through formal organizations (association, non-profit organization, etc.), informal is carried out through loosely organized groups, often spontaneously gathered to address certain problem, or through initiatives of individuals. Thus, volunteering can take different forms, more or less institutionalized.

Finally, an important issue related to volunteering is the *motive* behind it. Motivation refers to a psychological process that triggers behaviour towards achieving a goal in a given situation (Batson 2011). The goal of volunteering is to benefit the others or to provide a common good. However, this can be the final (ultimate) goal, when we talk about *altruistic motivation*. It can also be only an instrument for reaching some benefits for oneself, for example in terms of psychological benefits, good reputation or gaining work experiences, when volunteering is motivated by *egoistic concerns*. In other words, although the aim of volunteering is the welfare of others, it is not necessarily done from an altruistic motivation. Nevertheless, volunteering always means going beyond oneself and meeting the needs of others.

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Activism

While there are ample definitions of volunteering, there is a lack of definitions of activism. *Activism* is usually seen as a voluntary action oriented toward reform (Smith et al. 2006), or an individual activity within social movement group/organization (Mati et al. 2016). The causes activism is oriented

towards can range from minorities' rights protection, safe working conditions to world peace, while the activity may be a boycott, protest marches, canvassing etc.

Concepts of volunteering and activism have developed independently from each other (Musick and Wilson 2008), even conflicting each other. Volunteering is related to the studies of voluntary associations and organizations and activism is associated with studies of social movements (ibid).

The main distinction between volunteering and activism is based on the distinction between political and non-political voluntary action. Activism is usually related to "contentious politics", which appears when "collective actors join forces in confrontation with elites, authorities, and opponents around their claims or the claims of those they claim to represent" (Tarrow 2011:4). Unlike activism, volunteering is predominantly seen as not belonging to the world of political struggle. Scholars of volunteering have traditionally excluded political voluntary actions, especially more contentious social movements and collective activist-protest volunteering (Mati et al. 2016).

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While volunteering is seen as focusing on ameliorating individual problems through the provision of services, activism is perceived as oriented to broader social change (Leete 2006). Volunteering offers short-term solutions to the societal problems that target people, while activism provides long-term solutions that target structures and that would be built into official institutions (Musick and Wilson 2008).

Empirical studies show that the distinction between volunteering and activism is real to many people and that they choose between them, adopting the identity of one and rejecting the other (ibid.). Also, the distinction between volunteering and activism is implied by the way in which governments treat voluntary organizations, where tax

exempt status in many countries is granted only to those organizations that refrain from lobbying, issuing propaganda, and other political activity (ibid.).

To distinguish between a typical activity of volunteering from that of activism, let us examine the following example. There is a polluted river bank in a town. Faced with such a problem, an environmental non-profit organization initiates the action of cleaning the garbage, asking the local inhabitants to join the action. Those who join it are volunteering. Alternatively, the environmental non-profit could organize a street march calling for the reform in the environmental legislation, which would make polluters accountable. This is an example of activism. While cleaning the local river would make one river cleaner, introduction of a new legislation would potentially make the whole country cleaner. Despite their differences, it could also be argued that both kinds of activities are means towards the same end – cleaner environment. They are both voluntary activities for the common good. What prevents us from considering the street march as volunteering is the so-called “dominant paradigm” within which we analyze volunteering.

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Paradigms and Typologies of Volunteering

Rochester et al. (2010) distinguish between three paradigms of volunteering. These perspectives of volunteering differ alongside four aspects: 1) motivation for volunteering, 2) areas of activity, 3) organizational context and 4) volunteer roles (Rochester et al. 2010).

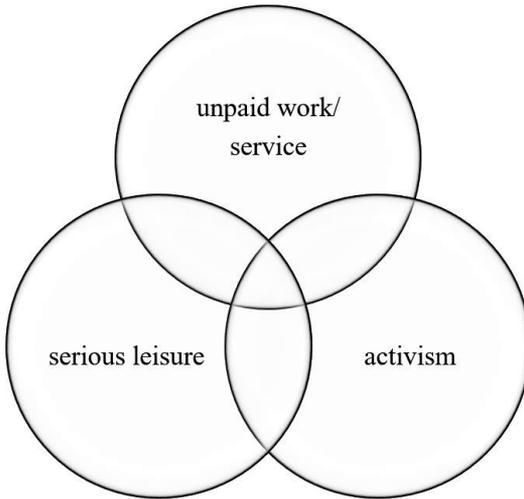
In the first – the *dominant or non-profit paradigm*, volunteering is seen as altruistic and philanthropic service to those in need, where people become volunteers in order to

help others (ibid.). It is a part of social welfare; it provides care and support for the vulnerable group. The organizational context under which volunteering occurs are large, formal and professionally staffed organizations, where the volunteer work is defined in advance. Volunteering is thus seen as unpaid work or service.

The *civil society paradigm* has a different view of volunteering (ibid). Mutual aid and the ability of people to address the common problems together are seen as the main drivers of volunteering. Instead of offering care for others, volunteers offer each other mutual support in self-help groups or through campaigning for improvements in the welfare provision. Rather than through non-profit organizations with paid management and professional staff, volunteering happens in the associations and grass-roots organizations, as well as through the self-help and community groups, which rely entirely on volunteer work, where work is rather seen as activism than as unpaid labour.

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In the third view, volunteering is seen as *serious leisure* (ibid.). Motivation is seen in an intrinsic satisfaction of volunteering. Leisure volunteers are usually involved in arts, culture and sports, while the organizational contexts include arts-culture or sports-recreation organizations, which may be large and complex organizations, but also small, local groups. The main volunteer work of leisure volunteers is related to performance and participation, but volunteer activities may also include teaching and coaching, acting as directors and coordinators, administrative tasks, etc.

Figure 2.

Source: Rochester et. al. 2010

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Volunteering is thus unpaid work, activism, and leisure. The conceptual map of this kind has two important roles. On the one hand, it ensures that when analyzing volunteering, especially when performing empirical analyses and measurements, none of the activities through which volunteering is expressed is left out. On the other, making a distinction between different forms of volunteering ensures that different theoretical frameworks are applied for their explanation.

Apart from these three paradigms, there are also many typologies of volunteering. For example, Smith distinguishes between five types of volunteering: 1) traditional service type, 2) mutual aid type, 3) leisure type, 4) conventional political engagement, 5) activism, 6) religious, and 7) occupational support (Smith et al 2016).

In order to encompass the full range of diverse voluntary actions, United Nations Volunteers make a distinction

between four broad types of volunteering: 1) mutual aid or self-help, 2) philanthropy or service to others, 3) campaigning and advocacy, and 4) participation and self-governance (UNV 2001). Each type of volunteering can be formal - coordinated and managed by an organization, or informal - carried out through informal groups, spontaneous action, or individual initiative (Butcher and Einolf 2017).

In short, voluntary activities may vary from preparing meals at the shelter for homeless people, providing free of charge legal advice in a trade union, unpaid acting as a referee at a volleyball play, participation in a street march, cooking a meal for a sick neighbour, etc.

While unpaid labour is different from activism, both types of activities are in fact voluntary actions for others without a compensation, and thus forms of volunteering. Therefore, the illustration of the boundaries and overlaps between volunteering and activism can be presented as in the Figure 3. How social engagement fits in the picture will be clearer after the examination of this concept in the next section.

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Figure 3.



Social engagement

Social engagement encompasses any collective practice that is characterized by a dual movement in a constitutive way: 1) reflecting on existing social values, norms and rules of action, and 2) acting in the direction of their change or preservation.

In order to see how this definition could be operationalized, let us apply it to the above outlined example of the polluted river bank. A girl named Mia, noticing the polluted river bank, reflects about the responsibility for the pollution and what could be done to protect the environment. She realizes that the environmental legislation is lacking, and that few people really care about clean environment. This reflection can make her do something about it. Believing that better laws would ensure cleaner environment, Mia could, for example, join the street march calling for the change in environmental legislation.

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Alternatively, she may think that such a march is useless. Even if a new legislation is adopted that would not change much. With the lack of the “rule of law”, as it is the case in the country she lives in, Mia does not expect that anyone is going to act according to it, nor would anyone be punished for breaching the law. Therefore, she could decide to join the initiative to clean the garbage from the local river bank and make at least one river bank a cleaner place.

In both outlined cases the definition of social engagement is applicable. Thus, both volunteering in the form of unpaid labour (cleaning the garbage) and in the form of activism (street march) are socially engaged practices. One can think of examples when each type of volunteering is a result of the reflection on the existing rules. Therefore, the boundaries and overlaps between volunteering, activism and social engagement can look like in Figure 4.

Figure 4.



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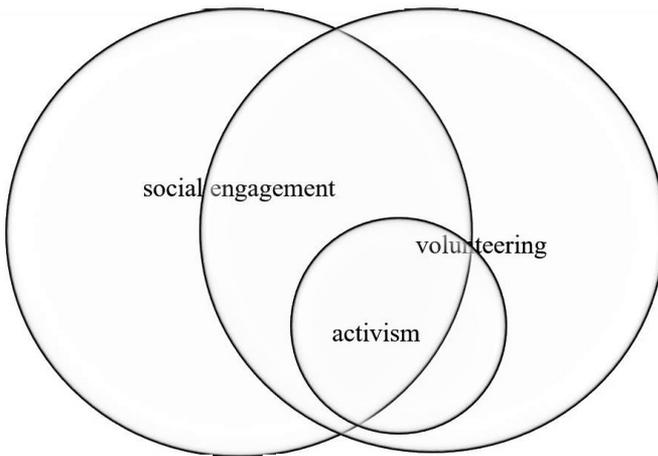
Let us now examine the following scenario. Mia has a close friend Emma, whom she invites to join the street march. Emma does not really care about environmental problems. She has not even noticed that the local river bank is polluted. In fact, there are many other things she would rather do than participating in the street march. However, she does care about her friend and, being a caring friend, she believes that it is her duty to support the issue that her friend admires. Also, knowing that many of their other friends will join the action, Emma is concerned what they would think of her if she refuses to join. Thus, she joins Mia.

Mia and Emma are marching for the environmental protection and an outsider cannot make a difference between their practices. Since volunteering is defined without reference to the motivation, both girls are volunteering.

However, while Mia's action is a result of the reflection on the existing norms and it is aimed at their change, Emma acts with an aim of supporting her friend. Thus, unlike

Mia's, Emma's action cannot be considered socially engaged, defined as a dual movement of reflecting on existing social values, norms and rules of action, and acting in the direction of their change or preservation.¹ We can think of many examples when volunteering is not a result of this reflection. Thus, the illustration of the boundaries and overlaps between the concepts can look like in Figure 5.

Figure 5.



Returning to the outlined example, the question that arises is whether Emma would support her friend regardless of the cause. For instance, to Emma's surprise, Mia has become a fascist. Assuming that immigrants pollute the river bank, Mia participates in a march against immigration and invites Emma to join it. Believing that Mia is deeply mistaken, Emma does not join the march on this occasion, despite the caring relationship with her friend.

¹ Emma's action is a result of reflection on the obligations of friendships, and thus on the values, norms and rules of action in the domain of friendship relationships. Arguably, her action is thus socially engaged. However, anything one purposively does can then be seen as socially engaged, which is overstressing the concept.

Though in the previous example Emma does not care for environmental protection, she nevertheless believes that this cause is acceptable, if not worth supporting, while when it comes to the march against immigration, Emma believes that the cause is wrong. Thus, it seems that a minimal reflection on the justification of the march is nevertheless necessary, otherwise Emma would join Mia without giving a thought about the rightness of the cause her friend supports. This poses another difficulty. Namely, what “degree” of reflection is needed in order for the actor to be considered socially engaged?

Without access to the internal processes that motivate the two girls to join the street march, we cannot say whether what they do is socially engaged, or to what degree they are engaged. While volunteering is defined without reference to the actors’ internal states, social engagement is characterised by the dual movement of reflection and action. Thus, the boundaries and overlaps between the concepts are never predefined.

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This poses a problem for the operationalization of the concept of social engagement. One possible solution to this problem could be to make a distinction between an engaged collective and an engaged individual. A collective is engaged when it is gathered to change social norms and rules (or to preserve them when endangered). Certainly, some initial reflection on the existing social norms and rules is necessary before the action for their change (preservation) is taken, at least among the organisers of the action. However, it is not necessary that each individual actor within the collective reflects on the rules and norms and acts with an ultimate aim of changing (preserving) them. Thus, we could define social engagement through the characteristics of the activity rather than the actors’ mental states.

Social engagement can be defined as an activity aimed at changing the existing social values, norms and rules, or preserving them when endangered. Although the aim of a socially engaged act is change of the existing social values, norms and rules, this can only be an instrumental goal. Participating in the street march for the change in environmental legislation would be a socially engaged act, even if the actor joins the march to support her friend, rather than because she is committed to societal problems. Because the collective (the group that marches) is engaged (it is gathered in order to change the existing legal norms), each individual participant could be considered as engaged, regardless of her motivation. Thus, both Mia and Emma are socially engaged.

However, it could be argued that not all members of an engaged collective are socially engaged to the same extent. In other words, there are different degrees of social engagement of individual actors. Mia is certainly more engaged with the cause of environmental protection than Emma.

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Conclusion

In this paper, we have analyzed similarities and differences between volunteering, activism and social engagement. Though in some respects contested, these concepts are deeply intertwined.

Volunteering is defined as an activity in which time, labour and experiences are given freely to another person, group or cause. Activism is a type of volunteering, related to political struggle and aiming at social change. Social engagement is defined as a collective practice that is characterized by reflecting on existing societal values, norms and rules of action, and acting in the direction of their change or preservation. It can encompass volunteering (and thus activism),

but only in cases when volunteering is a result of the reflection on the existing societal values, rules and norms of behaviour. However, one can volunteer for various reasons, for example to support the cause a friend cares for, or to meet the expectations of peers. In such cases, volunteering is not socially engaged. Thus, the boundaries and overlaps between the three concepts are never predefined.

Since without the access to social actors' internal states we cannot say if the act is socially engaged, the outlined definition of social engagement poses difficulties for the operationalization of the concept. This can be overcome by making a distinction between an engaged collective and an engaged individual. A collective is engaged when gathered to change an existing social norm or rule (or to preserve it when endangered). Certainly, some initial reflection on the existing social norms and rules is necessary before the action for their change (preservation) is taken, at least among the organizers of the action. However, to be considered as engaged, it is not necessary that each individual actor within the collective reflects on the rules and norms and acts with an ultimate aim of changing (preserving) them. Social engagement can be defined as an activity aimed at changing the existing social values, norms and rules, or preserving them when endangered, regardless of whether this is an ultimate or only instrumental goal.

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Foundations of Social Engagement

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Social engagement theory is believed to have been born *after* the Enlightenment in the work of Marx, Weber and others. For that reason, social engagement theory in modernity can be described as theoreticians within capitalist society studying its social processes. Marx' work criticizes the alienated social interaction of capitalist civil society and exposes the "real" class relations that underlie that social interaction and their natural progression. In the work of others (e.g. Weber), social engagement theory seems to legitimize those alienated social relations. Because contemporary capitalist society undermines or excludes actual social relations, Rawls has proposed that "a democratic society is not and cannot be a community."¹ He also "rejects civic humanism," the view "that we are social, even political, beings whose essential nature is most fully achieved in a democratic society in which there is widespread and active participation in political life."² Rawls seems aware that the reign of exchange value has destroyed social engagement. The only remedy for this disheartening theoretical situation is to reach back to the actual origins of social engagement theory in the work of Plato and Aristotle, so that we are able to understand social engagement and its degeneration in modernity, and are able to devise at least a theoretical framework for its reestablishment and revival.

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1 Rawls 2001: 3, italics added.

2 Rawls 2001: 142.

The core of that framework is, on the one hand, the ancient concept of *phronēsis*, otherwise known as “phronetic perception,” and on the other, policies of redistribution.

That which destroys human social engagement is the mediation of all relationships in civil society by exchange value. Thereby, capitalist society replaces social engagement with, let us say, “market engagement,” which refers to one’s engagement with commodities, exchange values, as forms of mediation with the world. It is a perverted form of social relationship. It is, as Aristotle says, “contrary to nature.” As Marx says, “the power which each individual exercises over the activity of others or over social wealth, exists in him as the owner of *exchange values*, of *money*. The individual carries his social power, as well as his bond with society, in his pocket” (Marx 1973: 156–157).³ If my “power...over the activity of others or over social wealth” consists in the money I possess then it would seem that social engagement is impossible, for exchange value degrades the human being into a commodity with a price, whereas genuine social engagement brings humans together in cooperation as sharers in a community or joint project. Those who possess more exchange value lord it over those who possess less, who become dependent on them. Exchange value produces a society more stratified than previous ones, e.g. feudalism. Exchange value perverts social interaction. It tears asunder all human social relations in behalf of itself, the money at which people feel forced to grasp. He who serves exchange value neither comprehends nor practices empathy, for the main point of exchange-value-mediated relationships is for him to extract gain from the other.⁴ The attempt to participate in social engagement outside of civil society meets with failure as woman and man value each other for the “social power,” the exchange value, that they carry in their

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3 Cf. also Marx and Engels 1992, section 1.

4 Cf. Gallagher 2018: chap. 7-8.

pockets. Contemporary capitalist society erases social engagement by means of the reign of exchange value. I claim that contemporary society is an aberration as far as social engagement is concerned, for in societies founded on social engagement exchange serves the purpose of satisfying needs for both parties, but exchange in mercantile or capitalist society serves the goal of profit for one party. In promoting social engagement today, we are reinventing the wheel. Social engagement can only exist in capitalist society as a rebellion against that society. (Note that, strictly speaking, there is no such thing as mere “engagement.” As Marx shows, the human always must act upon nature or his/her surroundings through his social existence.⁵ There is no such thing as a Robinson Crusoe acting upon nature apart from human society; s/he will always at least apply conceptions that originate in that society in his/her action).

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Social Engagement Theory in Brief

We follow Marx in looking back to the conceptions of the ancient Greeks and searching them for understanding and ways to solve contemporary problems.⁶ I argue that what we find there is an elaborate philosophy of social engagement and social action, or *praxis* as Aristotle calls it.

Ancient social engagement theory consists of 1) a philosophy of mind and 2) a theory of social organization and social interaction. Primitive social theory begins with Socrates’ discussion of the origin and functioning of the city-state (*polis*) in Plato’s *Republic* Book II. There Socrates sketches out the mutual dependence of different sharers, who possess different skills, in the community of an early city.⁷

5 Marx 1970: part I, 42-43, 50.

6 On Marx’s relation to Aristotle, cf. Gallagher 2018: chap. 1.

7 Rep, i.369-72; references to ancient sources are by the abbreviation of the work in question; these are listed in the Bibliography at the end of the entry for each such work. Page numbers are Stephanus page numbers in Plato, and Bekker numbers in Aristotle.

Socrates says that because sharers possess different talents, they need each other to make their lives, and thus they need to satisfy each other's needs.⁸ Socrates explains, "because people need many things, and because one person associates with a second because of one need, and with a third because of a different need, many people gather together in a single homeland to live together as sharers (*koinōnoi*) and helpers" (*Rep.* i.369c). In other words, a citizen's different needs correspond to the different co-sharers who will fulfill those needs for him, co-sharers who each carry out different functions (*erga*) in the community, tasks suited to the differences in nature that they have from each other. We can represent the city-state in the realm of metaphysics as a set of human natures, each of which is multiply related to all the other human natures in the set insofar as being different from it, they can provide something to it that it is not suited to provide for itself. That multiply connected set corresponds to a multiply connected set of sharers in the realm of the city/community.⁹ Though Socrates' formulation is primitive, as we will see, it nonetheless decisively nails down an ontological foundation for social engagement, for insofar as people differ from each other, and each needs what the other produces, they must engage with each other.

Aristotle develops Socrates' primitive social theory into an elaborate theory of shared "phronetic perception" and reciprocity among sharers "doing in turn and being affected in turn."¹⁰ He also engages in social criticism of how those who are richer or more powerful exploit those are weaker than they are.¹¹ With his theory of phronetic perception, Aristotle elaborates a theory of intersubjectivity of sharers in their commitment to collective engagement in both

8 Cf. Gallagher 2018: chap. 6-7.

9 Cf. Gallagher 2018: chap. 6.

10 On phronetic perception, cf. Kontos 2011: chap. 1; on reciprocity, cf. Gallagher 2018: chap. 9.

11 Cf. Gallagher 2018: chap. 7.

households and the city-state (*polis*). Intersubjectivity in Aristotle refers to the sharing, that is agreement, in the perception of moral phenomena, by citizens of a *polis* or members of a household. At the same time, it signifies intentions shared by those persons in regards to *praxis*.

Phronetic Perception

In contrast to Rawls, Aristotle says in the very first line of the *Politics* that “every city-state is a community (*koinōnia*) of some sort” (*Pol.* 1252a1). He says that community is based on “oneness of mind” (*homonoia*) and civic friendship (*philia*).¹² He explains that what is unique about humans is that they form *communities of perception* of what is good and bad, just and unjust, and other social values. Aristotle explains:

It is peculiar to human beings alone, in comparison to the other animals, to have perception (*aisthēsis*) of what is good and bad, just and unjust, and the rest. And it is the community in these things that makes a household and a city-state (*Pol.* 1253a16-18).¹³

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What makes a household or a *polis*, according to Aristotle, is “community,” that is agreement, of its members in the “perception of what is good and bad, just and unjust,” etc., that is agreement on how to view moral phenomena. Thus, intersubjectivity is the foundation of the household and the polis. Members view moral phenomena similarly. That means that they share in *phronēsis* (practical reason), for, as Kontos points out, in Aristotle *phronēsis* is not rational or logical, but a species of perception.¹⁴ Aristotle explains:

It is obvious that *phronēsis* is not scientific knowledge (*epistēmē*), for *phronēsis* is of the ultimate <the particu-

12 Cf. EN ix.6.

13 Cf. note 8. Cf. Rawls' rejection of this principle discussed in Gallagher 2018: chap. 2.

14 Cf. EN 1142a24f.

lar>, just as we have said, for the *prakton* is such an ultimate thing. *Phronēsis* lies opposed to intellect (*nous*), for intellect is of boundaries (*boroi*), of which there is no account, but *phronēsis* is of the ultimate, of which there is not scientific knowledge but only perception (*aisthēsis*), not the perception of the peculiar, but the kinds of things that we perceive <such as the fact> that a triangle is the ultimate thing in mathematics <to which all figures are reducible>, for perception will stop there <at that ultimate thing> (*EN* 1142a23-29).

92 According to Aristotle's text, one's *phronesis* perceives the ultimate moral phenomenon, *prakta* as Aristotle names them (singular *prakton*). *Prakton* means "what action has brought into being."¹⁵ In the ethical writings, Aristotle gives health, wealth, and happiness as examples of *prakta*,¹⁶ and also, decrees enacted by the assembly.¹⁷ When we see a healthy person, we see the result of his/her *praxis* in attaining health. Through its perception of *prakta*, one's *phronēsis* constructs a moral world that it holds in common with others. "Indeed, one might think that the visibility of what is *prakton* is dependent upon common ethical principles," says Kontos,¹⁸ for "despite our contingent point of view, we have access to the same shared reality."¹⁹ In the same way as we reduce geometrical figures into elemental triangles, *phronēsis* allows us to analyze moral reality through its perception of *prakta*. "The idea is that the moral world is there independently of our responses and sensibilities," says Kontos.²⁰ So, "*prakta*...perform a kind of resistance to the agent and his aspirations."²¹ So, *phronēsis* is contrary to

15 Cf. Kontos 2011:13.

16 EE 1217a35-40.

17 EN 1141b23-29; on that passage, cf. Kontos 2011: 10–16.

18 Kontos 2011: 32.

19 Kontos 2011: 49.

20 Kontos 2011: 48.

21 Kontos 2011: 34.

the ethics of Rawls or of utilitarianism, for both construct “moral worlds” out of “our responses and sensibilities.” Rawls openly admits that, as we will see below. The very idea that the moral world resists “the agent and his aspirations” would be violently rejected by most contemporary ethicists.

Because in Aristotle *phronesis* is perception of the elements that compose our moral world, Kontos renames *phronēsis* “phronetic perception.”²² *Phronēsis*, that is “phronetic perception,” says Kontos, “is not a matter of decent ethical outlooks, but a faculty which gives us access to a common moral world—a faculty shared by all human beings endowed with practical reason.”²³ “Phronetic perception is *original*, that is to say, it is not dependent upon the accumulation or collaboration of different experiences,”²⁴ says Kontos. Accordingly, I understand “phronetic perception,”²⁵ as an immediate apprehension of *prakta* (moral actions). Phronetic perception establishes a “shared moral world.”²⁶

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Rawls' Opposition to Social Engagement

This radical moral realism provides a basis for social engagement. In accordance with passage (1), members of ancient Greek households or city states share in phronetic perception. The idea that the foundation of fundamental social organizations of the household and *polis* is shared *phronetic* perception, seems to defy contemporary punditry, but agreement on fundamentals is the nature of social communions as has been shown by founders of anthropol-

22 Cf. Kontos 2011: 32.

23 Cf. Kontos 2011: 32.

24 Kontos 2011: 52.

25 For his treatment, cf. Kontos 2011: Chapters 1-2.

26 Kontos 2011: 45.

ogy and sociology.²⁷ Arguably, the Kantian doctrine that people cannot agree on fundamentals reflects systemic disunity in capitalist societies, as argued below.²⁸ As Rawls continues from the remark quoted above:

[B]y a community I mean a body of persons united in affirming the same comprehensive, or partially comprehensive, doctrine. *The fact of reasonable pluralism which characterizes a society with free institutions makes this impossible.* This is the fact of profound and irreconcilable differences in citizens' reasonable comprehensive religious and philosophical conceptions of the world, and in their views of the moral and aesthetic value to be sought in human life (Rawls 2001: 3).²⁹

Rawls argues that we can only agree that we cannot agree on moral and aesthetic values. To Rawls a common phronetic perception is impossible. Rawls' argument reflects the success of exchange value in destroying community since the rise of free market capitalism and the decline of feudalism. Exchange value destroys agreement on moral questions because it replaces the role of *phronesis*, of ethics, in deciding questions of social conduct, with the power of the market. Due to varying market results affecting our lives and wherewithal, individuals arrive at different answers to the same (ethical) question (e.g., "Should I evict my tenants?"), and that is part of the experience underlying

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27 E.g., Durkheim who writes "Society ... is above all a composition of ideas, beliefs and sentiments of all sorts which realize themselves through individuals. Foremost of these ideas is the moral ideal which is its principal *raison d'être*. To love one's society is to love this ideal, and one loves it so that one would rather see society disappear as a material entity than renounce the ideal which it embodies" (1973:59). Also cf. Polanyi 1957a.

28 Capitalism creates heteronomy in a society and the perception that law is arbitrary. Cf. also Donati 2013.

29 Italics added. I agree with Rawls that there is only limited community in the United States. As Marx explains, American capitalism "did not develop on the foundation of a feudal system, but developed rather from itself...not as the result of a centuries-old movement, but rather as the starting-point of a new movement" (1972: 884). As a result, the mediaeval traditions of community and of feudal ties among individuals and classes that exists in Europe, do not exist in America.

the Kant-Rawls dictum that we cannot agree.³⁰ This leads to utilitarianism, the view that ethics traditionally conceived (Aristotelian) does not pertain to modernity, for today we can only agree that what has moral worth is what maximizes pleasure and minimizes pain.³¹ Marx, of course, is aware of this problem.³²

There are flaws in Rawls' reasoning, which stem from his allowance for anarchistic "freedom" and his inclusion of agreement upon religious conceptions and aesthetic values in the requirements for a community.³³ For Rawls "free institutions" are those which act contrary to a prevailing community interest, e.g. the National Endowment for Democracy or the Open Society Foundation. Rawls' opinion is expressive of his America which seems bent on sowing division wherever it can. For others, free institutions are those independent of the power of banking and finance. Putting Rawls aside, it is clear that the Partisans of Nazi-occupied-Yugoslavia constituted a community of shared "phronetic perception," while at the same time including persons of different ethnic and religious backgrounds (that is Muslims, Jews, and multiple Christian denominations).³⁴ Partisans of different faiths attended religious funeral services for fallen comrades.³⁵

In addition to rejecting the very possibility of community, Rawls surprisingly puts aside Aristotle's account of the human as "a political animal."³⁶ He says:

30 One might also investigate the alleged economic causes of the reformation.

31 Cf. Bentham 1789; Mill 1850.

32 Cf. Marx 1992: 5; 1973:156-157.

33 Though agreement upon religious conceptions and aesthetic values was characteristic of the ancient Athenian community.

34 Cf. Davidson (1946), "The sinews of resistance," "Tuzla falls" and other chapters. Partisan Picture. Bedford: Bedford Books.

35 Cf. Davidson (1946), "The sinews of resistance."

36 Cf. Pol. I.2.53a2-3.

[J]ustice as fairness...rejects civic humanism. To explain: in the strong sense, civic humanism is (by definition) a form of Aristotelianism: it holds that we are social, even political, beings whose essential nature is most fully achieved in a democratic society in which there is wide-spread and active participation in political life. This participation is encouraged not merely as possibly necessary for the protection of basic liberties but because it is the privileged locus of our (complete) good (Rawls 2001: 142).

Rawls rejects existence of a shared phronetic perception that is the basis of community and political participation. It is weird that Rawls rejects the idea that “we are social, even political, beings,” for if we are not such, what are we? Grazing animals? But Rawls attempts to justify this strange view by saying: “Justice as fairness...regards the equal political liberties...as having in general less intrinsic value than, say, freedom of thought and liberty of conscience.”³⁷ “Equal political liberties” have “less intrinsic value”? So, African-Americans and South Africans have been wasting their time fighting for their “equal political liberties”? Incredibly, Rawls then concludes that civic humanism is “incompatible with justice as fairness as a political conception of justice.”³⁸ If “justice as fairness” is “a political conception of justice,” then why does Rawls put aside civic humanism and its “widespread and active participation in political life”? Rawls seems happy to take responsibility for political decision-making away from citizens and award it instead to technocrats.

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37 Rawls 2001: 143. One wonders if the tens and tens of thousands of Illinois citizens who stood for hours and hours listening to the Lincoln-Douglas debates, would agree with Rawls here. I also find it strange that Rawls holds that political liberties, e.g., the right to vote, run for office, publish a newspaper, are less valuable than the right to think as I wish, which we have by nature, without needing permission from any government.

38 Rawls 2001: 143.

Living Well and the Human Function

The governing conclusion here is that shared phronetic perception conflicts with the reign of exchange value, which coerces individuals to invent and follow their own relative perceptions of right and wrong, whatever is consistent with their interests, narrowly and selfishly conceived. While Rawls says we can only agree that we cannot agree, capitalism insists that we can only agree on market price. In that way, the rule of exchange value diminishes or even represses social engagement. But it cannot fully destroy the foundation of social engagement in the shared phronetic perception of all. Shared phronetic perception is a foundation for what Marx has called “class consciousness,” that is, a class that has become conscious of its shared moral world. Moreover, shared phronetic perception makes possible the collective deliberation of members of a community on the practical issues facing it. Such deliberation is an essential part of living well (*eû τêñ*), and therefore of existence for the community, for communities “exist for the sake of living well (*eû τêñ*).”³⁹ Living well in the Greek city-state means that citizens experience a life of culture and involvement in civic affairs, according to Karl Polanyi. “The elixir of the good life,” explains Polanyi, is “the elation of day-long theater, the mass jury service, the holding in turn of offices, canvassing, electioneering, great festivals, even the thrill of battle and naval combat,”⁴⁰ in a phrase, a life of culture and participation in the affairs of one’s nation. All this Rawls rejects.

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Aristotle explains that we achieve “living well and doing well” when we fulfill our human function, which he defines as follows:

39 Cf. Pol. i.2.1252b27-30; Gallagher 2018: chap. 7.

40 Cf. Polanyi 1957a: 98.

We take the human function (*ergon*) to be a certain kind of life, and take that life to be activity and actions of a soul by means of reason; and the good human does that well and finely (*eû kai kalôs*). Now each <function> is fulfilled well in accordance with its proper virtue. And so the human good comes to be as activity of a soul in accord with virtue, and indeed, if there are more virtues than one, with the best and most complete <virtue> (*EN* i.7.1098a12-16),

which for Aristotle is justice.⁴¹ So, to live well and do well, we must engage in activity of soul by means of reason and in accord with justice. All the activities that Polanyi describes above as characteristic of living well are “activity and actions of a soul by means of reason” and “in accord with virtue,” and that is living well. And most of those activities – “the mass jury service, the holding in turn of offices, canvassing, electioneering, great festivals, even the thrill of battle and naval combat”—are conducted with (collective) deliberation. Deliberation is part of *praxis*, action in accord with practical wisdom and the phronetic perception of the commons. The community deliberates in the assembly, in the law courts and elsewhere, comes to its decisions and acts. This was often chaotic—as in the Assembly’s “Mytilenian Debate” during the Peloponnesian Wars in which, out of anger at its colony Mytilene for attempting to revolt, the Assembly voted to execute the entire male population and enslave the women and children; the next day they reconsidered their decision and voted for clemency⁴² – yet, collective deliberation nonetheless it was. Aristotle shows that collective deliberation and the shared phronetic perception of citizens (*politeis*) makes them committed to the project of the *polis*: to establish and maintain living well (*eû zēn*) for all citizens. In Assembly, individual Athenians engaged the beliefs, intentions and feelings of others, whether present

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41 Cf. Gallagher 2018: chap. 7.

42 Thuc. 3.36–3.50.

or absent, and competed in advancing the common project of the *polis*. In the example above, it is as if they said, “We were acting out of anger yesterday! Let’s amend our action today.” That collective deliberation, that living well, is unfortunately lacking from contemporary societies and accordingly is rejected by Rawls in his rejection of civic humanism.

Why does social engagement seem lacking today? Foreseeing a problem of contemporary society, Aristotle warns that merchandising – the pursuit of exchange value – destroys communities and therefore social engagement.⁴³ In merchandising, which Aristotle describes as exchange “not in accordance with nature,” a merchant exchanges money for goods and then exchanges those goods for more money than she or he originally expended and so garners a profit, in a process representable by the schema M–C–M.⁴⁴ Clearly, Aristotle regards that form of property acquisition as reprehensible, for he says in the *Eudemian Ethics* that “If someone makes a profit, we can refer it to no other vice than injustice,”⁴⁵ and in the *Nicomachean Ethics* he explains, “it is not possible at the same time both to make money from the commons (*chrēmatisesthai apo tōn koinōn*) and be honored,”⁴⁶ for exchange to make a mercantile profit acts as a drain on the community, for in necessary commodity exchange (the C–M–C model), equivalents are exchanged for equivalents, and no one is exploited. But into such a community of exchange enters the commercial trader, who does not exchange equivalents for equivalents, but trades a commodity C (purchased earlier with money M) for more money M’ than he or she originally expended, to garner a

43 Cf. EN 1132b33-33a1,1163b8-9, Pol. I.8-10.

44 Cf. Gallagher 2018: chap. 1.

45 Cf. EE 1130a32

46 Cf. EN 1163b8-9

profit $M' - M$ through “making money from the commons.”⁴⁷ That profit-seeking trade is judged unjust by the phronetic perception of the commons, and it can lead to civil strife, as one portion of the community—traders—separates itself from the rest.⁴⁸ We cannot live well if we are unjust to the other, if we exploit the other for our personal gain. If we exploit the other, we violate the common (phronetic) “perception of what is good and bad, just and unjust,” and the community of living well of which we are members. Marx also wrote that exchange value destroys community and social relations.⁴⁹ The pursuit of exchange value in modern societies represses social engagement and makes it almost impossible. We witness “false” social engagement as in political forms that seek the establishment of the pursuit of exchange value as a political principle, or the dismantling of social welfare programs deemed “contrary” to the principle of exchange value, i.e. social regression.

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Redistribution as a Path to Social Engagement

To revive social engagement, we must revive community and, somehow, undermine the power of exchange value over the minds of our people. It is necessary to somehow support the existence of all individuals so that they are not desperately submissive to the power of exchange value and the labour market. Because their households are materially and socially insecure, workers tend to be politically submissive to the capitalist class. If instead they possess some social security, their minds are able to break free from conventional thinking and have a chance to participate in social engagement. The means to support such freedom is

47 Cf. 1163b1-14

48 EN v.5.1132b33-33a1. On phronetic perception, cf. Kontos 2011: ch. 1

49 Cf. Marx 1992: 5; 1973: 156–157.

redistribution of wealth among citizens. We achieve this by promoting social welfare programs—such as health care, social security, unemployment insurance, education and housing—that support citizens so they need not surrender to the ideology of the market that they are worth only as much as they are paid, and therefore little. Polanyi writes about how such social security was stripped from English peasants in the transition to free market capitalism:

The war on cottages, the absorption of cottage gardens and grounds, the confiscation of rights in the common deprived cottage industry of its two mainstays: family earnings and agricultural background. As long as domestic industry was supplemented by the facilities and amenities of a garden plot, a scrap of land, or grazing rights, the dependence of the laborer on money earnings was not absolute; the potato plot or “stubbing geese,” a cow or even an ass in the common made all the difference; and family earnings acted as a kind of unemployment insurance. The rationalization of agriculture inevitably uprooted the laborer and undermined his social security (Polanyi 1944: 92).

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For Polanyi, the point of Roosevelt’s “New Deal” was to return some such “social security” to the labourer. The point is that to the degree that a household in the ancient world was self-sufficient, in case of a breakdown of society its members could survive for some time, today that degree of self-sufficiency has been brutally eliminated. Polanyi advances ancient Athens in the 5th century B.C. as a model for programs of redistribution and social welfare:

[R]eciprocity and redistribution were the forms of integration that originally dominated the economic life of Attica...The *polis* took over much of the redistributive inheritance of the tribe. The distribution of land (*kleroi*),⁵⁰

50 Cf. Pol. ii.6.1265b3-4; Liddell and Scott (1897), 814 comment on *klêrouxia*; Thuc. iii.50; cf. Herod. vi.100 on the case of Chalcis; Plutarch, “Life of Pericles.”

of booty, of a lucky strike in the Laurion mines⁵¹—similarly, of the gold mined on the isle of Syphnos; the claim to maintenance or to corn distribution in an emergency⁵²; the claim to participation in public displays or to payment for the performance of citizens' duties⁵³—all this is a very real tribute to the strength of the *redistributive factor in classical communities*. The basic economic organization of the *polis* was redistribution of the proceeds of common activity, share in booty and tribute, share in conquered land and in colonial ventures, in the advantages to be gained from third-party trade (Polanyi 2014b: 157–8).

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According to Polanyi's account, an Athenian could sustain his household to a large degree as the recipient of a variety of distributions, whether that of land, or of payments for serving in offices or for involvement in festivals, or of episodic distributions of booty, of precious metals, or emergency distributions of corn. The Athenian was not left to his own resources to care for his household. That is the distinguishing mark of redistribution, and it highlights the way that redistribution supports *eû xên*, namely, the citizen is not on his own to support his household, as s/he is today, but can rely on support from the city-state. That enables the citizen to involve himself in the affairs of the *polis*, in political deliberation, in social engagement. Redistribution, formerly a responsibility of the tribes that composed ancient Athens, became the responsibility of the *polis*, says Polanyi, who refers to this being practiced at least down to the defeat in the Peloponnesian Wars. Polanyi's account is confirmed by Aristotle's *The Constitution of Athens*, where

51 Howatson tells us: "The silver mines of Laurium ... were the source of great wealth to fifth-century Athens (1989: 366)." Cf. also Thuc. ii.55, vi, 91.

52 Cf. Paley 1921.

53 Pritchard says that "In the 450s the Athenians voted to introduce *misthos* ("pay") for jurors" (2015: 52ff). In the 440s or the 430s they began to pay councilors and magistrates. By the 390s the *dêmos* were drawing pay to attend assembly meetings." On pay for assembly attendance, cf. Aristop. Eccl., i. 378–9. On payment for jurors cf. Pl. Gorg. 515e, Aris. Pol. 1294a37. Pay was raised from 2 to 3 obols by Cleon early in the Peloponnesian war.

the Philosopher describes the highpoint in Athenian policies of redistribution during the Penteconteitia, the interval of 45 years between the defeat of Persia and the onset of the Peloponnesian Wars.⁵⁴

[Aristides⁵⁵,] seeing the state growing in confidence and much wealth accumulated, advised the people to lay hold of the leadership of the [Delian] league,⁵⁶ and to quit the country districts and settle in the city. He pointed out to them that all would be able to gain a living there, some by service in the army, others in the garrisons, others by taking a part in public affairs...This advice was taken... They also secured an ample maintenance for the mass of the population in the way which Aristides had pointed out to them. Out of the proceeds of the tributes and the taxes and the contributions of the allies more than twenty thousand persons were maintained (*Ath. Res.* 24-25).⁵⁷

By 20,000 persons Aristotle means 20,000 heads of households. If 20,000 “were maintained”, as Aristotle says, that would constitute roughly half the households of Athenian citizens. We can surmise that the wealthy would not be on the receiving end of these distributions, both because they did not need them and did not care to hold most of the paying positions, and because the poor through their heroic role in the 2nd Persian War merited the distributions.⁵⁸ The point here is that *redistribution was a central feature of Athenian social life* and one that enabled the people to involve themselves closely in the cultural and political affairs of Athens. So, Pericles, in his famous funeral speech, could

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54 On the Penteconteitia, cf. Thuc. i. 89-117.

55 Known as “the Just,” he was an Athenian statesman, one of the generals at the battle of Marathon in 490, held a command at Salamis, and led the Athenian forces at Platea. He apportioned the tribute among the members of the Delian League. Cf. Howatson 1989.

56 The League was the alliance formed to prosecute the war against Persia. It included almost all the Greek islands. Cf. Howatson, 1989.

57 Translation from Aristotle 1984b: 24–25.

58 Cf. Aris. *Pol.* ii.12.1274a13.

claim with some justification that poverty in classical Athens was no barrier to political participation.⁵⁹ Aristotle's account provides strong support for our argument that the establishment of programs of redistribution will provide support for social engagement.

In conclusion, social engagement is stymied by the dominance of exchange value in contemporary capitalist society. Yet, there is historical evidence for widespread social engagement in ancient Athens, which is supported by the theory of social engagement in the writings of Plato and Aristotle. In particular, ancient Athens supported social engagement through redistribution of wealth among citizens. We conclude that the reestablishment of programs of redistribution will provide a basis for citizens to enter into social engagement today.

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Of course, there is another route, one that appears likely to be taken in the years ahead, as capitalist governments cut back programs of redistribution and impose austerity: As world capitalism collapses workers' living standards, workers may abandon life in accordance with exchange value and look for alternative, class-based modes of action, and with that, social engagement.

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Overcoming Domination

Being Engaged, Becoming Engaged. Entangled Affectability with Spinoza and Butler¹

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Introduction

According to Athena Athanasiou (2016) social engagement is twofold. On the one hand, it works at an ontological level: “we are always already engaged” (453). On the other hand, there is also a political level of engagement, as “we can also *become* engaged,” even “*critically* engaged” (453). The aim of this paper is to unfold these intertwined ontological and political levels of social engagement through the philosophical thought of Baruch Spinoza and Judith Butler. In this sense, it will explore Spinoza’s materialist ontological relationality and (trans)individuality (Sharp 2011; Balibar, 1997). Spinoza’s relationality leads towards a new understanding of the political role of affectivity and affectability

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(Deleuze 1988: 122-130). In this sense, Spinoza's influence on Butler's work will be outlined, through her own reading of his work, as well as her own stances about political body ontology, that involve thinking about our entwined constitutive precariousness and geopolitical precarity (Butler 2004; 2009; 2015: 63-89). Butler's perspectives on affectability and vulnerability shape her specific stances on critical engagement, understood as performative collective action and agency.

This paper will explore the complex relationship between being engaged and becoming engaged, arguing that society is formed by complex, multifaceted processes in which relations are always already political. As relational beings, social engagement is, thus, something that we slip into, that we enter in the middle of (Deleuze 1988: 123), and an analysis of the political cannot avoid a profound enquiry of its ontological foundation: the relational movements, forces, and affections that lead towards the collective production of meanings, desires, and actions.

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The Performativity of Being and Becoming Engaged

In her paper "Becoming engaged, surprising oneself" Athena Athanasiou (2016) reflects on the possibilities of being and becoming engaged. According to Athanasiou, social engagement is twofold: one is always already engaged, and one can also become (critically) engaged. We can then observe two entwined levels of engagement: an ontological level and a political one. At the ontological level, we are always already engaged prior to any volition, prior to any commitment to being engaged, prior to any agency, even

prior to our own knowledge of any kind of engagement. We cannot avoid being engaged; it is constitutive of our condition as relational beings. Judith Butler (2009) points out how helpless we are without one another when we are born: we need the others to thrive as human beings at the most basic and raw level of our existence. In Butler's words (2009: 14): "It is not that we are born and then later become precarious, but rather that precariousness is coextensive with birth itself (birth is, by definition, precarious), which means that it matters whether or not this infant being survives, and that its survival is dependent on what we might call a social network of hands." At the political level, which is always entwined with ontological one, the act of becoming engaged relates to a performativity of engagement that implies responsiveness to others and, thus, a critical displacement of our prior engagements; it requires an openness to others that may cause us to place ourselves otherwise. That is why Athanasiou (2016: 454) claims "that engagement is a self-deconstructing mode; a mode of self-reconfiguration."

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We are thus open to being affected through this responsiveness to others. For this reason, this performativity of engagement also implies embracing our constitutive vulnerability,² accepting the fact that we are vulnerable to our relations with others. This vulnerability is not only related to the possibility of being harmed; it goes beyond that, as it is related to our openness and affectability. We are vulnerable to being changed through our interactions and intra-actions³ with others, to undergo a process of re-making through our engagements. Indeed, we are effectively changed and re-constituted through our engagements with others. For Athanasiou (2016: 454) "engagement, then, en-

2 See: Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay (2016) to have an overview on contemporary conceptions of vulnerability in current literature.

3 This paper assumes Barad's perspective on intra-actions (Barad 2007). For Barad, inter-action presupposes that the elements that enter into a relationship have previous independence; however, intra-action suggests that they emerge from the relational process itself.

tails being and becoming exposed; being and becoming answerable to others.”

Nonetheless, these two levels are only separable analytically, for they are entangled. The intra-actions between being always already engaged and becoming engaged are not reducible to chronological or teleological fluxes. We are immersed in a never-ending process of engagement, forever already being and becoming engaged. As Athanasiou puts it (2016: 453): “the intertwinement between ‘always already engaged’ and ‘becoming engaged’ invokes the way in which performativity takes place as a situated contingency.” As a performative process, it is limitless, unattainable, there is not a specific goal to be reached; the aim is always elusive and in constant transformation. Engagement is, thus, constantly renewed and is repeatedly sustained through performative actions.

The performativity of being and becoming engaged also means that engagement might be an opaque process: it is not completely understandable, not completely consciously accessible to the self. There is no longer a sovereign subject – invested with “self-sufficient, self-affirming, free-willed agency (akin to liberal and libertarian individualism)” (Athanasiou 2016: 455) – that is fully self-aware and decides voluntarily how engagement will be. Nor does the socio-economic or linguistic environment deterministically shape our engagements. Power relations are everywhere, there is not an essentialist ontology that is prior to power. Intersubjectivity is thus always entangled in power relations. Our relationality is always historically, materially, linguistically, technologically, socially mediated. The performativity of engagement entails that the processes of intersubjectivity and intra-subjectivity are complex, multi-layered, and unforeseeable.⁴

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4 See the Introduction to *Bodies that Matter* (Butler, 1993) to see Judith Butler’s stance on the debate between sovereign voluntarism, constructivisms (both social and linguistic), and performativity.

The performativity of engagement is also precisely what permits persistence and resistance. This is so to the extent that performativity is deconstructive: the performative process is ongoing, open to change, to different outcomes, to differing becomings. The performative intra-action of being always already engaged and becoming engaged means an ambivalent subjectification that makes subjects being regulated but in unforeseen ways, in unexpected and even unknowable processes of becoming. Performativity is an iterative process, which means that it is related to *iter*; to the other, to the again (Derrida 1992): to the endless repetition of the other. But repetition is never stagnant, it is always a new becoming. The repetition of iterable discourses enables new possibilities of agency and the resignification of open-ended processes of being and becoming engaged to others.⁵

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In this first section, I have proposed thinking with Athanasiou about the entanglement of being and becoming engaged in a performative process. The performativity of engagement is, precisely, what makes it an open-ended process that takes place in constant intra-relations with others. In the next section, I would like to address Spinoza's ideas on relationality, (trans)individuality, and affectability, in order to see how they can be used to frame being and becoming engaged.

Relationality, (Trans)Individuality, Affectability

Spinoza's ontology offers a multifaceted description of reality. The world, for Spinoza, is dynamic; it is not motionless. This dynamism affects also human actions and thoughts. Thus, it is required to conduct a complex, dynam-

⁵ For more on Butler's theory of performativity and her stances on the performative subject as open, opaque, vulnerable, relational, entangled in intra-actions with the others and the world in the open-ended process of becoming and resistance see Butler 1990; 1993.

ic, multilayered analysis of the material processes that lie at the basis of communities, and to develop and mobilize complex categories of thought. Spinoza's ontology is, then, a powerful theoretical ground that can provide a complex materialist understanding of nature and, also, of human communities.

This paper does not intend to conduct a thorough analysis of Spinoza's complex material ontology, but it aims at exploring how analyzing notions like individuality, transindividuality, relationality, and affectability can contribute to thinking about being and becoming engaged.

What kind of individual appears in Spinoza's theory? The notion of individuality is crucial in Spinoza's thought, and it is articulated mainly in the *Ethics* and developed further in the political *Treatises*. It is interesting to note that there are only two specific references to the *subject* in the *Ethics*. On the one hand, the subject had not yet arisen as the concept that, according to Michel Foucault (1970), would be central in modern philosophy. On the other hand, his theory does not require a theory of consciousness as interiority, as subjectivity; rather, his analysis focuses on the formation of individuals. As Deleuze states (1988: 128), in Spinoza there is "no longer a subject but only individuating affective states of anonymous force;" there are, then, non-subjectified affects.

In the *Ethics*, the physics of the body and the theory of affects ground Spinoza's process of individuation. Here, Spinoza proposes his theory on the affective and political process of individuation, enabling a new awareness of the relationship between affectivity and politics, of the political role of affectivity. Although this paper will not explore this further, it is relevant to mention that in the *Treatises* the process of individuation explained in the *Ethics* is further expanded with his vision of society as the expression

of collective and natural acts of desire, his definition of the political body as a *mens una*, his definition of the category of multitude and the advocacy for democracy.

Spinoza offers a materialist conception of the individual, developed through an intricate entwining of ontological and political analysis, ontology and politics being simultaneous in Spinoza's theory of the individual, as political and ontological conceptions support each other. An individual, for Spinoza, has nothing to do with liberal notions linked to individualism that we have come to inherit. Rather, an individual is a composite of bodies and relations between parts. Also, it escapes anthropocentrism: it refers to any composite of complex bodies, not only to human individuals.⁶ In this sense, linking together an opposition to liberal individualism and post-anthropocentrism, Spinoza's philosophy is being used nowadays to develop what Hasana Sharp (2011: 4) has called a "philanthropic posthumanism," which is a "collective project by which we can come to love ourselves and one another as parts of nature." Along these lines, Sharp claims (2011: 4-5): "Spinoza's naturalism aims to engender enabling self-love in humanity by eroding those models of man that animate hatred, albeit indirectly, by suggesting that we are, at one extreme, defective Gods or, at the other, corrupt animals who need to be restored to our natural condition."

At an ontological level, the notion of individuality refers to the fact that actual existence is organised in the form of the multiplicity of individuals. While *substance* is the infinite process of production of multiple individuals, *individuals* are causally dependent and are the necessary existence of substance. There is reciprocity between the multiplicity of individuals and the unity of substance. As Balibar states

6 For more on the influence of Spinoza on the critical posthumanisms, see Braidotti, 2013.

(1997: 8): “‘substance’ is nothing *other* than the individuals; especially, it does not ‘transcend’ or ‘underlie’ their multiplicity.” Substance is “what is in itself and is conceived through itself, that is, that whose concept does not require the concept of another thing, from which it must be formed” (Spinoza EI D3).⁷ Thus, there is only one substance: *deus sive natura*.

For Spinoza, following this radical materialist monism, individuals are the union of body and mind: “The mind and the body are one and the same individual which is conceived now under the attribute of thought, now under the attribute of extension” (Spinoza EII P21 S). Body and mind are modes of the single substance rather than distinct substances (one mental, the other material), and they coexist simultaneously. As Balibar shows (1997: 6-7), Spinoza escapes the basic binarisms of classical ontological dualisms between individualism/holism, intersubjectivity/civil society, interiority/exteriority. Rather, Spinoza can be understood as a form of relational ontology: “a general theory of communication, from which the different forms of imaginary and rational life, including the political life, could be derived” (Balibar 1997: 7).

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Individuals are a conjunction of parts organised under a characteristic proportion of motion and rest, which is always dependent on exchanges with other bodies. In this sense, Spinoza constructs a dynamic ontology of becoming, a relational ontology. The ontology of the production of complex bodies is always dynamic and relational. In this sense, Spinoza states (EII P13 D):

7 The following abbreviated notation will be used when referring to Spinoza’s texts: EI for Part I of the *Ethics*; EII for Part II of the *Ethics*; EIII for Part III of the *Ethics*; EIV for Part IV of the *Ethics*; PCP for *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*; D for definition; L for lemma; P for proposition; PI for Physical Interlude; S for Scholium.

When a number of bodies, whether of the same or different size, are so constrained by other bodies that they lie upon one another, or if they so move, whether with the same degree or different degrees of speed, that they communicate their motions to each other in a certain fixed manner, we shall say that those bodies are united with one another and that they all together compose one body or individual, which is distinguished from the others by this union of bodies.

Every individual is a moment in a more general and more flexible process of individuation and individualization. As Balibar clarifies (1997: 9), individuation is the process by which individuals separate from the environment, while individualization is the process that ensures that every individual has unique characteristics. Individuals are not given, they are constructed and produced; also, they are productive and active. Both their construction and their activity are always already involved and engaged with other individuals. That is why Balibar argues that Spinoza's basic propositions in the *Ethics* can be understood as expressing ideas of individuality as transindividuality, or a "transindividual process of individuation" (Balibar 1997: 12). There is always reciprocity and interconnectedness in these interdependent processes of individuation and individualization. Thus, the processes that lead individuals to be separated are not separated; nothing is isolated, no-body is isolated, as there is always an original connection with other individuals.

The natural tendency of an individual's existence is towards activity. Individuals possess a conative desire of striving and persevering into life, of maintaining their physical consistency and integrity. This organizes both the activities of the mind and of the body. Spinoza defines the verb *conatur* as "a body's natural tendency to move in a certain way" (PCP Part III D). *Conatus* is the name that Spinoza gives

to the power of each individual to “persevere in its being” (EIII, P6). This conative striving may be described as the essence of a thing (Spinoza EIII P7); nonetheless, it should be taking into account that the metaphysical notion of essence is contested by Spinoza, for the essence of a thing mutates and varies constantly. In this sense, we can understand why Deleuze (1990: 222) refers to the elasticity of the conatus. The conatus is, then, a field of forces within dynamic conflictual relations.

The conatus is therefore constantly renewed by an endless production of affects, ideas, and bodily movements that are shaped by exchanges of power with other individuals and the world. Thus, relationality is key for the conative desire of striving and persevering into life. All individuals, including the human ones, have a collective constitutive dimension. Nonetheless, this does not imply the denial of their uniqueness, as the individual does not get lost in the collective. At an ethical level, his ethics can be conceived as a relational process of formation of complex individuals that does not preclude the expression of the individual’s self-determination.

As was said before, bodies are susceptible to being affected, as they are always dependent on exchanges with other bodies; there are always affects between bodies. For Spinoza, affect refers to a power to affect and be affected. The body is, then, a site of transformation and potential re-making. A body, as Deleuze (1988) reads Spinoza, is kinetic and dynamic at the same time. It is kinetic, as it is composed of an infinite number of particles which have varying relations of motion and rest between them. Also, it is dynamic to the extent that it affects other bodies and is affected by others. The kinetic proposition states that bodies should not be classified according to their form of function, but to their movements of motion and rest: “Bodies are distinguished

from one another by reason of motion and rest, speed and slowness, and not by reason of substance” (Spinoza EII PI L1). There is a complex relationship that is established between differential velocities, and bodies are compositions of speeds and slownesses that vary continuously and occur simultaneously and successively. According to the dynamic proposition, bodies are not substances, but modes, being a mode the capacity of being affected or affect others. Bodies are, thus, defined by their affective capacity. In this sense, bodies cannot be separated from their relations to the world.

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These relations to the world have the capacity of affecting individuals. There are affections that threaten the individual, as they diminish its power or slow it down. There are, on the other hand, affections that strengthen and accelerate. Affect is a universal power to affect and be affected; every individual has potential to affect others, either through an increase or decrease of another’s power. Affect is “a qualitative change, equally corporeal and mental, in the intensity of a being’s power to persevere” (Sharp 2011: 29). The ethical challenge would be, then, to form relationships that be extensive, that can nurture more capacity or power, that do not undermine the individual’s capacity to self-affirm itself. In Deleuze’s words (1988: 126), the challenge would be “the composition of a world that is increasingly wide and intense.” This composition is never-ending, or better said, it is forever ongoing: the world, nature, is always being composed and recomposed in dynamic and relational processes.

Spinoza’s relationality leads towards a new understanding of the political role of affectivity and affectability; to a new understanding of our constitutive affective entanglement and openness to others; to a new comprehension of the fact that we are always already engaged to others and to the world. The next section will outline Spinoza’s influence

on Butler's and her own stances about body ontology, that involve thinking about our constitutive precariousness and geopolitical precarity.

Engaging with the Desire to Live

Judith Butler engages with Spinoza's *Ethics* as a basis for a different kind of ethics and analyzes its political implications for critical social engagement. Butler considers that reflecting on Spinoza's conatus – understood as a desire to live, to persevere in being – can provide an alternative to individualist, liberal, contractarian political philosophy models. For Butler (2015: 63), Spinoza's conatus and relational conception of individuality has political “implications for social solidarity and a critique of individualism.” As Butler shows (2015: 80), it is in proposition XXXVII that Spinoza offers an account on sociality that differs from the contractarian perspective: “The good which everyone who seeks virtue wants for himself, he also desires for other men; and this desire is greater as his knowledge of God is greater” (Spinoza EIV P37).

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The main political implication of adopting a Spinozian standpoint would be to develop a “dynamic conception of political solidarity in which sameness cannot be assumed” (Butler 2015: 64). As has been mentioned before, Spinoza's theory of the individual requires contemplating that there is always a social and communitarian dimension to the individual, but this does not mean that the individual is lost into the community; each individual continues being unique, although the social dimension of the individual's formation should not be disregarded.

Spinoza's concept of conatus as desire to live stimulates Butler into thinking about what exactly is the self that desires

to be preserved, and what is the life that is desired to be preserved. Where and when does one's own individuality start, and where and when does it stop? If the individual is always already engaged with others, due to its constitutive relationality, where are the limits of one's own being? The individual is never completely definite. Its limits are blurred, always already engaged with the limits of the other individuals and the world. As Deleuze comments on Spinoza (1988: 125): "The interior is only a selected exterior, and the exterior, a projected interior". With this formulation that reminds of Derrida's constitutive outside (Butler, 1993), it can be argued with Spinoza's theory of the individual that one can never be separated from its relations to the world.

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The Spinozian conatus and affective relationality also connect with Butler's own stances on vulnerability and political body ontology. Butler draws a distinction between precariousness and precarity. Precariousness is an ontological shared state of humanity that relates to a general condition of susceptibility to being harmed. She considers this constitutive vulnerability or precariousness a consequence of her stance on the relationality of bodies and subjects: we are all interdependent, thus, we are affected by others, and we affect others; thus, affectability is a crucial part of vulnerability. We are vulnerable to others, we are open to others. Precarity, on the other hand, is the "politically induced condition that would deny equal exposure through the radically unequal distribution of wealth and the differential ways of exposing certain populations (...) to greater violence." (2009b: 28). Thus, within the framework of Butlerian political body ontology, we are constitutively engaged and also geopolitically engaged.

Returning to Butler's reading of Spinozian conatus, she states that life traverses one's own and also what is not merely one's own. The individual is not a monadic entity, as it is always already engaged in intra-actions with others

and the world. In Butler's words (2015: 65): "It is not possible to refer to one's own singularity without understanding the way in which that singularity becomes implicated in the singularities of others". The "me" and the "you" are bound up, are always entangled, always already engaged with each other.

It is thus impossible to refer to own's power without contemplating other powers that belong to others. As we live and seek to persevere in our own being within an affective relationality, the encounters with the others can diminish or enhance our own possibilities of future perseverance. Referring to Deleuze's early reading of Spinoza (Deleuze 1990), Butler states (2015: 66) that within the Spinozian framework of the individual one cannot persevere in its being apart from a common life, that is, "deprived of the representational and expressive apparatus by which life itself is enhanced or diminished". The conatus is enhanced or diminished in the disposition toward others.

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This has ethico-political consequences, as we constitutively need to live in a world that nurtures the possibilities of our own perseverance; in fact, we not only need a world that enhances the possibilities of our own perseverance but also the possibilities of the others' perseverance: "'To persevere in one's own being' is thus to live in a world that not only reflects but furthers the value of others' lives as well as one's own" (Butler 2015: 65). Sociality is thus essential to perseverance and mutual enhancement of life conditions. In Butler's words (2015: 81):

What one desires for oneself turns out to be, at the same time, what one desires for others. This is not the same as first determining one's own desire and then projecting that desire or extrapolating the desires of others on the basis of one's own desire. This is a desire that must, of necessity, disrupt and disorient the very notion of what is one's own, the very concept of "ownness" itself.

The conatus is related to affects, to emotions, to what one feels towards another, to how one is acted upon. It is crucial to take into account how we represent ourselves and others to ourselves. These imaginary conjunctures effectively affect the possibilities of our own perseverance and the perseverance of others. In a creative ongoing process, we posit possibilities and imagine their realization through “expressive actions by which life itself is augmented or diminished” (Butler 2015: 66).

Desiring life, desiring persevering in one’s being is desiring to continue being engaged with the others. It is, in this regard, desiring to go beyond ourselves; better said, it is desiring to continue existing beyond ourselves. It is an *ek-static* movement that puts the “I” into question: “Desiring life produces an *ek-stasis* in the midst of desire, a dependence on an externalization, something that is palpably not me, without which no perseverance is possible” (Butler 2015: 67). The very practice of persevering in life is a referential movement towards the world. As a consequence, Butler argues that our being is fundamentally responsive: it is not only always already engaged, but it responds to further engagement to others and the world.

The social bind, the social bondage is always already there. It is constitutive, one cannot escape it: “the very distinction between self and Other is a dynamic and constitutive one, indeed, a bind that one cannot flee, if not a bondage in which ethical struggle takes place” (Butler 2015: 80). Furthermore, the social bondage is not only what binds us socially, but also what holds one together. Spinozian thought on relationality and social bondage allows a powerful stance against individualism and leads toward political solidarity. Spinoza’s ethics would be:

An ethic that not only avows the desire to live, but recognizes that desiring life means desiring life for you, a desire that entails producing the political conditions for life that will allow for regenerated alliances that have no final form, in which the body, and bodies, in their precariousness and their promise, indeed, even in what might be called their ethics, incite one another to live (Butler 2015: 89).

In this quotation, I would highlight Butler's call for the need for *regenerated alliances that have no final form*. These words echo her critique of identity politics and her defense of political alliances (Butler 1990), such as the Occupy Movement,⁸ understood as the exercises of performative, plural, social and coalition-based agency. (Soley-Beltrán and Sabsay, 2012: 224). Indeed, if we are always already engaged, and if processes of engagement are performative, collective, ongoing, open-ended, and intra-active, it only makes sense that our political engagements and alliances take into account both this constitutive engagement and transindividuality, and the dynamic processes of becoming engaged. In this sense, our engagements should be aware of our mutual interdependence but also situate themselves in the understanding that society is formed by complex, multifaceted processes in which relations are always already political. As relational beings, social engagement and performative collective action and agency is, thus, something that we slip into, that we enter in the middle of (Deleuze 1988: 123), and an analysis of the political cannot avoid a profound enquiry of its ontological foundation: the relational movements, forces, and affections that lead towards the collective production of meanings, desires, and actions. If we understand society as a dynamic, performative process, it would make sense to think about critical engagement as *alliances that have no final form*.

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8 Indeed, Judith Butler showed openly her support to the Occupy Wall Street Movement in a public intervention. See Youtube (2011, October 23).

Conclusion

Departing from Athanasiou's idea that we are always already engaged and able to engage, even critically, with others, this paper has analyzed how these ideas can be found in Spinoza's relational ontology. Spinoza's understanding of relational and ongoing processes of individuation and individualization lead to new perspectives on the political role of affectivity and affectability. Understanding the transindividual processes of individuation and individualization that Spinoza's theory outlines, one can argue that we are always entangled with others, susceptible to affect and being affected by others. Every individual has the potential to affect others, to increase or decrease another individual's power. This idea connects with Butler's perspectives on our constitutive precariousness, understood as foundational relationality and interdependence.

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Both Spinoza's and Butler's perspectives on our constitutive relationality constitute powerful conceptual tools to argue against individualism and to advocate forms of political and ethical solidarity that take into account our interdependence and affectability as relational beings.

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Engagement and Complex Domination: The Emancipatory Potential of Contingency

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Introduction

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This paper has two interconnected aims. The first is to explore the heuristic fruitfulness of Luc Boltanski's pragmatic sociology of critique, in particular his conception of "complex (or managerial) domination", for understanding the contemporary political predicament characterized by a sense of an impossibility of any substantive social change. The second is to offer a form of preliminary expansion of Boltanski's perspective that would enable a greater appreciation of the emancipatory potential of the *contingency of social action* under the conditions of complex domination. On the grounds of a concise reconstruction and critique of Boltanski's perspective, we argue that the ordinary social actors in Boltanski seem completely powerless to prevent the mechanisms of complex domination from completely neutralizing any damage to the institutional order, and any subsequent opportunity for social change, caused by

the contingency of action. The emancipatory potential of contingency is theorized in the paper by means of the basic social-ontological concept of “common knowledge”, addressed by authors such as David Lewis and Margaret Gilbert. In the final section of the paper, we propose an outline of the concept of “negative common knowledge” that, we hope, sheds some light on the capacities of ordinary social actors to resist complex domination in those situations in which contingency has caused some social actors to radically doubt the validity of some (or most) societal norms. Finally, we argue that negative common knowledge provides the necessary initial foothold for non-authoritarian forms of *critique* and *engagement* in the context of complex domination, ones that are focused on preventing the closure of the space for substantive social change that contingency has opened, rather than aiming to provide ordinary social actors with blueprints for political action.

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The Diagnostic Potential of Boltanski’s Pragmatic Sociology of Critique

When reflecting upon the above mentioned contemporary political predicament of the impossibility of radical social change, one notices that at the heart of modern and ever more differentiated societies lies a peculiar paradox. Namely, if we take even a superficial look at today’s media discourse, it would undoubtedly seem to us that the world is constantly on the verge - if not in the midst - of profound (social) change. One would certainly not be wrong in having this impression, for it is hard to ignore the intensity of technological innovation, socio-economic crises and climate challenges at the start of this century. And yet, on the global scale political apathy remains ubiquitous, and is in fact on

the rise (Oxenham 2017). Consequently, taken at face value, one would also be safe to assume that when it comes to current socio-political regimes in fact nothing (truly) ever changes or is likely to change.¹ This paradox which presumes that change is both inevitable and impossible is the starting point of this paper. The first part of the paper will examine pragmatic modes of emancipation that were introduced by Luc Boltanski and try to argue that, although innovative, his understanding of the relation between contingency, emancipation and what he calls complex (or managerial) forms of domination has certain shortcomings in the conceptualization of common knowledge which cognitively fuels the “pragmatic critique”, as well as the overall social ontology which lies behind the subsequent acts of social engagement.

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Before we tackle some of the central issues, we first need to take a closer look at the aforementioned paradox of the impossibility and inevitability of social change that characterizes so many contemporary societies integrated into the global Post-Fordist capitalism. The paradox seems to be based on three largely co-determined structural factors. On the one hand, the neoliberal turn, which started in the eighties, displaced or largely cut-down the institutional framework of the welfare state that once enabled a collective response to social issues (i.e. state housing projects, free public education and healthcare, etc.) and instead introduced the Thatcherist variation of extreme individualism in which we are all only inherently competitive individuals (Greenhouse 2012; Wacquant 2009). This process of fragmentation was only exacerbated with the development of new forms of communication in the information era (Bennett 2003; Bennett 2012). In other words, it doesn't take much insight to see that we are getting increasingly more

¹ This is, for example, the normative credo of the regimes of so-called stabilitocracy currently present in some of the Western Balkans countries (Bieber 2018).

self-confined in various internet echo-chambers that are embedded in “the Feed” of various social media outlets.

For these reasons, it is increasingly more difficult to achieve common ground on even the most basic political issues. Finally, the increasing level of the fragmentation of modern society enables different forms of social domination through which structurally conditioned injustices (asymmetries of power between social actors) are reproduced. The phenomenon of *social domination*, which we will examine in more detail below, has the aim of furthering social fragmentation by negating or integrating various forms of *contingency* which inevitably occur during the course of (everyday) social interaction, as well as to impede or absorb any kind of critique of the current institutional order that could potentially enable isolated social actors to form groups which would foster a more disruptive collective agency.

Boltanski's Social Ontology

In recent years, Luc Boltanski has explored the logic of new forms of social domination in some detail, on the grounds of an original social-ontological perspective. In *On Critique* (2011), Boltanski develops a heuristically fruitful social-ontological distinction between the *world* and *reality*. He maintains that the reality pertains to those situations that are, at least to some degree, semantically certain in the sense that the occurrence of contingency is manageable with the categorial apparatus which is already present in the given social interaction. As he points out: “reality tends to coincide with what appears to hang together, in a sense by its own strength” (Boltanski 2011: 57) and “is invariably oriented towards permanence (or, if you prefer, the preservation of order)” (2011: 58). Conversely, the world

pertains to the incalculable that cannot be integrated in the current schemes of interpretation: “something of the world precisely manifests itself every time that events or experiences whose possibility - or, in the language of modern governance, ‘probability’ - had not been integrated into the pattern of reality, make themselves present in speech and/or accede to the register of action, whether individual or collective” (2011:58). In other words, reality can be seen as a subset of the infinite set called the world, and although we can expand this subset infinitely, the two can never be equal, that is, if we stick to the mathematical analogy, they can never have the same elements.²

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Boltanski’s main theoretical goal is to show that world and reality are incommensurable, and that the possibility of social change is created once the reality (inevitably) gets punctured by world, as well as that the scope of the social of change is proportional to the differential that is thus introduced into social reality. It is precisely through this differential that, during the course of our everyday life, we perceive contingency - which we colloquially refer to as “unpredicted circumstances” or “unforeseen consequences” of social action. Furthermore, as we shall see, Boltanski’s distinction between the world and reality will be very helpful in understanding how social engagement and critique emerge from contingency.

According to Boltanski, the fact that the contingency of social action is unavoidable has two important implications. First, the already institutionalized semiotic of social action is always trying to incorporate those new and experimental vocabularies of ordinary social actors which were developed after the world has unexpectedly entered into reality. In some sense, this resonates with standard (liberal) social dynamics: during the course of social life some of the

2 See also: Stones 2014; Susen 2014.

procedures, protocols, conventions which are relevant to a concrete situation fail us, and upon feeling the “unease of uncertainty”, we either choose to rationalize and cope with this fact, or, if the failure is severe enough, we might try to formulate a critique that aims to reveal those inner inconsistencies of the given procedure, protocols and conventions.³ The outcome of this act of critique can of course vary, but its scope always remains limited to the *modification* of the semantics and grammar of social life. This particularistic critique - which is based on “practical moments” as Boltanski calls them - is always inherently intersubjective, as it relies on the existing semantic resources in formulating the justification of its demands for institutional change. However, for that same reason it is more easily integrated into the current social order and is thus much more vulnerable to *social domination*.

In Boltanski’s perspective, domination means the neutralization of *critique* - of all processes that involve the questioning of the “reality of reality”, that is, the legitimacy of institutions by identifying the so-called “hermeneutic contradiction” that is inherent in every institution, its inability to completely subsume under itself the world, i.e. the contingency of action. For Boltanski, hermeneutic contradiction manifests itself in everyday life as a form of “unease”, which could only be “reduced if ... the semantic function of the institution genuinely had the power wholly to cover the field of experience and, as a result, abolish the multiplicity of points of view in favour of a single perspective that would end up saturating the field of significations” (Boltanski 2011: 87). Critique is for Boltanski an essential social activity, the basic complement of institutions, and can be practiced by all social actors, in other words it is not a privilege of intellectuals. Every social actor is capable of identifying the

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3 This is more in line with previous argumentation which Boltanski developed together with Luc Thévenot in *On Justification* (2006).

“hermeneutic contradiction” within institutional reality in the course of his or her everyday interactions - this is why *domination* is essential for maintaining the institutional reality in a given form. But if the world permeates reality, according to Boltanski, we are moving from the practical moments to the *metapragmatic* ones. In these instances of contingency, we have lost all of the semantic security that was guaranteed in practical moments, and find ourselves “head to head” with the incalculable nature of the world. Boltanski describes this encounter in the following way:

To distinguish them from moments that form part of a practical register, I propose to call metapragmatic moments those that are marked by an increase in the *level of reflexivity during which the attention of participants shifts from the task to be performed to the question of how it is appropriate to characterize what is happening*. The attention of the participants is then directed towards the action in common itself, its modalities, its conditions of possibility, the forms it is inscribed in. What people are in the process of doing, *as if they were doing it together, no longer seems self-evident*. (Boltanski 2011: 67) (emphasis added)

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As we can see, metapragmatic moments are constituted once we stop following pre-given rules and procedures of social life and start paying attention to the patterns of social interaction that the world has introduced into our everyday life. This more intensive and focused reflection on the rules, norms and procedures - that is the lack of their formalization - is the first aspect of any social engagement (the second being the actual social action towards the conservation or change of those rules, norms and procedures).⁴ Boltanski is of course more preoccupied with the

4 By “social engagement” we understand precisely this spectrum of ways in which the citizens of a given political community reflect on the norms and rules of social action (legally institutionalized, culturally dominant or specific to certain spheres of social action: professional, private or economic), which constitute the structure of their institutional reality, and ways in which they act, on the basis of this reflection, either in order to change parts of this institutional reality, or in order to reinforce them (see the Research Platform of the Group for Social Engagement Studies (Research Platform of Social Engagement Studies, 2018)).

progressive outcomes of social engagement and maintains that critique which is based on metapragmatic moments has a potential to bring about more radical modes of social engagement in which the totality of rules of social interaction are questioned or even denounced. This type of critique (or engagement) is also much more difficult to integrate into the current social order because its outcome is a radical *innovation* of the semantics and grammar of social life.

However, there are several important problems with Boltanski's account of metapragmatically founded critique. A crucial difficulty occurs once the contingency renders old rules and norms obsolete and the new ones lack proper vocabularies, since those who perceive this rupture in the reproduction of social reality can only, at least initially, act *as if* they are a group, which is to say that they need to attain the intersubjectivity of new norms and rules only as individuals who are actively trying to formulate them. In other words, it seems that, in Boltanskian sociology, the more the world permeates reality the less there is common ground and knowledge between the actors that would facilitate the formation of a socially engaged group. This is further exemplified in Boltanski's understanding of the so-called *existential test*⁵ through which radical critique challenges the validity of the given social world: "...existential tests must not be regarded as having been subject to a process of institutionalization, so that they retain an individual - or, as people say, 'lived' - character even when they affect a large

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5 Boltanski makes a distinction between three kinds of tests (*épreuve*). First, there are the truth tests which, through routine and ceremony, aim to "make visible the fact that there is a norm" (Boltanski 2011: 104) thus stabilizing the current normative order. Reality tests, on the other hand, refer to the "material" application of this symbolic order in the reality of social interaction. According to Boltanski, these tests also have mild "...disruptive effect, either by unmasking contradictions between various forms of normative expression, or by revealing dimensions of reality that might be called forgotten" (2011: 106). Finally, in this paper we will focus on the existential tests which go beyond the current normative order (and the other two tests that they issue) and aim to completely construct new institutions and new tests.

number of people, *but each of them taken in isolation. Only their sharing can confer a 'collective' character on them.*" (2011: 107)

But how is this sharing exactly to be attained? We find that, faced with this issue, Boltanski turns to a very problematic nominalistic account of the intersubjectivity of social critique.

That is why radical critique is frequently based, at least in its early stages, on expressions used in forms of creation - such as poetry, the plastic arts or the novel - where it is socially more or less permissible... And this is perhaps also why philosophy, when it seeks to release critique from the iron cage of reality, often initially looks for its subject matter to an analysis of the work performed by writers on language itself, in such a way as to inscribe their uniqueness in it... But what philosophy does with writers is precisely what the sociology of critique intends to do with ordinary people, by working to make their existential experiences visible and intelligible (Boltanski 2011: 108)

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As we can see, Boltanski's strategy seems to go as follows: during the course of our everyday life we encounter situations where the world in varying degrees ruptures reality. Through existential tests - that is when the reality fails them - we see beyond the current semantics. But even when this happens, we are still far from emancipation because these experiences are idiosyncratic and therefore cannot be mutually shared as some sort of a starting point of a radically new semantic. This is why, according to Boltanski, we need pragmatic sociology to interconnect these particular instances of emancipation caused by contingency, and thus provide fully intelligible radical critique which is not paternalistic and epistemologically authoritarian. However, this means that the radical critique (and engage-

ment) always remains an “aggregate of the actors’ idiosyncrasies” in Boltanski’s sociology, because the inherently particularistic “existential encounters with the world” can never constitute a common knowledge. In fact, it is only through the work of sociologists that these dispersed idiosyncrasies can ever become interconnected and mature into a radical critique. This makes the formation of radically engaged groups extremely difficult, since it is not clear how this aggregate might develop any form of reciprocity in using their own cognitive capacities which was the main goal of the “pragmatic turn” in sociology.

Complex Domination and the Impossibility of Critique

Hence, it seems that although Boltanski provides useful analytical tools for exploring the relation of contingency and radical, epistemologically non-authoritarian critique, he fails to provide the ontological conditions of social engagement that will follow from the epistemology which introduces the very possibility of this type of everyday radical critique. And so we might, in Boltanskian terms, ask: is there a way in which social actors might relate to each other in order to engage reality? This question becomes particularly important in light of Boltanski’s argument that we are today witnessing, within the contemporary political communities characterized by high degrees of economic and societal development, what he calls regimes of “complex domination”. While critique exposes the hermeneutic contradiction, the goal of standard forms of domination is to *mask* it - either through direct repression of critique or some form of ideology (semantic incorporation of elements of the world which does not admit that there is a disconti-

nity between reality and the world). *Complex domination*, on the other hand, does not negate the difference between world and reality (hermeneutic contradiction) - it attempts to show that the institutional reality is perfectly capable of absorbing all elements that emerge from the world without transforming itself radically.⁶

In Boltanski's account, complex domination unfolds primarily by means of "expert" or "managerial" authority - institutional spokespersons who hold the authority of experts are, within regimes of complex domination, those who have successfully arrogated to themselves an epistemologically privileged insight into the world itself (managers, technocrats, scientists). As Boltanski argues,

In a regime of domination of this type, the systems that ensure domination are not geared to slowing down change or incorporating it in such a form that it can be denied as such. On the contrary, they are based on the argument of constant change, while arrogating to themselves the privilege of interpreting it, thereby providing themselves with the possibility of propelling it in a direction favourable to the preservation of existing asymmetries and forms of exploitation. This process is made possible because institutions are grounded in a form of authority - that of experts - which aims to situate itself at the point of non-distinction between reality and the world (Boltanski 2011: 136).

When the contingency of everyday interaction ruptures institutional reality - whether it be a car collision at a crossroads or the financial breakdown of 2008 - the experts are tasked with interpreting this element of the "world" that has broken into reality and determining the right course of institutional modification (but never radical transformation). This is why Boltanskian sociology is useful for understand-

6 Complex domination is formative for the so-called "new spirit of capitalism" which, according to Boltanski and Chiapello, anticipates and incorporates particularistic modes of critique (Boltanski & Chiapello 2007; Chiapello & Fairclough 2002).

ing the paradoxical fact that “change becomes both inevitable and impossible”, a fact that accompanies the regimes of complex domination. It is inevitable because of the inevitable rupturing of institutional reality by the contingency of the world; it is impossible because the institutional reality itself (spokespersons) accepts the existence of contingency but claims a privileged insight into it, which means that only the existing institutions can be the “solution” to the problems caused by the world itself. Boltanski points out that regimes of complex domination are capable of producing the impression that the institutional reality itself is more dynamic and reflexive than the very forms of critique that challenge them:

This way of controlling critique, by incorporating it, is reinforced by the fact that domination through change itself identifies with the critique of which it deprives those who would like to oppose it. But it identifies with an internal critique, constructed in the image of scientific disputes between those who are the exclusive possessors of the requisite authority, licensed by their competence, or rather their titles, to give a relevant opinion (Boltanski 2011: 137).

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The 2008 crisis and its aftermath in the European Union exemplify the logic of complex domination in a particularly acute way. In trying to deal with the crisis, to close the gap between the world and the institutional reality that it has opened, institutional spokespersons employed both the vocabulary of the more conventional, “ideological” domination and the more effective vocabulary of complex domination. Consider the following example which illustrates the difference between ideological and complex domination:

Margaret has worked hard all her life and played by all the institutional rules, but loses her job as result of a crisis caused by strange economic processes that have nothing to

do with her own profession - something “improbable” has happened in Boltanski’s terms, and Margaret does not quite know how to explain this to herself with the given semantics (vocabularies of justification).

1) Standard ideological domination would involve statements such as: for decades, the society in which Margaret lives has “lived beyond its means”, it was spending more than it was producing (welfare state, “parasites”, etc.), including Margaret herself, so that “the bubble had to eventually burst” - in the end, there was no contingency, there is a reason for the crisis that fits into the ideological narrative. Now, for this reason we have to introduce austerity measures - people will have to lose jobs, but the “best” ones will keep them (meritocracy). In other words, it must in the end be Margaret’s own fault that she did not after all keep her job, even in these difficult but understandable circumstances. In this case, theoretically informed critique can effectively challenge ideological domination by pointing to the fact that the causal explanation of the crisis in the ideological narrative is wrong, and that, therefore, what happened to Margaret is deeply unjust.

2) Complex domination works somewhat differently - it does not negate the contingency and normative deficiency of what happened to Margaret. What happened to Margaret is indeed a product of contingency, the crisis was caused by certain economic processes that have nothing to do with her. The crisis itself is not “deserved” by the broader society, it is indeed a product of contingent economic forces - in other words, there is a high degree of injustice and institutional deficiency at play. However, since these contingent economic processes are so complex, only experts (technocrats) within institutions can understand them and devise appropriate solutions that would prevent similar occurrences in the future. In the end, the imperfect and unjust

institutional reality is still the best means we have for solving the problem that contingency has created.

Boltanski's perspective, in our view, manages to correctly grasp the logic of the neutralization of critique that has emerged over the last decades. To put it in pragmatist terms, Boltanski offers us innovative theoretical tools for explaining to ourselves our own feeling of "apathy", of the impossibility of radical social change in the contemporary world (epitomized, for example, in the omnipresent rhetorical question "can we imagine a viable alternative to the market society?"). However, Boltanski's individualism when it comes to the possibility of an intersubjective articulation of radical critique implies that there really is no way of challenging complex domination. This is due to the fact that, in regimes of complex domination every rupturing of the institutional reality by contingency (the world) is, on the one hand, "interpreted" by institutional spokespersons (experts) while, on the other, it can only be experienced by individual social actors idiosyncratically.

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Possibility of Critique: Contingency and Negative Common Knowledge

Boltanski's diagnosis of late capitalism in terms of complex domination posits a radical asymmetry of power between the institutional spokespersons and ordinary actors when it comes to the possibility of articulating critique and engaging for social change. On the one hand, this seems to be empirically corroborated by current empirical reality - on the other, it runs counter to Boltanski's own imperative of treating ordinary actors as intelligent and capable of unmasking even complicated forms of social domination. A crucial question that his diagnosis thus opens is: can social

actors really experience the radical uncertainty created by the rupture of the world into reality only idiosyncratically, or could there be a kind of “immediate intersubjective understanding” between social actors even in this kind of uncertainty and - most importantly - what would be the political implications of this intersubjectivity.

For tackling this question, we need to turn to alternative social ontologies such as that of Margaret Gilbert who, in her *Sociality and Responsibility*, defines *common knowledge* and *joint commitment* as key notions for collective social action. Gilbert argues that joint commitment comes into being when, roughly speaking, each of the parties has expressed his or her personal willingness to be party to it in conditions of common knowledge. That is, it is *common knowledge* between the parties that each of them has expressed his or her personal willingness to be a party to the joint commitment (Gilbert 2000: 40).⁷ The important point here is that all members of the group *G* *internally* know *p*, or as Gilbert states: if *p* is “out in the open” (*ibid.*) in the group *G*.

Now the really interesting question is whether an element from Boltanski’s world can ever be formulated as *p*, that is as Gilbert’s common knowledge - for example if, after some disruptive effect caused by the inherent contingency of action, we maintain that *p* stands for “the rule *R* doesn’t make sense anymore”. In other words, can there be something

7 There have been several important accounts of common knowledge that have been developed in game theory and logic. First introduced (in its philosophical variation) by David Lewis (1969), this term refers to a specific kind of knowledge that a group of agents might have. Namely, while some more colloquial notions like that of mutual knowledge simply refer to the fact that one or more agents know *p*, common knowledge refers to those situations where all agents within a group *G* know that they know *p*, they all know that they all know and so on ad infinitum (for more on defining common knowledge in set-theoretic and game-theoretic terms see also (Friedell 1969) and (Gilbert 1992, Chapter 3, 2000). It is interesting to notice here that although each of the members of the group might individually know the same thing, the fact that that everyone knows that each member of *G* knows the same thing (this is, as Gilbert points out, what constitutes that the knowledge is “out in the open”) brings useful new information to the group *G*.

like a “negative” common knowledge that would provide a foundation for critique in regimes of complex domination? In regimes of simple domination, the inability of the institutional reality to react to the rupture otherwise than to negate it or attempt an ideological explanation leaves enough room in Boltanski’s perspective for the actors’ individual experiences to gradually become “aggregated” and for the actors to form a radically engaged collective. But in a regime of complex domination, there simply is no room (time) for this process of aggregation, as the institutional reality reacts to the rupture in more efficient ways (the admitting of contingency and injustice combined within an expert account of the event) and offers to the confused social actors generalized narratives (tools) for explaining to themselves their own experiences of existential discomfort before these can be articulated into normative claims.

In complex domination, radical critique (and radically engaged collectives) could only emerge on the basis of an *immediate intersubjective* understanding about the nature of the rupture of reality by world - in other words, to come back to Margaret Gilbert, critique needs a foothold in something that we have termed the “negative common knowledge” that the rule R (or the totality of rules Tr) does not make sense any more. In Boltanski’s perspective, we can only have negative *mutual* knowledge of this kind, a state in which the rupture of the world into reality causes a number of individuals to experience, each in her own idiosyncratic way, that the rule R doesn’t make sense any more. In our understanding, Boltanski does not recognize the potential of everyday language to provide an initial “negative intersubjectivity” between these actors that provides an initial unifying thread for these otherwise idiosyncratic experiences. Consider the following brief example: a very serious traffic accident happens on a crossroads X, the kind

of accident that puts in question not only the existing traffic regulations on the crossroads, but the much wider network of social rules pertaining to traffic and urban planning.

While social actors could easily communicate their experiences of the accident regarding truth tests and reality tests (modifications of the existing regulations at the crossroads - installing a traffic light or limiting speed), those actors who also formulate their individual existential tests in this situation have much more difficulty communicating their experience that the wider network of rules has somehow been challenged by the accident - these experiences are framed by their different ideological and cultural backgrounds, their class positions, etc. For example, some of these actors might be left-leaning and come to think that cars should be abolished in urban traffic in favour of free public transportation, others might be neoliberal and think that the existing urban planning and traffic regulations produce irresponsible and dependent subjects who are not capable of thinking creatively in difficult and unpredictable situations, such as the one on the crossroads X, etc. But even though their perspectives on the rupture of the world into reality that the accident on the crossroads has caused seem incommensurable, their *mutual* knowledge that the totality of rules regarding traffic (Tr) doesn't make sense any more ($Mkn = Tr < S$) can be transformed into a "negative common knowledge" about this totality ($NCkn = Tr < S$) by way of placing the knowledge "out in the open" - by way of *declaring* (D) that $Tr < S$. In other words, $NCkn = Mkn \times D$, so that now both our socialist and our neoliberal actor *know that each of them knows* that the totality of the rules of traffic doesn't make sense any more, that $Tr < S$. Now why does this modest "negative common knowledge", namely the fact that actors with seemingly incommensurable perspectives can at least agree that rules no longer make sense, possess

emancipatory potential in the context of Boltanskian complex domination? In our understanding, negative common knowledge is a crucial bulwark against the intervention of the institutional spokespersons who wish to close the gap between the world and reality by offering expert narratives to isolated social actors in order for them to make sense of what has happened. In our example, complex domination would function as follows: institutional spokespersons, such as experts on traffic regulations (E), intervene in the aftermath of the accident in such a manner as to acknowledge that the world has indeed ruptured reality and that changes need to be introduced not just in the limited context of the crossroads, but in the wider network of rules - however, this wider network (Wr) must necessarily be narrower than the totality of rules Tr that our socialist and neoliberal actors (A1 and A2) have in mind. In Boltanski's perspective, the experts would have little problem in convincing both actors A1 and A2, as there is no negative common knowledge between them, only mutual knowledge:

A1 -----Wr-----E----Wr----- A2

However, if there is minimal common knowledge, NCKn, in other words, if one or both of the actors have declared that the totality of rules no longer make sense, both actors will not be satisfied with the Wr proposal, *because they will both share the awareness that not just Wr, but Tr < S*:

A1 -----Wr-----E----Wr----- A2

|-----|

NCKn = Tr < S

This of course does not mean that the power of experts to close the gap between world and reality has been neutralized, it simply means that a crucial "opening" for critique and engagement is created through negative common

knowledge. Whether, and in what ways, this opening can be utilized depends, in our view, on the existence of *non-authoritarian forms of engagement*, on which we briefly reflect below.

Conclusion: The Role of Non-Authoritarian Engagement

The opening for social change that negative common knowledge creates is precarious for several reasons. First of all, the seemingly incommensurable experiences of actors A1 and A2 (socialist and neoliberal) that the totality of rules Tr no longer make sense do not seem to hold much promise of reaching any kind of “positive” common knowledge, i.e. an understanding about how to collectively act in order to change the totality of rules. Second, there are two kinds of “threats” to the opening that come from “reality” in Boltanski’s sense:

1) the first is the already mentioned power of institutional spokespersons, experts, to finally succeed in convincing both our actors that the proposed change to the wider network of rules (Wr) is the only legitimate solution. Wr remains a powerful tool of neutralizing critique even in the context of negative common knowledge, precisely because the actors with very different experiences of Tr cannot easily reach any kind of positive intersubjectivity. This means that the experts can always present Wr as a “scientific”, “non-ideological” solution to the crisis, especially if they incorporate elements of both actors’ worldviews. This is the continued “threat of complex domination”.

2) the second threat comes from what might be termed “commonsense quasi-theories” (see Prodanović 2017) that constitute much of our “weakly institutionalized” (culturally dominant) semantics of everyday interaction. Quasi-the-

ories are metaphysically laden vocabularies about social actors and reality that play a crucial role in reducing the uncertainty about the “reality of reality”, to use Boltanski’s terms, and constitute the “everyday” complement of institutional reality strictly speaking (formally institutionalized rules of interaction). We use the term “quasi-theory” because this kind of vocabulary must lay some sort of claim to positivistically grounded truth (often science or direct observation, compared to, for example, some kind of “theoretical mumbo-jumbo” of “leftists, feminists, cosmopolitans, etc”). Quasi-theories are exemplified by statements such as “Women are bad drivers (this is scientifically proven)”, or “non-European immigrants simply do not have the same standards of civilized behaviour as we do (this can be verified through direct observation)”.

Now let us turn back to the above example with the cross-roads accident to briefly illustrate how the combined threats 1) and 2) work in complement to close the opening for critique and social change created by the negative common knowledge about Tr. Let’s say that the driver who caused the accident was a non-European immigrant, and let’s also introduce actor A3, who is a racist. Our racist actor immediately offers a quasi-theoretical explanation of the accident that aims to reduce the radical uncertainty that surrounds our neoliberal and socialist actors A1 and A2: the accident happened because non-European immigrants cannot be disciplined drivers.

Now, neither A1 or A2 are racists, but they are not immune to this kind of statements either - there is a lingering threat that they might adopt this explanation in order to reduce their own sense of unease created by uncertainty, and because they have difficulties reaching any kind of understanding between themselves. But - there is an even more promising alternative to uncertainty, one that even carries

a sort of “premium of cultural distinction”, in Bourdieu’s terms: namely, the experts’ (E) proposal Wr . It carries a premium of distinction because, by endorsing Wr , $A1$ and $A2$ can *distinguish themselves from $A3$ as anti-racists*. This, in our view, is a crucial component of complex domination not elaborated by Boltanski - the ability of the institutional spokespersons to present their own narrative as “superior” to various forms of quasi-theory that claim the role of “critique” of institutional reality (think of the so-called “radical centrism” that is now the main political contender of right-wing populism in much of Europe and America). So $A1$ and $A2$ now find themselves in-between the regime of complex domination and quasi-theory, where the latter two work in a complementary fashion to close the opening and reinforce institutional reality. Thus, the full model of complex domination in situations of radical uncertainty, where negative common knowledge is “attacked from both sides”, so to say, looks like this:

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(Wr) E---A1-----A2-----A3 (Quasi-theory)

$NK_{kn} = Tr < S$

When we consider this extended logic of complex domination, it is not difficult to see what kind of engagement is most suitable to countering the “two threats” to negative common knowledge that the totality of rules no longer makes sense. It is the form of non-authoritarian engagement that can simultaneously criticize the expert side (E) for the epistemological authoritarianism of Wr , and the quasi-theory side (A3) for essentialism (normative particularism). In other words, forms of engagement that aim to keep open the gap between world and reality and the possibility that actors $A1$ and $A2$ could gradually transform their negative common knowledge into a positive one. Forms of non-authoritarian social and political theory (neo-pragma-

tism, contemporary critical theory, Boltanski's pragmatic sociology of critique, etc.) can be fruitful in informing this kind of engagement. Engaged actors informed by such perspectives could persuasively argue in situations such as the crossroads accident against both expert narratives and quasi-theory by interconnecting distant elements of human experience (Dewey 1929; 1948) - for example, showing, contra E, that a much wider network of rules than Wr, namely Tr, is implicated in the accident, and at the same time fighting the prejudice of A3 by showing that his own quasi-theory about immigrant drivers serves precisely to reinforce Tr, an institutional system that justifies exploitation and class inequalities through racism and nationalism.

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The Good and the Best: Being Realistic about Social Change¹

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*“Were it not sinful then, striving to mend,
To mar the subject that before was well?”*

Shakespeare, Sonnet 103

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Introduction

An old Italian proverb, referenced by Voltaire in *La Bégueule*, states that ‘the best is the enemy of the good’ (Voltaire 1877: 50). The idea is that perfection is difficult to reach, and by striving for it we may overlook small incremental improvements which are feasible right away. Indeed, in some cases, calls for wildly utopian social changes may compromise other feasible improvements, and ironically end up preserving the *status quo*.

This intuition, I take it, is at the core of the quite common idea that being a realist is a good thing in the political world, although many may contest what such realism actually requires.

1 Earlier drafts of this paper were presented at the University of Manchester (MANCEPT 2016), at the University of Milan (Political Philosophy Seminar) and at the University of Pavia (Mercoledì Filosofici del Maino). I thank all participants for their insightful comments and helpful discussion.

A recent literature has developed around the question what it means to do realist political theory: designing a normative theory, which avoids being as “moralistic” (Williams 2005: 5) as much of the philosophical tradition inspired by John Rawls (Rawls 1971; Nozick 1974; Cohen 2008). Moralism is the idea that proper political philosophy is a sort of “applied ethics” (Geuss 2008: 6): you start from a general theory of what people owe to each other, and then you deductively apply it to political problems. This moralism is criticised by realists on a methodological level and on a substantive level.

On a methodological level, the moralistic attitude is deemed unsatisfactory for two reasons (Horton 2010). First, it conceives politics in a way that is very distant from our commonsensical understanding of it: roughly as the realm where we politely exchange public reasons about what justice demands. As a consequence, important features of actual political life occupy only a marginal role (e.g. parties, electoral systems, power asymmetries, etc). Second, moralism applies moral standards devised under idealized assumptions to political contexts (Sangiovanni 2016), which are collective and involve the exercise of coercive political power (Sangiovanni 2008). As such, its normative recommendations fail to offer relevant guidance in the strategic interactions of the real world (Schmidtz 2016).

Moralism is also found deficient on a substantive level because of its focus on demanding moral ideals like justice, fairness, freedom and equality. This takes for granted other essential political goods like peace (Gray 2002; Wendt 2013) and legitimacy (Rossi 2012; Sleat 2013).

However, in this paper I assume a different perspective: I ask what it means for an actor to act in a realist way in politics. This position might very well be called common-sense realism, because it closely resembles our intuition about the way the concept is used to criticise political agents.

I am not asking how should good political *institutions* be realistically arranged². I am rather asking how should good political *actors* realistically behave. This approach relates closely to the concerns of classical realists. The key point of Machiavelli's realism is to present itself as a better guide to political actors than the idealistic "*specula principis*", which were catalogues of virtues and vices meant to educate princes. Machiavelli mostly focused on political action, and never explicitly assumed an institutional perspective. He never theorized about the best form of government, for example, to the point that the question of whether he favoured a republican government, as it seems from his *Discourses* or the prince, as it appears from the homonymous book, is still debated (Baron 1961). Machiavelli was rather more interested in the individual perspective: his claim is that the political actors should not be bound by the laws of Christian morality, common at his time (Berlin 1972). In this guise, I want to inquire what it might mean today for political actors to be realists.

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In this, I aim to counter a common misconception, that realism is necessarily status quo bias. On the contrary, realism is the most effective way to pursue social change. This approach has more to do with the way in which one acts politically, rather than the ends one pursues. The goal itself may be ambitious, and even demand radical reforms (Rossi 2015), but one ought to pursue it in a realistic way.

The Importance of Realizing Preferences

In a basic sense, a realist is someone who is strongly committed to realize his own preferences. This assumption captures the "seriousness" about one's own desires towards which many realists are sensitive. This concern, for example,

is beautifully captured by Max Weber, in his *Politics as a Vocation*:

For mere passion, however sincerely felt, is not enough in itself. It cannot make a politician of anyone, unless service to a 'cause' also means that a sense of responsibility toward that cause is made the decisive guiding light of action (Weber 2004: 77).

For a political realist, there is no value in holding the right ideal, if one fails in trying to make the world resemble it. If we truly value equality, for example, we should be acting in a way that aims to increase equality. The thought is that valuing equality means acting in a way that makes our world approximate it.

This view starkly contrasts with political philosophers of idealistic orientation, who believe, for instance, that “the question for political philosophy is not what to do but what to think, even when what we should think makes no practical difference” (Cohen 2008: 268). Under this reading valuing equality means believing equality is the right way to *think* about social relationships, even though one does nothing to make the actual world more equal in practice. On the contrary, realists start from a very practical concern, and try to characterize how a political actor should behave, not what they should believe. This point cannot unfortunately be persuasively argued here, but it is widely assumed in the realist literature. Following this tradition, this paper will instead inquire how we should realistically pursue social change, not what idealized social state is better.

In this paper, I interpret this realist assumption - the practical orientation to realize one's own preferences - as a “meta-preference” that political actors are presumed to have. If you desire walking in the park you must also be willing to sometimes take a walk in the said park. This is not a particularly extraordinary claim. In isolation from other confound-

ing variables, a preference for something must imply an inclination to do it. Of course, eventual costs could directly affect the choice of whether to do it, even though I maintain an inclination for it. If the park institutes an expensive entry fee, I might not be willing to walk there anymore, even if I would still enjoy it if it were free. Clearly, if the realization of one's goal counts against some other goal that outweighs the first, it is reasonable to wish it not realized.

One might argue that this meta-preference is already part of the concept of preference itself. Some philosophers do believe that "it is tautologous that we have reasons to do what serves our ends" (Schmidtz 2014). However, the concept of meta-preference has more controversial implications: in conjunction with an external reality that limits our freedom to satisfy our preferences, it can be used to filter out those preferences we should not seek to realize. If some preference cannot be realized, then our meta-preference puts forward a 'second order' (Frankfurt 1988: 21) claim to abandon our first-order preferences or to reformulate them in realizable terms. This is sometimes called "strong evaluation" (Taylor 1977), i.e. the idea that qualitative differences among desires commonly interfere with a simple and straightforward weighing of preferences.

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Suppose I want everybody to earn more than the average. Given the mathematical definition of "average", this peculiar preference is mathematically impossible to realize. Thus, the meta-preference would, under this interpretation, give me a decisive reason to abandon it. If everybody earns more than the average cannot logically be realized as a state of affairs, it obviously contrasts with the meta-preference and cannot be valuable in a practical realist perspective. Other examples that involve weaker kinds of impossibilities might be more controversial.

An interesting case is Aesop's notorious fable: 'The Fox and the Grapes' (Aesop 1998). Does the impossibility of reaching the grapes count as a reason for the fox to abandon her preference (Elster 1985)? If there is no physical way for the fox to get the grapes, the intuition behind the previous mathematical example should carry the same force here. Of course, this case is more problematic from an epistemic point of view, as there is no way in practice to know that the grapes are beyond reach with the same mathematical certainty of the previous example. It might be the case that the fox is discounting some concealed means to do it and, if she suspects this, she might have reasons not to discard her preference so easily and keep trying to reach the grapes. Yet suppose by assumption that getting the grapes is not just difficult but truly physically impossible for the fox, it would follow that she should yield to her meta-preference and abandon her preference for the grapes.

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While reality tells me which means are available, the meta-preference tells me that I ought not to pursue goals for which no means are available. This is not universally recognized, as even among political realists some believe that realism can be utopian (Geuss 2016) and that it can legitimately "demand the impossible" (Rossi 2015). While this paper won't vindicate such a strong conclusion, it will defend the claim that realism is indeed the best way to pursue radical social change.

Deliberating about Courses of Actions

If we care about realizing our preferences, we should not think of our preferences as ideal end-states disconnected from the actions available in the current context. Rather, we should deliberate about courses of action:

*Course of action = end-state*P + means + consequences*

As the formula states, the desired end-state makes up for only part of the value of a course of action. There are three other elements to consider: its likelihood of success, the means involved, and its likely consequences. Whenever we merely ponder the desired final state of affairs, we do not act realistically and risk failure in realizing our goals.

Imagine I am considering whether to become a professor of philosophy or an astronaut. Comparing end-states (being a professor vs. being an astronaut) is only part of the story, as their practical value cannot be properly assessed, if I do not factor in also the likelihood of success, the means involved and its likely consequences. I might in isolation consider being an astronaut much more satisfying and enjoyable than being a professor. However, when I need to decide how to act, other considerations immediately become relevant.

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First, I need to consider which means are available to become an astronaut. Floating in space may sound enticing but knowledge of astrophysics is required to become an astronaut. If I really hate math, becoming an astronaut involves costly means. Such means can impose a significant burden on the value of the whole course of action, to the point that it becomes open to question if the costs are outweighed by the goal. With respect of social change, if some desired reform requires drastic violence to be implemented, we should at least consider whether it is worth doing. This consideration echoes the famous saying: “you can’t make an omelette without breaking eggs”.

Second: likelihood of success. The most effective means available are still not guaranteed to land a success. Thus, selecting a course of action involves discounting the value of the end-state by the probability of reaching it. Becoming an astronaut might be more difficult than becoming a professor, and thus choosing a course of action must reflect

what is technically called expected utilities: the value of the goal, discounted by the probability of getting it. Moreover, it might be hard to backtrack on a course of action. If I happen to already have a PhD in philosophy, it would be much costlier for me to become an astronaut than it would be if I were fresh out of high school. This is an important consideration when pursuing social change, because choosing the less likely option often involves the risk of realizing neither. However, this does not mean that ambitious improvements are never worth striving for, just that we should balance their desirability against their likelihood.

Finally, pursuing a course of action might also lead to other foreseeable consequences, which can add or subtract to its value. For example, a likely consequence of being an astronaut might be spending a lot of time away from one's family. Another, possibly more discomfoting consequence, is that of dying in a space accident. Even if the chance of a lethal accident is not particularly severe, living on a space station would still be more dangerous than going to *most* classrooms. Consequences need not only be negative. Suppose that I really like the fame that being an astronaut brings about: this would obviously raise the value of the course of action.

I think the reader can easily discern for himself how the frivolous example of the astronaut can be substituted with more serious and controversial questions taken from the political domain. Was Lincoln wrong in buying other politicians' votes to get slavery abolished? Was the Italian government wrong in refusing to negotiate with terrorists and letting its kidnapped Prime Minister Aldo Moro be murdered? Was Andreotti wrong in commissioning bloody false-flag terrorist attacks against his country, to alienate popular support from a party that planned to turn it into a dictatorship? Was Robespierre wrong in liberally using the guillotine to

preserve the republic from monarchical restoration? Was Cesare Borgia wrong in terrorizing the people of Romagna, to prevent political decay and civil war? All these dramatic questions, I claim, have no clear-cut answers, but depend highly on the context. For a realist, the means are not always justified by ends, consequences do not always justify means, and principles do not categorically exclude the use of means. Each element needs to be contextually balanced against the other.

This interpretation explains the realist intuition that political judgments ought to be contextual. Bernard Williams for example famously questioned philosophers who like to play “Kant at the court of King Arthur” (Williams 2005: 10). Similarly, Raymond Geuss comments that “political philosophy must recognize that politics is in the first instance about action and the contexts of action, not about mere beliefs or propositions” (Geuss 2008: 11). Both means and consequences are extremely variable throughout time and space. Since their assessment is essential to choosing between courses of action, it is a foolish endeavour trying to discuss the merit of end-states without reference to the particular context. Moreover, in order to appropriately evaluate means in a given state, it is paramount to consider where one is at the present moment.

Deliberation among courses of action may resemble an instrumental calculus of the best means for whatever (pre-rationally) chosen end. Some political philosophers, like Thomas Hobbes and David Hume, did in fact share this instrumental view of rationality, now common among game-theorists. Indeed, classical political realists have often been seen as supporters of this instrumental version of rationality (Herzog 2008). Undeniably, deliberating about courses of action shares some similarities with Humean instrumental rationality. Both accounts are, in fact,

subjectivist about value: they do not seek to establish the value of ends in any objective way, beside what the subject attributes to them. However, by taking into account means and consequences, this realistic outlook provides a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between preferences and reality. Indeed, deliberating about courses of action constrains the subjectivity of preferences, by revealing how goals themselves are not merely taken as fixed, but enter the calculation and are rebalanced against other elements in two ways.

First, actors should rationally revise their ends in light of other goals they might have. If one goal is necessarily incompatible with another goal, then I need to evaluate which one I care about the most. Suppose I like bachelor's freedom, yet I am really in love with someone. I cannot consistently pursue both ends: I need to revise one or the other. As Robert Nozick notes:

one tiny step beyond Hume, not something he need resist, I think, are the constraints on how preferences hang together [...] Contemporary decision theory takes this one step beyond Hume: although it does not say that any individual preference is irrational, it does say that a group of them together can be (Nozick 1994: 140)

Second, realistic deliberation is slightly heavier than instrumental rationality, because it does not simply require decisions to be consistent with a set of goals, but also with the real world which weighs on our choices by establishing means, consequences and likelihoods independently from what we want them to be. Again, the decision about what to do partly hinges on the constraints that reality casts on our preferences.

In practice the relation between ends, means, consequences and likelihood of success can be seen as a kind of

“reflective equilibrium” (Rawls 1971: 18). By focusing on courses of action rather than on ideal states we accept to rebalance how strongly we seek to pursue the intended goal in light of its means and consequences. We adjust the value of all parts of courses of action until they are in equilibrium.

Mistakes in Deliberation

Deliberation among courses of action allows us to isolate unrealistic modes of social engagement. I shall briefly highlight seven ideal-types³ of political mistakes⁴: fanatic, saint, naïve, ineffective, wishful, self-deceptive and akratic agents:

Neglect of part of the course of action

Fanatic

Fails to consider the costs of means and consequences

Saint

Fails to consider the benefit of end-states

Naïve

Fails to consider likelihood of success

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Mistakes in evaluating the course of action

Wishful

Knowledge of means and consequences, distorted by preferences

Ineffective

Fails to acquire available knowledge of means and consequences

Self-deceptive

Knowledge of his own preferences, distorted by other preferences

Irrelevant courses of action

Akratic

Fails to act on his correct deliberation

3 These flaws only approximate empirical cases, and are by no means mutually exclusive. For example, a saint might also be naïve, while a fanatic might also be wishful.

4 While these kinds of failures are ubiquitous in human life, they are particularly grave in political arena (Galeotti 2018). I will however discuss cases from ordinary life for explanatory purposes.

Let us now consider each failure in more detail.

Fanatic

A fanatic is a political actor who does not deliberate on the full course of action, but focuses exclusively on the value of his favoured end-state. Consequently, the cost of means and consequences, however grave, escapes his evaluation and makes him willing to sacrifice anything for his goal. Any means become permissible and beyond scrutiny in light of the final goal. The irrationality of the fanatic stems from his inability to reassess the value of his end in light of the costs of its means. Yet if the fanatic truly wishes to realize what he wants, he needs to factor means and consequences in his decisions as well. A fanatic is thus someone who is so committed to some idea that he is willing to disregard his other interests (Hare 1977).

A typical example of a fanatic is someone who supports a bloody revolution. Yet not any rebel is a fanatic, only those that do so without considering the means they employ. Someone who attentively ponders the course of action, but finds out that some distasteful means are indeed outweighed by the value of his end, would not count as a fanatic. The crucial element is to enter the political calculus of means, ends and consequences. Realists do not criticize the goals chosen by fanatic actors, nor the extreme means they employ. Rather, they condemn the fanatic's refusal to reconsider his goal with respect to the means that such a goal requires and the consequences it carries. Fanatics are so absorbed by their goals that they do not enter the deliberation on courses of action at all. Even if they do enter the deliberation, they usually do so only formally to seek confirmations for their goals rather than with the critical attitude to revise their end-states in light of the means and consequences.

A good historical example of fanaticism might be Robespierre, who during the French Revolution was so devoted to the ideals of the republic that he was willing to use the terror of the guillotine to secure it. Robespierre was a fanatic “striving to establish his authority over men’s minds, and to accomplish this he was ready, if necessary, to pass over the dead bodies of his opponents” (Kropotkin 1927: 551). He did not consider the costs of terror, nor its consequences, but focused exclusively on the value of its end-state: the republic. Of course, historical accounts are necessarily imperfect, and other scholars doubt that he was a fanatic. In fact, under some accounts Robespierre is viewed as a skilled judge willing to discriminate between those who were counter-revolutionaries and those who had merely been misled (Rudé 1991). This example shows that it is not always easy to assess fanaticism from the outside, but the crucial point of the argument stands: if one wants to realize his preferences, one should avoid reasoning like a fanatic.

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Saint

The type of political behaviour most criticised by political realists is acting saintly. The previous argument offers us a way to highlight what precisely is wrong with saints. A saint focuses exclusively on means, ignoring end-states which are only realizable employing “forbidden” means. The problem is the same as with the fanatic: a fixation on a single part of the course of action and the refusal to balance it against other considerations. For this reason, this behaviour has been qualified the “fanaticism of means” (Pontara 1974).

Consider Machiavelli’s remarks about Christian ethics (Berlin 1972). According to their moral doctrine, a good Christian would refuse to use violent means regardless of the goal. He would rather “turn the other cheek” to their offender. However, politics requires the occasional use of violence. Only a bad politician always avoids using vio-

lence. This does not mean that one can use violence lightly. On the contrary, an “economy of violence” is encouraged in Machiavelli’s thought, because violence is costly. The point is to be prepared to do “evil” when the situation requires it, i.e. when the end-state and consequences warrant it. True Christians would never consider the benefits of being evil, and would avoid doing so at all costs. Thus, Christians might make good men, but poor politicians. Weber gave a good description of this type of error:

you must be a saint in all respects or at least want to be one; you must live like Jesus, the apostles, St. Francis, and their like, and then this ethic will make sense and be the expression of true dignity. But not otherwise. For if, following this unworldly ethic of love, you ought to ‘resist not him that is evil with violence’ - the politician must abide by the opposite commandment: ‘You shall use force to resist evil, for otherwise you will be responsible for its running amok’ (Weber 2004: 82)

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Note however that the categorical refusal to employ violence can in some context be effective: Mantena for example argued that Gandhian non-violence was a realist strategy (Mantena 2012). In the context of a liberal democracy peaceful resistance may appeal to others and be a strong engine for political change. Conversely, using violence in a democratic regime usually delegitimizes one’s own position and may have the opposite effect. The context, again, is crucial.

More generally, the critique of the saint is a critique of deontological political agents. A less dramatic example is the famous Kantian case of refusing to lie under any circumstances. Even when he is faced by a murderer inquiring the whereabouts of his children, one is committed to answer truthfully (Kant 1999). A politician who always lies is usually terrible, but a politician who never lies won’t be very good

either, as he would condemn himself to political impotence.

If Christians and Kantians wanted to realize their preferences, however, they should be willing to rebalance their principles in light of the end-state, which would be realizable through forbidden means, and to check if these are worthy of infringing the categorical rule. It might still be the case that they end up deciding against it, if the benefits are not deemed good enough to outweigh the costs of violating the moral rule. Otherwise, they would give up the commitment to realize their preferences, as they can give up extremely positive consequences in exchange for a minimal violation of principle. Whenever certain means are excluded in principle without entering in the political calculus of ends, means and consequences, we fail to execute social change, and remain confined to the status quo.

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As Machiavelli famously pointed out: ‘it is very suitable that when the deed accuses him, the effect excuses him’ (Machiavelli 2009: 29). Deliberation among courses of action makes sense of Machiavelli’s idea, which has become tantamount to realism, that even repugnant means are permissible if the expected effect and consequences are far greater. However, Machiavelli adds that: ‘when the effect is good, as was that of Romulus, it will always excuse the deed; for he who is violent to spoil, not he who is violent to mend should be reprov’d’ (Machiavelli 2009: 29). This means that it is not the case that *any* end justifies *any* means, as sometimes his claim is too easily popularized. A more accurate interpretation would be that some ends justify some means. In particular, the effect of conserving the state and the ‘*salus populi*’ allows violent means. The best available means, even morally repugnant ones, are permissible in choosing a course of action whose end-state and consequences are good enough to outweigh them. But this is not always the case.

Naïve

A naïve actor is someone who ignores the likelihood of success. One option might be better than another, and yet significantly less likely to be realized. Thus, the value of the final state needs to be discounted by the probability of realizing it. Sometimes, taking a risk for a significant better end-state might be worth it, if the expected utility is greater. Other times, it is just more sensible to focus on more assured if less spectacular improvements.

Consider for example the introduction of Obama-care in the USA. Of course, one might have ideally preferred a more advanced welfare system, like those that are actually working in Europe. Yet, even the more modest Obama-care was *barely* realizable in the American political climate, having to deal with a republican majority in the Senate. Striving for the more ambitious proposal would have probably meant failure, and thus being stuck with the terrible *status quo ante*.

Deliberating about courses of action captures the worry about feasibility, sometimes (Valentini 2012) but not always (Sleat 2014) associated with a realistic perspective. End states that are completely unrealizable become inert preferences in evaluating courses of action because they are rebalanced against their zero-probability of being realized. For example, I might want to visit Alpha Centauri, but this state of affairs is unrealizable and cannot motivate me to do anything at all. The preference remains inert for as long as a new course of action emerges that might lead to my preference being satisfied. A particular goal is completely nullified if there are no means to reach it, as its probability and expected value become 0. This does not mean that improbable goals are not worth striving for, but only that one has to rebalance their value against their likelihood of success.

A difficult case to evaluate is when by acting seemingly irrationally, we make a certain course of action possible that otherwise wouldn't be. Suppose we want to organize a large protest in a situation of widespread political apathy. This may seem impossible, but if we are slightly naive about it and we refuse to take apathy into account, we might in the end succeed in mobilizing a large number of people. Realism does not mean pessimism, instead it requires us to take the very possibility of this mobilization into account. Weber famously stated that "what is possible could never have been achieved unless people had tried again and again to achieve the impossible in this world" (Weber 2004: 93). This example thus rightly cautions us against being excessively pessimistic when we evaluate concrete paths to improve society. Sticking to an accurate assessment of feasibility is essential to pursue effective and realist social change.

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Ineffective

An ineffective actor is an actor who makes an epistemically wrong assessment of means, consequences and likelihood of success. If one wants to realize his preference, however, one must be very attentive in evaluating the evidence.

In a famous example of his, Bernard Williams considers the following situation: "the agent believes that this stuff is gin, when it is in fact petrol. He wants a gin and tonic. Has he reason, or a reason, to mix this stuff with tonic and drink it?" (Williams 1981: 102). Williams's idea is that due to an epistemically incorrect assessment of reality, the actor takes a course of action that does not align with his own goal, and suffers negative consequences for it.

Let us consider a more political example. A foreign political actor wishes to turn a cruel dictatorship into a democracy and concludes that a military intervention is likely to succeed, and that no significant negative consequence is to be

expected. In particular, he expects this war to be swift and painless, as the dictator's army is weak and the target population would support the liberating army. However, these factual assumptions happen to be wrong as the military intervention creates a long and bloody civil war.

Of course, uncertainty is a common underlying assumption of all political decisions and one cannot be deemed irrational for not knowing something he could not reasonably have known. Yet taking a political decision without considering available information leads to failure in implementing any social change.

Wishful

Wishful actors are agents who have an erroneous view of reality, because they allow their preferences to distort their knowledge of means, consequences and likelihood of success. Just as ineffective actors are mistaken about the world in which they live, wishful actors consistently refuse to recognize it for what it is. It is thus a self-defeating mistake to allow our ideals to distort our beliefs about the world. If we do this, we misrepresent means and consequences, and thus make it more difficult to realize what we want.

Elaborating on Aesop's example of the fox and the grapes, we can imagine a wishful-thinking fox would simply refuse to acknowledge the fact that there are no ways for her to get the grapes (suppose this is true). She would never enjoy living in a world so cruel that allows tasty grapes to escape her reach. As a consequence, she is willing to falsely believe that there must be some way to reach the grapes. As she pointlessly obsesses over figuring out how to reach the grapes, she misses the food she could actually reach and ends up starving.

A political example of this kind of irrationality is given by a variation on the classic theme of "dirty hands" (Walzer

1973), where a politician refuses to torture a terrorist in order to obtain information that would prevent an attack and save thousands of lives. In Walzer's original example, the politician is a saint: he is refusing to use dreadful and immoral means that would violate his moral principles. Let us consider a variation, in which the politician is instead wishful: he does not believe that torture is always forbidden, it would be acceptable when the lives of thousands are at stake. He is instead convinced that 'there must be a better way' to prevent the attack, which does not compromise his moral purity. If by assumption one can reasonably know that there is no other way, then he is being wishful insofar as his beliefs are distorted by his desires. The best means available in this example are very costly and thus the politician is wishfully trying to convince himself that there are better ways to obtain the same results without paying so high a cost. Being wishful means rejecting accurate beliefs in favour of beliefs that would fit better with our desires and is a detriment to realizing our own preferences.

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Self-Deceptive

A self-deceptive actor is someone who is mistaken about his own desires. They allow some of their preferences to distort the knowledge of other preferences.

I might believe I enjoy studying, while all I want is just to appear like one who enjoys studying. If this is true, then I am having false beliefs about my preferences. This is problematic because it leads one to perform the political calculus under false assumptions. This would lead one to pick a course of action which is not in line with one's preference, or maybe even fail to carry through with it. If I think I enjoy studying, I might choose to take a PhD. However, if this is a case of self-deception, I might end up failing to put up with studying and never graduate.

This case is similar to the previous one. Just like the wishful actor has false beliefs about the facts of the world because he wants them to be different from what they are, the self-deceptive actor has false beliefs about his own preferences, because he wants them to be different from what they are. Of course, there is nothing necessarily wrong with having such second-order desires. The problem is when they distort our own beliefs about what we want. In this way, they alter the political calculus and lead us to courses of action which do not help us realize our desires.

In Sartre's vivid description of the problem of dirty hands, it seems that Hugo is a wishful actor rather than a saint: "Purity is a concept of fakirs and friars. But you, the intellectuals, the bourgeois anarchists, you invoke purity as your rationalization for doing nothing" (Sartre 1965).

Akratic

The final political failure is akrasy, the condition under which one reasons correctly about what he should do, but then is unable to bring himself to do it. This case is the explicit denial of the meta-preference I have argued for in the beginning: it is a failure to be moved to realize one's own preferences. In Hume's view of instrumental irrationality, there is nothing necessarily wrong with akrasy. He explicitly says that: "Tis as little contrary to reason to prefer even my own acknowledg'd lesser good to my greater, and have a more ardent affection for the former than for the latter" (Hume 2007: 128).

This is a much-debated issue in philosophy, which can only briefly be considered here, but deliberating about courses of action may help disentangling this puzzling perspective. It is entirely plausible that one looks positively on some end-state, and yet refuses to undertake the course of action that leads to it. It might be the case that the costs of means

and consequences for the agent outweigh the value of the end-states. In such case, the preferred end-state can only be realized through terrible courses of action. Suppose I really want to be fit, and I rank it highly among my preferences. Yet, I am also quite lazy and I do not want to hit the gym three times a week. In this case, I may appear akratic about the isolated end-state, but I am quite rational about the whole course of action.

Akrasy may however still persist with regards to the whole course of action. What if I evaluate the whole course of action positively (e.g. being fit and hit the gym), but I still fail to act? In this case it is clearly in contrast with the preference to realize one's own preferences, and should be avoided.

Ovid gave a vivid representation of akrasia, describing Medea: the mythical mother who killed her own children for vengeance against her husband. He writes "*video meliora proboque, deteriora sequor*" (Ovid 1972: 59): I see and approve of the better, but I follow the worst. Medea may fail to entertain the deliberation on the course of action, because she did not entertain the cost of the means of her revenge, or she is rational but insincere. In this second case, she would have entertained the political calculation only to find out that her revenge was more valuable to her than the lives of her children. This is indeed how Hobbes interpreted Ovid's sentence: 'that saying, as pretty as it is, is not true; for though Medea sees many reasons to forbear killing her children, yet the last dictate of her judgment was, that the present revenge on her husband outweighed them all, and thereupon the wicked action *necessarily* followed' (Hobbes and Bramhall 1999).

With respect to social change, true akrasy is possibly the gravest sin. One should particularly be wary of philosophical akrasy, where we are so much focused on thinking about

the best way to arrange society, that we become uninterested in actually changing it for the better.

Conclusion

Political philosophy should not be concerned only about what to think, but also about what to do. The reason for this is that desiring something gives us reasons to seek to realize it. Seeking to realize it forces us to confront reality, and imposes all sorts of constraints on us.

Particularly when we seek to change society, I argue, we do best if we heed these constraints. When we act, we ought to be sensitive about means, consequences and likelihoods of success.

This soberly realistic perspective should not lead us to adopt a conservatory stance. Quite the opposite. Unless we deliberate among courses of actions, we face a strong risk of failure. And in action, the cost of failure is the preservation of the status quo.

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Engaging Images,
Engaging Words

Seeing Violence: Engagement and Numbness¹

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This text is indebted to a great extent to the reading of Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others*, a small book which could be read in a day – were it not for its content which, in my case, led to a tiresome lingering that lasted for several months, procrastination which in the end produced an entirely non-bookish effect: instead of remembering certain claims, or the narrative itself, or the elegantly moulded sentences, I remembered only images – the frames of the book, or the frames Sontag used as illustrations. The blurb appearing on the front page, positioned almost as a subtitle, prompted me to start thinking – during those months of non-reading, or rather of evading the text and of repentant rebounds – what does it mean to become numb in front of an image, to be critically benumbed, insensate or paralyzed by it?²

Sontag's little book is certainly not the only entrance into the world of images. The domain of photography is a largely

1 The text has been published, in somewhat abbreviated form, in *Politics and Image*, ed. Constantino Pereira Martins and Pedro T. Magalhães, Universidade de Coimbra (eQVODLIBET series), 2019.

2 The blurb says: "A brilliant analysis of our numbed response to images of horror." The word numb is significant here. Numbness refers to the absence of physical sensation or a capacity to move, but also to the incapacity to act, and to a lack or deficiency of feeling. Etymologically, it refers to being taken, seized, and is homologically close to dumbness. In its early uses it referred to being heavily 'taken' with palsy, shock and especially cold.

debated one in many various disciplines ever since the frame has been introduced into our optical and discursive reality. The same is true for the other dimension this text refers to, violence, an endlessly discussed subject in its own right. However, *Regarding the Pain of Others* posits two significant questions for a reflection that couples images with critique, and provides precise, if disputable answers. The first question is how we respond to the images of violence – or, from which part of ourselves our response arises? The second one, articulated in a slightly Manichean fashion, is what do the images do – do they only haunt us or do they have an ability to make us understand, and perhaps produce a critical response?

In that sense, I am here interested in what images of horror produce. Do they reduce our ability to react rationally, in other words, do they numb or incapacitate reason? What happens to reason, when confronted with an image of something that surpasses the powers of explanation or rational reconciliation with the seen? Surmising that the clips, the frames of horror – which in different ways represent violence – equally exercise a certain form of violence over us, I wondered in which part of us this violence takes place.

But what if we want, as indeed many have, to use the images as the means for critique or, further, for a development of a strong ethico-political stance? Is it possible to be both numb *and* critical? What is critique, and what are our critical capacities, when sifted through violent images – images of violence and images exercising violence? Is this numbness the same as a critical seizure? What role the affects play in our being “taken” and what – if anything – propels us to act out of violence, by being exposed to it, against violence? The assumption I begin with is that today we are all exceedingly exposed to violence via images. This ‘we’ refers

both to the critical theorists who may employ critique to advocate against violence, or to the “common people” who are critical of the world and the amount of violence in it, without any awareness of the existence of critical theory. As a matter of fact, I want to explore how the constant exposure to horror turns the critical theorist into a “common wo/man”, as much as the commonality holds certain critical potentialities. The search for the “place” of response to violent images serves that purpose.

Raw Messages to the Eye

Let us begin, following Sontag’s steps, with one of the boldest statements against the war – Virginia Woolf’s very long response to the question, “How in your opinion are we to prevent war?” Written in 1936-7, in the thick of the Spanish civil war, her letter begins hesitantly, with certain faltering perhaps somewhat pertinent to a representative of the class of “daughters of educated men”, a class formed at the beginning of *The Three Guineas* in order to introduce innumerable differences into an emphasized “we”; differences that would unavoidably shape an answer to this hard, but (always) urgent question. In the spirit of these differences, Woolf addresses the educated man who penned the question: “Scarcely a human being in the course of history has fallen to a woman’s rifle; the vast majority of birds and beasts have been killed by you, not by us; and it is difficult to judge what we do not share” (Woolf 2012, 6). The situation is, of course, far more complex – it is precisely during the Great War that the new categories of prisoner were established, in order to punish pacifists and dissidents who rejected war (Marston 2009) – making the drives, motives and morals which urge one to support and not prevent it

(that is, anything which might fall under the rational explanation aiming to be absolute in reach) vague, perplexing and contradictory. It is perhaps for that reason that Woolf looks for a different type of means: as arguments addressed to reason fail to offer an explanation, she turns to pictured facts, to the factual statements addressed to the eye. Such addressing does not refer to an act of perceiving, even less to that of reasoning – what an eye does is produce affects that seemingly abrogate differences: “Let us see then”, says Woolf, “whether when we *look* at the *same* photographs we *feel* the *same* things“ (Woolf 2012, 10, italics mine), we who are in all other matters thoroughly different.

They are not pleasant photographs to look upon. They are photographs of dead bodies for the most part. This morning’s collection contains the photograph of what might be a man’s body, or woman’s; it is so mutilated that it might, on the other hand, be the body of a pig. But those certainly are dead children, and that undoubtedly is the section of a house. A bomb has torn open the side; there is still a bird-cage hanging in what was presumably the sitting-room... (ibid)

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Virginia Woolf maintains that the photographs are not arguments, but the raw message addressed to the eye. However, that message was so powerful that its receivers – whoever they were, whichever class or sex they belonged to (and it seems that in Woolf sex structures our drives, needs, histories and understanding) – have the very same reaction to it: what we thought we knew and what we now feel merge, and in that process of erasure of the past and the present, only an affect remains which is equal to all and equally potent. In other words – and this may serve as an initial argument – if we were collectively exposed to these images of facts, to corpses which might have been children or pigs framed by crushed bird-cages and ruins which were at a time some-

one's living rooms, we might be able to prevent the war. Not this or that war, but war in the generic sense.

The reason for such an assumption may be in the fact that the images we see simplify – they dissolve the complexity of an individual life and layers of its historicity, its sociability. Although it seems that nothing displays a singularity as faithfully as a photographic frame, that irrefutably singular snippet is literally only that, a snippet which in its irreplaceability – this or that person – ceases to be anything more than the evidence about that very person, the one of whom we know nothing and need to know nothing about, who vanishes in front of us as someone devoid of duration outside of the frame. In a series of similar images, the singularity of the displayed is lost, and pictures seem to say: now, this is only a dead body. Each new demolished building is only one in a series of demolished buildings – the view is iterative, featureless, and empty: we are certain that it is not our house, although in an infinite repetitiveness of demolition it might also be our house. Seeing repetitive demolition almost urges us to not know, to lose ground in certainty. It is sufficient to admit that the horrors of war are horrors, maybe the worst of all, and this admission comes from an unbearable feeling, lacking only in moral monsters.

There are numerous problems which immediately appear with this proposition. The first pertains to a simple historical fact – in 1937 photographs had, although this too is questionable, a power to group, and by their sheer exposure in the public, exclude and decry moral monsters. They were scarce, they were events.

Although wars and war-related practices of themselves were not new, the media through which they had been registered, had only begun to shape perception and perceptivity. We can hardly speak of the structurally new types

of emotions (as much as we can hardly say that some new kind of emotivity arose, for example in 1937, at the time of a gradual rise of photography, and under its influence): anger, stupefaction, disgust, fear, empathy, outrage, pity, all of these are affective protocols of humanity. However, a precise depiction of a body inflamed, torn apart, bruised – the image of a fact – has doubtlessly given a novel structure to the affective relation, emotional response, to the capability of reacting to something imaginable, but not necessarily seen or see-able.

The time referred to is the time when transparent images of events, and therefore events themselves, were an excess; the time when experiences were less democratic, and not only in the sense that they could have been experienced by a fewer number of persons, but also in the sense that some experiences were so strong that they had the power to produce equal and equally potent emotions. Only a few decades later the incessant multiplication of the snippets of reality and their boundless availability would enable a *collector's* reaction to experiences, their amassing and appropriation: although these are not my experiences, by taking part in their seeing they may become mine, even if only in a partial, mediated and inverse manner. It may be that with this collecting a peculiar form of compilation of affects crept in as well. However, the compiled affects would by all means be of a different quality, of a lower intensity due to their mediated nature. The participation in seeing thus does not provide only – irrefutable, solid, passive – evidence of the existence of the seen, but also bears witness to my relation to it, affirming it: this is seen, experienced, as appropriated, as something which has gone through an affective reaction – even if that reaction might be weak, filtered, and in that sense passive, but still solid and irrefutable.

Trying to understand what a photograph meant for Virginia Woolf back in 1937, Sontag defines it as a means made for those who have the option to choose to pass over the reality of the event (Sontag 2003: 6). That choice does not have to be on the level of a conscious decision, but is rather a consequence of ignorance, non-exposure to the immediate experience, a happy privilege that we were not there, on the spot. But, if we have seen, if that is now a part of our scopic field, there is no justification for being exempt from witnessing. When we know, that is, according to Woolf, when an appropriate emotion has been produced – and it is emotion, rather than knowledge, that ushers that reality into our safe space – we cannot be absolved of a critical relation towards such reality. It is only as moral monsters that we can remain indifferent to it.

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Now, it seems that a very strong ethico-political attitude results from the mere exposure to this powerful means. However, it is a sad fact that photographs have by now neither stopped wars, nor have they, by definition, generated a general pacifist attitude. Are we to take that as a proof that we are indeed moral monsters, or does the problem lie in the way the means that should unite us in condemnation of violence, work? At this point it is important to further resolve the play of reason and affects, what in Woolf remains unclear and too sketchy. One dimension of that discussion would involve the question: if and how what we know impacts on what we feel? The other concerns the issue of the lasting exposure and its power to structure the feelings themselves.

Feeling *or* Knowing?

Let us imagine a building, a common, indistinguishable one, a generic building which has turned to ruin due to the

actions of war. Seeing one such frame might animate a generic kind of empathy: we feel with the other, for the other, regardless of who that other is – we mourn as humans, mourning over humans, and it is the act of mourning that incites us. But, let us now imagine some building which is a symbol, an edifice which gives us an unambiguous location, not only a spatial one, but also a temporal, historic one, which on the basis of other affects defines our relation to the given symbol. Even if there were no title to the frame, the symbol itself acts as a heading, as a description which unwittingly serves as a potential explanation, but even more than that, as something which steers affects and defines their vigour. Such a symbol functions as a title in a similar way as do the epaulettes or a recognizable uniform, or a peculiar type of civilian robe that says something about the part of the world where it is worn, or the skin colour of the persons photographed. (Do we react in an equal manner to the war in Libya, Yemen and Chechnya, even if we do not exactly know where the images were taken?) It seems that the indifference towards symbols, to what a heading says about an image, is not determined by the structure of affectivity itself. Our seeing has already been grafted by certain knowledges and affective responses, before a “raw message addresses the eye”. Were that not the case, no one would care if the lifeless body captured by a frame belonged to, say, an Albanian or a Serbian. Simply, the utmost horror would lie in the fact that a human life has been forcefully brought to a halt.

We may then rightfully say that the affects are always in a concatenation of a sort, and that they are shaped by, as Roland Barthes says, the rational intermediary of an ethical and political culture. Feelings derive from “an *average* affect, almost from a certain training” (Barthes 1981, 26). This unusual choice of the word (training/dressage) points in an important direction: what we feel is never in direct relation

to a simple perception, to something immediate and “raw”. Dressage refers to a process of levelling the past and the immediate present, to a complex undertow of the existing knowledges, to what we have previously rationally processed, and maybe consciously accepted as a defined code which conditions our perceptive reactions. This leads to a second fundamental question: are the feelings incited by the photographs somehow preceded by some non-affective *decision*? Can we say that there is certain infra-knowledge, produced by some kind of dressage, which directs affective response, so that when we see a fallen body, some of us would see a dead human, while some of us a body defined by its colour, nation, gender etc.?

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To develop this further, we need to pass to another dimension mentioned above: to the impossibly lasting exposure to the effect of the frame. In contrast to previous times, our era is characterized by an impossibility to sometimes differentiate between frames. They are heaped up but dispersed, always fit to burst, they overlap and merge, cutting into one another, they chisel themselves onto our memory, unseam it and at the same time stitch at the places over which we have no control. The description might sound poetic, but if we take another look, it is a blend of surgical metaphors and images of an unendurable clutter, which is so stifling that it can produce dizzying satiation, calm encounter with the horror, indifferent response to the seen which thus becomes insignificant, something that can be passed – or swiped – over all too quickly. There is such an abundance of snippets of reality – and the stress here is on their quantity, availability and endless circulation – that their mere presence cannot serve to anticipate *any* reaction.

Therefore, contrary to the previously described aspect which assumed a certain rational or, in any case, a pre-received history of affectivity where we seem to be mould-

ed to choose how to react and then act upon images, this dimension confronts us with a vertigo-like production of affects, which may lead to a complete lack of critical response. I will offer an illustration. I first started thinking about what the frame does when I saw photographs shared on a social network by a close friend who has a long activist history in fighting against violence. The photographs were from Maidan in Ukraine. They showed the fallen bodies and were taken by someone who had, probably by phone, registered an activity of shooting, probably by a shotgun. The photos went viral: as the word would have it, they spread fast, like a virus. This is probably a rare example of a “good contagion” in the history of virus-metaphors: the internet’s speed, its potential anonymity, the possibility to “share” quickly and to create an, as it were, anonymous network of sharers, accompanied by a relatively new phenomenon of a “non-professional” desire to spread the “truth” or to demonstrate several alternative truths – all of these belong to the sphere of this good contagion. My reaction to the shared photos was in the first place a bodily one: apprehension, misgivings, diffidence (various ways to distance ourselves from the immediately seen) came only later, as much in response to a need for the rationalization of what I had seen. The first reaction was revulsion, although the images were not soaked in blood, there were no disfigured bodies (so mutilated that they might also be the bodies of pigs), and they were not symbolic, in terms of showing some recognizable, “unacceptable” devastation. In many respects, the images had some uncanny resemblance to the shooting-games: the faces were indiscernible – no identity could have been given to the persons that were the fallen bodies – and it was not at all easy to identify the place where the passive act of falling had occurred. The logic went: “We heard about it, it did happen, it was current at the time,

therefore, this was Maidan”, but it also could have been any other place. Or, the first sharer of the pictured data, this snippet-of-truth, entitled it – gave it a name, a place and a time – in a certain way, automatically producing at least a potential relation to the image. But, before the relation has been constituted as known and decided, before the response has been produced, there was a visceral effect.³

This illustration opens, without a doubt, many questions, but for a moment I want to refer to only two: to the reaction from within the body and to the democratic nature of the frame (in which today, as this instance shows, we very often willingly take part, by ‘sharing’ further). It seems, at least from the first interpreters of crowd psychology, that there is an intrinsic link between these two. Truly horrified by the crowd, Gustave Le Bon ascribes its suggestibility and credulity to the prodigious perversions of thought – because “a crowd thinks in images, and the image itself immediately calls up a series of other images, having no logical connection with the first” (Le Bon 200: 163). Evoking the then popular science of hypnosis, but also a powerful fear of contagion so characteristic for the 19th century, the disgusted Le Bon presented “image-thought” of the crowd as the model of ‘un-thinking’ of hypnotised automatons whose thoughtless exaltation is somehow infectious to anyone nearby. These infected puppets of instincts leave their reason aside and think from the body, which is for Le Bon equal to col-

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3 To reiterate, with such images it is a futile task to try to elaborate what is exactly the cause of such a visceral reaction. Being overwhelmed by the scene and increasingly unable to differentiate between what we saw, makes this attempt at defining the source of the ‘pure affect’ impossible in advance. It becomes almost a chicken and egg dilemma to decide if we respond only to what we see now (as if we were devoid of any other previously rationally moulded affect), or is that response of necessity concatenated with some known frames, for example from some other media, other games, films, some other wars? Maybe this visceral reaction has also something to do with an eerie domestication of phenomena which serve to entertain us, even though there is nothing that should be entertaining in cruelty and violence.

lective hallucinations that have the power to obliterate “the faculty of observation and the critical spirit”. But let us remember that Virginia Woolf also spoke of extremely strong reactions we all might have merely by being exposed to the images – raw facts addressed to the eye – of course, on condition that we are not moral monsters. Being exposed to them, we may, unthinkingly, as if we were part of some vast crowd, wish to prevent all wars. So, was it not precisely a contagious reaction from the bowels that would – utterly unreasonably – bring us to the prevention of all future wars?

Thinking in and through images, in the era of constant exposure to them and their almost absolute availability, turns us – if we decide to remain with Le Bon on this – into a crowd, even if we are not in the crowd itself. The democratic nature of the image today – even forbidden, censored photographs can always leak out – makes us all think in images. We may, however, wish to leave the incredulous Le Bon here and make an argument which would have, for him, been a contradiction in terms, asking if there is any possibility for a *critical thought* to emerge out of this elusive fusion of intestinal thinking, collective hallucinations, and messages to the eye that are not and need not be rational and rationalized?

In a short article, written in the midst of the Ukrainian crisis, a new genre, the “apocalypsticle”, has been provocatively thematized. Sarah Kendzior speaks about the apocaliptization of the experience of seeing conflict – taking place in a country for which, in her part of the world, there was only scarce or no interest, the country which was not really on the map of the known, about which the frames of the ‘crisis’ also conveyed next to nothing. For an apocalyptic effect to be drawn by the frames utilized for a far-away audience, Ukraine would have to become a singular mixture of scenes from Bosch and Breughel and some movie sets reviving the Second World War placed *somewhere* in Europe. In the times of click and share (and the times when these words

have no adequate translation in any language), Kendzior reverses a familiar metaphor: instead of a thousand, a picture is now worth zero words, because for a person exposed to it, overwhelmed by the images that in fact say nothing, the frame produces a single effect. Instead of forcing us to ask *what* and *why* whatever happened in Ukraine (or anywhere else in the distant world), these infinite possibilities of staring into bewildering reproductions of the doomsday Ukrainian kind, produce only a numbing *whoa* (Kendzior 2014). It is not accidental that Kendzior, along with many others, describes this as a certain mode of pornography: banal and however strong, an inevitably short and overwhelming way of facing the incomprehensible horrors.

We are faced here anew with the split between mere seeing (the raw message to the eye) and understanding (*what/why* versus *whoa* effect), and it is clearly the understanding that is seen to be missing, with possible detrimental consequences. But, again, is this not precisely what affirms Virginia Woolf in her belief that, stirred by the strong urge to vomit – in a sense, a bodily sensation comparable to a numbing *whoa* – all of us will want to prevent the war? In other words, is it not the absence of explanation, the need to provide rational arguments, but a raw exposure to the frame, the non-narrative, the fragmentary, the generic, that promises *the strongest critical reaction* – the utter and final condemnation of war? To put it in simpler terms, would not one especially hallucinatory *whoa* have the power to turn us into the true radicals in our critique? And is it not precisely a flood of images of our own time that may force us to see a generic apocalypse as an unprecedented mass of cadavers we are constantly exposed to? To see what we can do with these Manichean splits, we need to pay some more attention to the nature of the frame.

Framing the Felt and the Known

The frame has come a long way from Baudelaire's fear of the idolatrous multitude's cry for an exact reproduction of nature, which would lead to the expulsion of art and the baleful distortion of the sublime sphere of the untouchable and imaginary ("An avenging God has heard the prayers of this multitude: Daguerre was his messiah", 1980: 86) towards Brecht's suspicion towards the critical powers of photography – because the sheer reproduction of reality says nothing about reality itself, since reality is always *in* time. The question of the powers of reproduction is not the only metaphysical question raised by the frame. Particularly in the context of images meant to prevent the war, we have to ask if the photograph works in any other way but as a stamp, silent evidence – does it ever say anything? Then again, if we were to concur that the photograph is no more than a stamp of existence, taciturn in Brechtian terms and inane in Barthian, does that also pertain to the effect produced by the image, regardless of the photographer's primary intention?

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In his essay on ambiguity of photography, John Berger claims that the frame offers unquestionable evidence on existence, but it never gives reasons why something existed – photography has no language of its own. It is a reference, a quotation, but never a translation. "A photograph arrests the flow of time in which the event photographed once existed... Every photograph presents us with two messages: a message concerning the event photographed and another concerning a shock of discontinuity" (Berger 1982: 86). Barthes would refer to the photograph's almost absolute mimetic quality and its promises of certainty: it is certain that the object *was there*, that it *existed* (although this stamp gives no hints toward the continued existence of an object, even less towards the form the object would

take). “Impotent with regard to general ideas (to fiction), its force is nonetheless superior to everything the human mind can or can have conceived to assure us of reality – but also this reality is never anything but a contingency (*so much, no more*)” (Barthes 1981: 87). The photograph thus becomes an emanation of a past real, the confirmation that refers to time, such that it conserves rather than presents – “false on the level of perception, true on the level of time... (on the one hand ‘it is not there’, on the other ‘but it has indeed been’)” (ibid. 154). Lastly, whatever the intention of the one who puts the frame into circulation – to inform, shock, produce an artwork or an ethical intervention – the only thing that the frame really says is: this frame is made, someone was there, and someone captured the moment⁴. The moment captured, isolated and preserved outside of the continuum to which it belonged, remains silent on the continuum, but it assumes it – what is shown evokes, refers to what is not shown.

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Discontinuity, certainty that something was unquestionably there, fragmentarity – isolation from a continuum, accompanied by someone’s decision to cut and isolate precisely that part of the continuum – these are then the main features of the frame. By delimiting, the frame has the power to organize our visual experience, to form it in specific fashion by isolation and conservation. The framing of perception is founded on exclusion, sundering and dismembering⁵. Indeed, the boundary of a snippet of reality excludes and suspends what remains out of the frame, but it also evokes it: the boundary itself is contingent, as much as is the reality conjured by the frame. The power of the photograph – es-

4 Sontag reminds us of Goya’s *Disasters of War*, where he sometimes leaves a signature beneath an image, as an additional, but – it seemed to him – necessary confirmation of presence: *Yo lo vi* (I saw this), *Esto es lo verdadero* (This is the truth) (Sontag 2003: 41).

5 And this, in the context of war photography particularly, can be quite useful for the production of specific affective reactions – it is precisely in these selections that our pre-affective histories start to concatenate with what we see, and to give form to a specific way we interpret the seen.

pecially in the era of hyper-production of frames – lies in the fact that we often do not think, do not have to think (and maybe are no longer able to think) without photographs, and in the fact that we do not critically elaborate the very *contingency of the frame*. It is almost as if the photograph becomes a proof (but a proof of what?), a given display of what is, as if all that is becomes exhausted by the displayed. We no longer remember through photographs, but we remember only photographs (Sontag 2003: 79), “remembering” collected experiences which belonged to other people, collected affects the intensity of which abates with a constant rise in the quantity of frames, swarming the area of the eye. Sigrid Kracauer wrote back in 1927 that “the flood of photos sweeps away the dams of memory... the resemblance between the image and the object effaces the contours of the object’s ‘history’”, hence “in the hands of the ruling society, the invention of illustrated magazines (sic!) is one of the most powerful means of organizing a strike against understanding” (Kracauer 1995: 58). Although it does not have to be this way, as Kracauer would have it, in his time, which from our perspective looks almost like a time without images, “the blizzard of photographs betrays an indifference toward what the things mean” (ibid). The world itself and its meanings are being structured for us through the frame: our perceptions, affectivity, memory and the way we critically process the contents available to us, have been continuously sifted through the discontinuous frames.

What is it then that the frame does, when it is certain that it has the power to do something? Or, to narrow this question down: does it enable understanding or not? Does it say something on meaning or not, affecting our capacity to think critically? And does it – in effect – have the power to inform our ethico-political attitude? Susan Sontag is unambiguous about this:

Harrowing photographs [even in the times of hyper-production of the images of horror] do not inevitably lose their power to shock. But they are not much help if the task is to understand. Narratives can make us understand. Photographs do something else: they haunt us (Sontag 2003: 80).

The expression Sontag uses, *to haunt*, is such that it cannot be easily translated into some language, Serbian being of them, to retain its ghostly connotations, but also its etymological relation to the home, to that most familiar, most intimate. Thus, the frames visit us regularly, they frequent us – as if they are coming home, but uninvited; they remain with us, although we shun them; they are with us, but only in a spectral form, as mute phantoms arousing dread, horror, of whose presence we cannot free ourselves. Indeed, this word is a likely companion to the frames, even to the most common ones, those that at the first sight have no horrific quality to them whatsoever. It was Kracauer who back in the 1920s spoke of the ghostly in the photograph, because it preserved what no longer existed for eternity (Kracauer 1995: 56). In her introduction to the *Frames of War*, Judith Butler also thematizes what is outside of the frame as that which haunts, penetrates the boundaries of the frame, making them porous, questioning the confines that define the very nature of the boundary (Butler 2009).

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A Horrible Repetition

The images of war do that much more than any other frame. Not only because it is horrible to see bodies that are cadavers, and of such kind that it is hardly discernible if they belonged to a former man or a former pig. Not only because photographic capture of death displays an eternal death,

death that potentially lasts forever, but also because the circumstances of that death are fragmentary, discontinuous, unchosen – a life stopped, brought to a halt, framed by horrible material and symbolic violence – and the photograph shows that plainly and unambiguously, stamping that stoppage. Horrorism, the neologism introduced by Adriana Cavarero as a conceptual counterpart of terrorism, refers to a particular form of violence that exceeds death itself (Cavarero 2011: 32), violence to which the death is not a boundary. Contrary to the terror, a total fear of a coming death, fright which makes us run from it in panic, horror implies the lack of movement, paralysis, seizure when confronted with something more horrible than death itself. “[T]he physics of horror has nothing to do with the instinctive reaction to the threat of death. It is rather to do with instinctive disgust for a violence that... aims to destroy the uniqueness of the body” (ibid, 8), a singularity guaranteed by the limits of the skin. The body that loses its figure, becomes disfigured (monstrous, disjointed), deformed (even if it is not dis-membered), fragmentary; it ceases to be only the symbol of the end of a *vita humana* and truly questions the very *conditio humana*. In this, Cavarero recognizes an ontological crime, the crime of war seen principally through the eyes of the helpless, those who have not chosen the war, who had the war thrust upon them, those who are by definition without arms (*inermes*), helpless in their facing the horror of war⁶. Faced, with the help of the frame with the gaze of the helpless who see something worse than death, who look into

6 It should be noted that the book *Horrorismo: or on the violence over the helpless* (2007) is in a crucial sense an interpretation of the transformation of war through the terrorist acts, where the figure of the helpless becomes inconceivably accidental and arbitrary. In this “quotidian war”, the transformed state in which the time and the space of war become one with the everyday life, the very idea of an everyday life becomes destabilized, out of bounds of something orderly, routinely, and outside of the ordeals of war. In this war that does not last, but also never stops, which is neither here nor there, but potentially everywhere, the civilians (those by definition *inermes*, the helpless who would want to be the bearers of the quotidian) become “the targets of a violent death that surpasses the event, atrocious in itself, of death, because it has degraded each of them beforehand from singular being to random being” (ibid., 76).

the eyes of the horror, what is that which we see (we, ourselves also helpless): an ontological crime of abrogation of singularity, or a generic horror of repetitiveness and repeatability that ontologically puts individuality into question? Although we may have never seen a war, as participants or immediate witnesses, there is something horribly familiar which, finally, produces the haunting effect. One of the most famous war-reporters, Martha Gellhorn, describes this uncanny familiarity, the generic in war that denies the need for a title and attendant explanations, thus:

There is a single plot in war; action is based on hunger, homelessness, fear, pain and death. Starving wounded children, in Barcelona in 1938 and in Nijmegen in 1944, were the same. Refugees, dragging themselves and whatever they could carry away from war to no safety, were one people all over the globe. The shapeless bundle of a dead American soldier in the snow of Luxembourg was like any other soldier's corpse in any other country. War is a horrible repetition (Gellhorn 1988: 6).

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And not only is the war a horrible repetition, but so are the frames of war, the repetition of representations of the ontological crime and generic horror. Nonetheless, Gellhorn, a self-declared member of the "Federation of Cassandras" (ibid, 7), insists that we can never be reminded too much or too often.

Critical Advocacy for Non-Violence

Surmising that we have at least touched upon the points of intersection of affects, reason (which here often went by name of explanation, and thus, in Sontag's trail, a narrative or a text) and the medium that does something to and with them, it remains to be seen if and how their concatenation enables a clear ethico-political attitude. Perhaps this

question may be articulated in as Manichean way as at the beginning: where does the advocacy for non-violence originate – from the bowels *or* from critical reflection?

We are haunted by photographs, because they are mute, without language, spectral quotations. Without text, naming, context, it is as if they do not produce a critical distance necessary for a moral attitude. And, despite the fact that war is a horrible repetition with a single plot and an action monotonously predictable in its repetitiveness, there is still no generic war: wars have names, however uninventive, which may also function as headings, as explanations (the wars in former Yugoslavia have many names, depending on the name-giver: liberation war, homeland war, civilian war, Serbian aggression etc.). Therefore, Sontag's claim from her *Essays on Photography* rings so true: the images can be morally effective only if accompanied by an adequate political knowledge – by a critical reflection drawn from the narrative, or at least a heading, from words which furnish a mute image with a language it does not possess of itself. “Without a politics, photographs of the slaughter-bench of history will most likely be experienced as, simply, unreal or as a demoralizing emotional blow” (Sontag 1982: 19). However, the possession of a critical attitude may, and does far more often than not, produce *loyalty* to a *particular* interpretation of horrors of war, turning persons – those who look into the eyes of horror, or us looking at them – into such and such, and not into the generically helpless.

In addition, photographs always conserve the singularity of the person – regardless of the generalizability of the situation, the person is never generic, however indiscernible or mutilated they might be. This in itself can produce the effect of identification – maybe the one Virginia Woolf relied upon or hoped for (this might have been my dead body, and my crushed building) – but also an effect of distancing (this

surely is not my corpse, I am here, alive and in one piece, in my very whole building, and at this moment I can decide not to look any longer and perhaps to never again see the bodies which undoubtedly belonged to someone, but that someone is not me in my own singularity). Contrary to the pacifist faith in the powers of affects, there are no guarantees that the immediate exposure to horror can be transferred to our eyes only via an exposure to the frame. We can always avert the gaze, abstain from complicity, or become anaesthetised, accustomed to the suffering of others, where this “custom” domesticates the effect of haunting – what we see is indeed horrible, but derealized; intimate, but spectrally remote; inescapable because it has been already recorded, because it belongs to the code of a past event.

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In other words, exposed to the frames of horror we can also become moral monsters, we can become staunch supporters of war who read messages to the eyes in a very particular way, seeing in them rightful justification for a particular devastation of particular singularities; we can, lastly, reject history, all knowledge and interpretations we have and remain paralysed by a horrific repetition of certainty – the repetition peculiar to war, the certainty peculiar to the frame.

A general question which could be posed to any “generic pacifist” would certainly be: do images of violence produce a non-violent reaction, albeit one that is not reducible to benumbed insensitiveness? Can anger or empathy be translated into a critique if we are exposed only to scattered quotations, fragmentary and illegible references, and not to the “text”, the only thing truly translatable? What we feel is always at least to some extent conditioned by how we see things, what we grasp from the world piercing the apples of our eyes, and how we interpret that: in that sense, the Manichean split introduced at the beginning was only a rhetorical device.

No affect exists in a vacuum, affects do not exist outside of the complex webs of perceptivity and interpretative forms of concatenations of frames that organize our visual and affective experience. There is no raw message to the eye, since the messages are always moulded in different ways (they are moulded even as “raw”) and since the eye retains in itself layers of sociality through and with support of which it becomes reactive – responsive to a certain reaction. To quote Judith Butler from her polemical discussion with Susan Sontag: before we *decide* to distinguish between the fields of affects and narratives, immediate reactions and distanced explanations, “we are already social beings, working within elaborate social interpretations both when we feel horror and when we fail to feel it all. Our affect is never merely our own: affect is from the start, communicated from elsewhere” (Butler 2009: 50).

If there is a space for critique, after the horror, it should be directed towards a production of social interpretations which would not diminish or anesthetize, but potentiate affects, and potentiate them in such a way to show the source of their commonness. Such a critical endeavour should provide means not only for a different validation of affectivity, but also for its exposure to different forms of sociality. The frames may have a significant role as the means of production of critical numbness but also, at the same time, as the strong stimulus to surpass it, to transform it into something else, something which demands critical inventiveness and the absence of resignation. The constant exposure to images – which we can no longer choose – reveals an inherent sociality of affects that ceases to be only “mine”, belonging solely to myself. This insight may make us think what a shared, group-wise exposure does in terms of critical elaboration not only of affects, but also of a different sociality we may hope for the future.

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Painter and the Pledge of Silence

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Philosophers, these language officials, often have a distrustful, even hostile, attitude towards pictorial images. This *tópos* of philosophical literature is also reflected in the matter of whether painting can be considered a form of social engagement. Jean-Paul Sartre, Emmanuel Levinas and Maurice Merleau-Ponty provided the reasons for the negative or at least skeptical response in the times when the question of *l'engagement* was explicitly and decidedly entering the space of phenomenology. Visual arts in their figurations cannot be socially engaged activity in the strong sense of the word¹.

On the other hand, outside of the field of philosophical assertions of a generation of French phenomenologists, there are painters whose work *strives* to be the proof of the contrary. Counterexamples which challenge this position can be found in the tradition of Spanish and Yugoslav painting,

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1 The support for this judgement can be found in the first chapter of Sartre's polemical text "What Is Literature?" [integrally published in 1948, as "Qu'est-ce que la littérature?" in *Situations*, II], which begins with: "No, we do not want to 'commit' painting, sculpture, and music 'too', or at least not in the same way. And why would we want to?" (Sartre 1988: 25). In the essay "La Réalité et son ombre" [originally published in 1948, in the journal *Les Temps modernes* 38], Levinas has no doubt: "But a work would not belong to art if it did not have this formal structure of completion, if at least in this way it were not disengaged. We have to understand the value of this disengagement, and first of all its meaning." (Levinas 1987b: 2). Finally, Merleau-Ponty writes in "L'Œil et l'esprit" [first appeared in the journal *Art de France* 1, in 1961.]: "Only the painter is entitled to look at everything without being obliged to appraise what he sees. For the painter, we might say, the watchwords of knowledge and action lose their meaning and force." (Merleau-Ponty 1964b: 161). Of course, those are not the only places where the relationship between painting and engagement is mentioned and thematized in their works.

primarily in the works of Francisco Goya and Đorđe Andrejević Kun. The philosophical figures of phenomenological thought should thus not be worshiped as idols, they should not be regarded as “gods of gold” whose judgment is taken as correct by default. Instead, the arguments contained in the core of their conclusions should be analytically investigated and the soundness of their principles should be determined. Why did they show reservations about the suggestion of painting being an engagement act?

Phenomenology, as a philosophical project, is obsessed with the category of time. The temporal flow is the condition for the accumulation of experience, the development of, and the stringing of words together. The human life is predominantly defined as a facticity which has a duration, consciousness as an ability to (re)constitute its correlative objectivities through retentions and protentions, and the very being as a temporal structure. Is such a position the consequence of an emphatic insight into the fact that humans are universally mortal and transient, or the result of an epoch obsessed with the concept of historicity? Either way, this is not the place for such a debate. Phenomenology is so fascinated by the perspective of time that it views the meaning of all of the products from the horizon of their temporality. Pictorial images as originally spatial entities have not been spared from the judgment based on this theoretical point of view.

The status of a canvas, an engraving – as an object occupying a certain place and spatializing it by its visual appearance – suffers, within the phenomenological frame of thinking, from an idealistic premise by which time overrides space and pushes it aside. If verbal exposition of experiences and thoughts is an activity that requires, in order for it to occur, the flow of interconnected elements that compose it, that is, temporality as its own *a priori*, works of

painting, of this non-verbal, unlike the novel or poem, are limited to the presentation of a single moment. According to this perspective, paintings would be nothing more than a freakish or defective image of the potentiality of time. In “Reality and Its Shadow” work of spatial art is described as “an instant that endures without a future” (Levinas 1987b: 9). It captures the infinity of a moment in which no tomorrow exists. A nauseous image of time frozen in place, finiteness without any prospect for further movement. On the other hand, in Merleau-Ponty’s essay “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence” the very genesis of the visual art is defined as a process of constitutive and implacable amnesia. The painting cannot internalize and reflect within itself the ideas accumulated in those that preceded it, in the way that works made of words can do, nor can it be remembered in those that will come after it. A radical opposition exists between verbal signs and pictorial images when it comes to their relationship with time, because the word is “not content to push beyond the past, claims to recapitulate, retrieve, and contain it”, it does not seek to “to push it aside in making a place for itself in the world”, but to preserve its sense and spirit (Merleau-Ponty 1964b: 80). Instead of movement and animateness, immobility and death; instead of memory and time, oblivion and the infinity of a single moment.

There is another important moment in the *corpus* of the analyzed phenomenological texts, which contributes to the further collapse of the status of the visual art as a form of expression within the philosophical systems from which it is observed. The abstraction of a pure meaning from a painting is considered a futile undertaking. The signified of a pictorial work is inherent to it in a way that it always remains “tied” in its material structure. This is why the meaning of the painting is considered incompletely transparent.

In explaining this type of argument, the photo-metaphoricity of phenomenological language is particularly emphasized. For Levinas, works of art are “the very obscurity of the real”, that is, “a shadow of being” (Levinas 1987b: 3, 8). Sartre sees the intentional act of penetrating into the meaning of a word like light freely passing through the sign: “Since words are transparent and since the gaze looks through them, it would be absurd to slip in among them some panes of rough glass”. (Sartre 1988: 39) In this type of relationship, a spontaneous “sacrifice” of the word occurs in the name of what it refers to. The verbal sign not only “illustrates”, it itself is non-opaque in nature, because – as it can be read in the text “L’Artiste et sa conscience” – the reader’s attention is directed towards the object being referred to through the spontaneous forgetting of the sign itself, while, conversely, the observers will receive a deeper sense of the pictorial image if they remain focused on its perceivable aspects for longer (Sartre 1964: 29–30). Merleau-Ponty speaks of “the mute radiance of painting” (Merleau-Ponty 1964b: 78) as the luminosity of being, but he also emphasizes that spoken language has the power of separating meaning from the signs, the transcendence of the silent dimensions of the world on which it rests. To conclude, the obscurity of the pictorial image does not correspond to the transparency of the verbal sign.

All three philosophers share an explicit skepticism about the axiom of painting being a language² in greater or lesser measure, with occasional hesitation and met-

2 Visual art is not seen as an intelligible communication system. Painting is not a language, despite what is heard “too often” (Sartre 1963: 71), and this attitude is marked as “dogma” (Levinas 1987b:1) or “one of the commonplaces” (Merleau-Ponty 1969: 66). For Sartre, the painter does not deal with signs, because the function of his creations is not to refer to the other objects beyond them. Levinas treats in an ironic manner the presumption according to which artworks are the expression of knowledge and that they “tell” something. On the other hand, Merleau-Ponty starts from the premise of closeness between language and painting, based on the power of creative act of expression they share, but accepts it only as an operative analogy.

aphorically used verbs which state the opposite and disrupt the negation of the aforementioned principle³. This theoretical proposition is defended by the assertion that artistic images are non-conceptual entities. Since concepts are manifested through linguistic forms, the being of the pictorial work cannot express them; the reality of the pictorial image is not discursive in nature. Overall, the spatiality and hence the strong materiality of the painting halts the extraction of its already translinguistically instituted meaning:

After all, we think with words. We would have to be quite vain to believe that we are concealing ineffable beauties which the word is unworthy of expressing. And then, I distrust the incommunicable; it is the source of all violence. When it seems impossible to get others to share the certainties which we enjoy, the only thing left is to fight, to burn, or to hang. (Sartre 1988: 228–229)

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But it is also true that ineffability should not be reduced to inexpressibility in general. Sartre speaks from the point of view of the philosopher or the writer. Perhaps the painter would not sign this assertion without reluctance. Is painting undemocratic in its being? There is no equivalence between verbally incommunicable and intersubjectively unshareable, because the pictorial expression “tells” the opposite and, while making it, the painters do not always have to stimulate violent acts towards the members of their community.

In prose, unlike in visual arts, silence can only be expressed linguistically — therefore, never through the absence of words, always indirectly. The section in literary work which contains the action that was left unsaid about, or signifies a moment of silence in the dialogue, the state of taciturnity

³ Such as the use of the verbs “speak” (*parler*) or “say” (*dire*) when referring to the contents of the painter’s act.

of a person, the course of narration or description, is represented through lingual statements and through them only. Sartre's novella *The Wall* abounds with such strategies. In this work, which describes the last night of prisoners before they are sent to the firing squad in the midst of the Spanish Civil War, the dialectics of the stated and unsaid, the tension of sound and silence, are present from beginning to end⁴. The relationship between visual and linguistic works is inversely proportional. In the art of painting, words serve silence, and in literature, silence is based on words.

From all three perspectives, the visual artist is seen as an egological figure standing in a position of isolation and observing the world in front of him as a spectacle, as an image of a series of events in which, due to his radical passivity, he does not participate. For the painters, the world is reduced to a visual phenomenon. Moreover, the visual artist is radically silent, because he is "mute"⁵. He does not take action, he is not part of the historical scene, but he observes it from a sufficient distance. The visual artist creates images that magically fascinate observers and which, with their muteness, do not provide them with any explicit answers to their doubts, fears or demands:

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4 Silence can generally serve as a determination of the atmosphere of a situation: "When they took us back, we sat and waited in silence." It can also be expressed through the mute gesture of the literary character: "But the desire to talk left me completely; I shrugged and turned my eyes away." Or: "He kicked me without great conviction and I kept quiet." It can also be instantly constituted through an act of silencing, either through the use of the imperative "Shut up!", or by a neutral description of the scene: "His lips trembled. A guard shut him up and took him away." In certain parts of the novel, there is also "shading" of the intensity of silence: "I started to speak in a low voice too." (Sartre 1975) The gradation of filling the space with sound reaches its upper limit with the scream of one of the prisoners or with the gunshots at dawn. Here, the act of silence also expresses the inner state of fear. The action of mechanical speech blocks deeper reflection.

5 In "What Is Literature" it is explicitly stated: "The painter is mute." (Sartre 1988: 27). In *The Prose of the World* there is a variation of this observation: "Painting is unable to speak." (Merleau-Ponty 1973: 101) The author of "Reality and Its Shadow" is distancing himself from the following claim: "An artist – even a painter, even a musician – tells. He tells of the ineffable." (Levinas 1987b: 1) The art of painting uses means different from words.

From the writer and the philosopher, in contrast, we want opinions and advice. We will not allow them to hold the world suspended. We want them to take a stand; they cannot waive the responsibilities of men who speak. (Merleau-Ponty 1964a: 161)

In the aforementioned section, words and responsibility are brought together to the greatest possible extent, almost to the point of their identification. Since the painter fatefully chose to refrain from words, starting from the domain of his profession, he would not be in a position to persuade people or to literally respond to their inquiries, so he is judged – but not always with a negative connotation – to be irresponsible.

The essay “The Transcendence of Words” (1949) points to the advantage of spoken words in which the thought is active in its liveliness and immediacy, as opposed to paintings, which are based on their closeness and radical silence (Levinas 1987a: 219). In Sartre, Levinas’s ethical reservation towards all poetic works is limited to art outside of the registry of prose, but also to those literary works in which speech is paradoxically equated with silence in which it vainly disappears. In “What is Literature”, the prose word is defined pragmatically – it is an act which affects reality and changes it. The writer’s word, in a somewhat surrealist manner, is compared to a gunshot, it incites alertness or makes noise: when he writes, the author shoots, the pen is his gun. Even the extreme claim is made that in losing the power of speech, one loses the ability to adequately act. If the writer does not get an aphasia or a similar disorder, if he does not forget to speak, his silence is never innocent, it must be meaningful and instructive, because once he enters the vortex of linguistic acts he can never exit completely again, he can just attempt to temporarily displace himself out of it:

This silence is a moment of language; being silent is not being dumb; it is to refuse to speak, and therefore to keep on speaking. (Sartre 1988: 38)

In fact, painting cannot be socially engaged art to the fullest extent, as it does not use words, but visual figures. Its mutism inevitably leads it to further its position of disengagement. Visual art, without the immanent ability of speech that would clarify and sublimate its meaning, stays out of the space of action, outside the field of direct influence on social flows and political events by way of denouncing and naming them, and by asking the addressee to become aware and properly act. If the pictorial work is silent, its echo is not heard. Visual art, in its mute purity, cannot in a literal sense denominate or call for reflection. Since it is not a language, it is by itself not able to capture and provide any form of knowledge, except in obscure intuition. The lack of transparency of its meaning oscillates between the hermeticity and the ambiguity of its content, that is, between the dark illegibility and the absence of a clear fixation of meaning:

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The work is completed in spite of the social or material causes that interrupt it. It does not give itself out as the beginning of a dialogue. (Levinas 1987b: 2)

The impenetrable aestheticity of pictorial works opposes every ethical demand that through them could be presented before someone. In the text “Unprivileged Painter”, Sartre constructs and analyzes the various paradoxes that occur in painting with respect to the relation of the beautiful and the good. How does one express and present a massacre? The observer will never return to the ugly painting, while a beautiful one would, in a Luciferian or demonic way, betray the nature of its subject. And when the theme of the pictorial image is a violent event, this violence is pacified through visual figuration and acquires the “calm plastic Beauty”

(Sartre 1963: 63), Beauty with a capital B. Henceforth the question arises: how would one denounce the crime, while simultaneously not paying it artistic homage?

The present exposition has shown that the phenomenological consideration of the relation between the verbal and non-verbal expressions with regard to the question of (dis)engagement is mainly based on antithetical discourse, full of figures of contrast. Is it possible to resolve such difficult question at all?

The taciturnity of the painter is not a negative act. The fact that he refuses to speak does not mean that he does not act in a different way. His intentional act of silence is manifested and as such it is directed towards another human being. Action is not only taken through words because there are other, non-linguistic, types of action. The exhibited painting is the ultimate expression of the artist's project and, although it is mute, it does not have to remain unnoticed and to potentially not obligate its observer. There remains the question of how impenetrable the message is that is being transmitted through such a form of poetic activity. Silence is an ambivalent phenomenon, and its content is subject to different interpretations. The visual artist does not *explicitly* say anything through his figures, but by keeping silent, he does not have to keep treacherously holding his tongue. Visual testimony does not conceal anything in a strong sense, but socially engaged art must keep a count of the tension of the ethical and the aesthetic, because the irrationality or evil intention of a particular act must be neutralized or blocked by displaying its consequence through the arranged structure of a successful and effective work of art, that is, through beautifully arranged forms.

The painter, certainly, is aware that he is practicing a non-verbal discipline to the highest possible degree. This

also implies that there are moments when, by exploring the scope of his profession, the painter must also face its limitations. When he wishes to present a *particular* historical event, and to express and publicize his political and ethical attitude towards it, he is faced with the very difficult task of achieving this through visual forms only, *sans mots ni paroles*. Because of this, in such circumstances, he might be forced to use words, that is, to “soil” the purity of the artistic image by introducing originally external elements to it, either by bringing it into the pictorial space itself or by adding it alongside the painting. Here, of course, what is being referred to is the title of the painting. Without it, the observer will have problems finding out exactly what is happening in the scene he is looking at and determining the exact geographical location and historical moment depicted in the work. The face of an innocent woman suffering, or of a crying and unhappy child, once painted, has a universal and transhistorical value, while the titling of such a scene associates with one unique situation.

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Artists preoccupied with social injustice or personal and collective tragedies of which they testify often complement their pictorial works linguistically. Đorđe Andrejević Kun inscribed the titles of his works directly on his canvases in order to more specifically direct the audience to what he is presenting. He did this on the oil paintings such as *No pasaran* (1948) or *For Peace, Bread and Freedom* (1950). In the first canvas, the words written in the upper part of the composition decidedly indicate the intended message. Without this slogan with clear connotations, the woman with a rifle in her arms could be perceived as an indeterminate female figure carrying a weapon.



Picture 1 Đorđe Andrejević Kun, "No pasarán", 1949, Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade

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Picture 2 Đorđe Andrejević Kun, "The Spanish People Are Rallying to Fight to Defend Freedom", *For Freedom*, 1939.

On one of the prints from Kun's map of graphics For Freedom the title of the entire series is included in Spanish – "por la libertad". The print in question is no. 7, whose description within the map is: "The Spanish People Are Rallying to Fight, to Defend Freedom". The artist's credo is clearly expressed and reflected in the whole narratively structured work⁶. Kun moved to Spain in 1937 to participate in the Civil War as a volunteer in the International Brigades, and he would print the map in 1939, after experiencing the front and upon returning to Yugoslavia.

Combinations of text and images can be traced back to the tradition of the emblematica, where the *pictura* is combined with the linguistic elements labeled *inscriptio* or *motto* and *subscriptio* (Vuksan 2008: 9–11). Such is the case with the series of graphics *The Disasters of War* by Francisco Goya, another and earlier piece of socially engaged visual art strongly interrelated with the aforementioned map by Kun. Goya started to work on these graphics in 1810, and they abound with scenes of atrocities that took place during the Spain. Both Kun's and Goya's work owe something to the French occupation of structure of the emblem (in the graphic "The Spanish People Are Rallying to Fight to Defend Freedom" the text entered is in the position of *inscriptio*). This model served to make their acts of engagement with a testimonial character more pronounced.

Each of Goya's images is followed by a specific comment in the place of a *subscriptio*. For instance, "And There Is no Help" (no. 15). Kun's graphics are also accompanied by a guide that directs the observers to the meaning of their content. One of the first in the series, entitled "They Are Shooting", is vividly described as a scene in which the vic-

⁶ Effortlessly "readable" story of the map is the correlative of the author's ethical and political stance. His "dialogue" with the paradigms from the European art history here is not based on the concept of artisticness, impenetrable to the targeted public, but on the aim which transcends the position of erudition for its own sake. (Ćupić 2015: 261–262)



Picture 3 Francisco Goya, "And There Is no Help",
The Disasters of War, 1810–1820.

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Picture 4 Đorđe Andrejević Kun,
„They Are Shooting“, *For Freedom*, 1939.

tims stand “in front of the mouths of the rifles’ barrels” (Bihalji-Merin 1946: 3). Moreover, if the titles of Kun’s prints are arranged in order and combined, a complete, rounded-off narrative is obtained, which, as more than counterpoint to the graphic images, functions as their independent supplement. In this way, it eliminates all the ambiguity of the visual expression regarding the clear ethical or political message of the artist. In both of the artistic works, in *The Disasters of War* and in *For Freedom*, the figure of the victim, and not the executer, is put at the forefront.

Too direct an engagement in art and literature is bothersome, because it is too obtrusive, aggressive. In the event of such an overstatement or unidirectedness, the work is “killed” by being turned into an ideological pamphlet or moral breviary, regardless of whether the subject is a fictitious event or not. Perhaps the potential of indirectly engaged attitude in visual art is in the ambivalent status of its messages, which do not burden the recipient in a categorical and explicit manner. The mute visual act does leave space not for enchantment, but rather for mystery, which again stimulates reflections in which there is no place for one-sided and clear answers, but neither for the stuttering of meaning.

The social appeal of the painters is a problem. A visual artist as a witness does not speak of crime or violence, but he does not hush them up either. The appeal is *appellatio* – addressing a word, speaking out against injustice, a title, a naming. When a visual artist titles his work, he marks what is the subject of viewing and orients this act into one direction. But the very fact that the title is just one of the elements of the painting indicates that this is an artistic totality whose visual burden cannot be fully supported by the verbal element alone.

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Where Is Engaged Literature?

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And looking back through my work, I see that it is invariably where I lacked a political purpose that I wrote lifeless books and was betrayed into purple passages, sentences without meaning, decorative adjectives and humbug generally.

George Orwell

Now, frankly speaking, I have always been irritated by the complacent conviction that a ripple of stream of consciousness, a few healthy obscenities, and a dash of communism in any old slop pail will alchemically and automatically produce ultramodern literature; and I will contend until I am shot that art as soon as it is brought into contact with politics inevitably sinks to the level of any ideological trash.

Vladimir Nabokov

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Introduction – Poetics or Politics?

The question from the title of this article is a an ambiguous one – on the one hand, it applies to where and how literature is engaged; on the other, it asks how relevant is engaged literature today, considering that it somewhat moved from one of the central features of literary theory to rather marginalized issues within current thinking about literature.

Starting from this special relationship between engagement and literary theory through history (for example, one does not speak of engaged or disengaged visual arts or music), the first part of this article affirms an idea about the inherent engagement of literature through a retrospective reading of several representative passages in Sartre and Plato, and the corresponding examples from several literary works. In effect, we will aim to affirm the idea that Sartre's seminal dictum towards engaged literature actually always existed in literature itself. We will then touch upon the constitutive ambivalence of the use of this notion in literary theory, where engagement is found in parallel or overlaps with the notions of utilitarianism, tendency or socially engaged/responsible art. Furthermore, we will mention authors who, in distinction to Sartre, hold that literature should not be concerned with the world but with itself, and that therefore disengagement is the ultimate literary engagement. Above all, we will mention Adorno's critique of Sartre through the notion of committed literature, and Rancière's politicization and historicization of the aesthetic as a regime of the distribution of the sensible. Finally, by using an example of César Aira's 2001 novel *Favela*, we will test the potential of a Rancièrian notion of literature and possibility of engaged literature hic et nunc. Thus, in a nutshell, we will offer a lapidary, selective overview of traditional approaches to literature and open some timely questions of current literary theory in the context of engaged literature.

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Sartre's Idea of Engaged Literature

First, it is instructive to remind ourselves of an inherent aporia when it comes to offering a precise definition of engagement – in previous considerations of this topic, we moved operatively within the wide perimeters of defining engagement as action, social activity or socially oriented

thinking. If a tentative working definition of engagement is required, critical reflection about social phenomena and emancipatory strivings directed towards problematizing or changing the existing social framework seems useful as defining characteristics (Zaharijević and Vasiljević 2017).

Sartre was “the father of engagement”, as Serbian writer Danilo Kiš once said (Kiš 1995: 199). In the years following the end of World War II, Sartre insists in several works on the writer’s responsibility and demands engaged literature. He criticizes art for art’s sake and writers indifferent towards social reality such as Flaubert and Proust as *irresponsible* (Sartre 1981: 4). In a 1945 preface to the first issue of *Les Temps modernes*, Sartre follows a Hegelian attitude about being situated in time and the world and derives from it a strict *dictum* to the writer to be responsible towards the times that he is writing about; further, he states that he pities Flaubert and Balzac for being indifferent to 1848 and the Paris Commune, and dismisses Proust as “the accomplice of bourgeois propaganda” (Ibid., 10): “A writer is situated in his time: every word resonates. And every silence. I hold Flaubert and Goncourt responsible for the reprisals that followed after the Commune, for they did not write a word to prevent it” (Sartre 1981: 5); in distinction, Sartre emphasizes the examples of Voltaire, Zola and Gide: “Each of these writers felt in a particular circumstance of his life his responsibility as a writer: the occupation has taught us about ours. Since we act to our age by our own existence, we have decided that action to be voluntary... In short, our intention is to contribute to certain changes in Society that surrounds us” (Ibid., 5-7). Moreover, Sartre does not want to change the spirits and souls of the readers, but “men’s social position and their self-conception”.

It is from this vantage point that Sartre derives his conception of literature and demands of writers to address current,

timely questions from the position of totality, and because such choice is a conscious choice and, as such, an essence of a man – man is free. “In that sense, freedom resembles a curse; it *is* a curse. But it is also the only source of human greatness” (Ibid., 14). Thus, a man is responsible for the choice he makes, and there lies his essence. Sartre claims: “That is how we imagine a total man. He is totally engaged and totally free” (Sartre 1981:15), and concludes his text with a remark that “in ‘engaged literature’ *engagement* should by no means suppress the *literary*” (Ibid., 16).

Sartre addressed the topic of engaged literature in more detail in his 1947 collection of essays *What is literature?*, which is a seminal text of the Western European conception of engaged literature (see: Sartre 1949). The book is divided into several diverse and disparate parts. It is difficult to relate the first three essays to the rest of the book. Sartre is trying to provide a relation between different and incompatible discourses about literature while distancing himself from two understandings of literature based on genres. Sartre accuses “art for art’s sake” of making useless works of art, of separating itself from society. He critiques realism as a genre of civil and bourgeois classes with its analytic spirit whose baseline is its reduction of complex things to the sum of simple elements. Furthermore, realism aims toward the non-passionate scientist who convinces himself that he is outside of society. In analytic discourse, a man is a man, bearer of human nature, that is, he does not change. To the analytic spirit Sartre opposes a synthetic one that sees a whole as different from the sum of its parts. There is no such thing as human nature, rather there are metaphysical positions, a sum of forces that delimit and constrain finitude and life with others. The goal of literature is emancipation. Man has to become the other because he does not do what he wants but he is responsible for what he is – totally

engaged and free. The engaged writer defends freedom, he embraces the epoch in which he lives with the goal of stopping the repressions of his time. Authors are also intellectuals who stand against injustices. The work of writers is to point to the eternal values implicit in the social and political conflicts as a way to change the social condition.

Responding to the critics who would claim that engaged literature is nothing but the old social realism, Sartre first distinguishes literature from music, painting, and even from poetry – “The empire of signs is prose” (Sartre 1949: 11). It would be foolish, Sartre submits, to demand poetic engagement, for words in poetry are metamorphosed, whereas in prose they are expressed. For Sartre, “to speak is to act” (Ibid, 22); naming something also means revealing it – *ergo*, the writer is someone who has chosen one way of indirect action through discovering the world. Therefore, literature – understood here as prose – is inherently engaged, for naming means revealing, and one cannot reveal without the desire for change. Writer, Sartre claims, “knows that words, as Brice-Parrain says, are ‘loaded pistols’. If he speaks, he fires. He may be silent, but since he has chosen to fire, he must do it like a man, by aiming at targets” (Sartre 1949: 24) A writer, therefore, reveals, encounters the world, and from this encounter follows responsibility and action to change it.

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Literature and Its Social Function in Literary Theory

One could certainly criticize Sartre for divorcing fiction from poetry and other art forms, especially for his claim that it has a substantially different expressive, even ontological nature, as one might say, from other art forms (for example, why would Picasso’s *Guernica* or Tchaikovsky’s *1812* be less

engaged simply because they are articulated in different mediums? Why would *picture* or *sound* be less lethal, less “loaded pistols” than words?). Still, it is more important to make a retreat here to see that, from the point of history of literary theory, Sartre here actually rearticulates an idea about a specific impact of literature on society that is found in relation to literature practically from the earliest times, among its proponents and critics alike.

As an illustration of the idea about this special relation between literature and society, we provide here one ancient example from the dawn of European literary history, followed by a short discussion of two historically immensely influential conceptions of literature, those of Plato and Horace.

It is known that before the time of the great Athenian dramatists Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, certain Phrynichus had been famous for his tragedies in Athens. That Phrynichus wrote one – nowadays lost – tragedy *The Capture of Miletus*, in which he described the capture of this town by Persians and criticized the Athenians for failing to provide aid for the Miletians (see: Murray 1966: 214 et passim). This is how Herodotus, in Book 6 of his Histories, describes this event:

The Athenians, on the other hand, showed great distress over the capture of Miletus in many ways, and especially in their treatment of Phrynichus. For when this author produced his drama *The Capture of Miletus*, the whole audience burst into tears; and they fined Phrynichus 1,000 drachmas for having reminded them of their own misfortunes, and forbade anyone ever to stage that play again (Herodotus 2014: 315).

Indeed, the Athenians were rather successful in their censorship, for nowadays practically nothing apart from the

title is known about this lost play. Anyway, already in this ancient example we find everything that Sartre wants from literature – an engaged writer who speaks about contemporary events, and who therefore assumes certain responsibility (and, here, a sanction as well) for his work. But the outcome is telling – literature possesses the power to articulate social critique in a too suggestive manner; it has something subversive, dangerous, which needs to be controlled. An exemplary way of such control, which the Athenians chose and many after them applied, is to punish the writer and ban the work.

This case could just as easily serve as a paradigm for Plato's critique of poetry. We will leave out here several of Plato's dialogues in which he, through the character of Socrates, criticizes poets and rhapsodies, such as *Ion*, *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, and focus on several well-known places from *The Republic*.

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In discussing which roles and functions should be present in an ideal state, Socrates and Glaucon conclude that poets should be excluded from it, unless they are properly tamed: "First, as it seems, we must supervise the makers of tales; and if they make a fine tale, it must be approved, but if it's not, it must be rejected. We'll persuade nurses and mothers to tell the approved tales to their children and to shape their souls with tales more than their bodies with hands. Most of those they now tell must be thrown out." (Plato 1991: 377c) Since writers expose many inappropriate and immoral things, this is how they should be dealt with: "We'll beg Homer and the other poets not to be harsh if we strike out these and all similar things. It's not that they are not poetic and sweet for the many to hear, but the more poetic they are, the less should they be heard by boys and men who must be free" (Plato 1991: 387b). Plato then develops in

more detail this thesis that many things that poets present should be banned, such as verses describing how famous heroes cry or weep, or presenting Gods as immoral or inappropriate, for all these things soften the souls of young men: “we fear that our guardians, as a result of such shivers, will get hotter and softer than they ought... So, we’d be right in taking out the wailings of renowned men and we’d give them to women – and not to the serious ones, at that – and to all the bad men.” (Plato 1991: 387-388).

Therefore, according to Plato’s ideal statesmen, literature softens and spoils men, which is particularly worrying in case of warriors whose task is to defend the state. One of the key passages here is 398a, where Socrates and Glaucon conclude that they would expel a brilliant poet from their state, “while we ourselves would use a more austere and less pleasing poet and teller of tales for the sake of benefit, one who would imitate the style of the decent man and would say what he says in those models that we set down as laws at the beginning, when we undertook to educate the soldiers.” (Plato 1991: 398b).¹

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1 In this context, it is instructive to remind ourselves that for the entire Ancient Roman and later classical and classicist poetics derived from it, utilitarianism of literature featured as its basic notion. In the Roman poetics, a supreme poetic dictum was that poetry (therefore, literature) should “join the instructive with agreeable”; subsequently, *utili cum dulce* remained an astonishingly influential and repeated phrase derived from Horace’s influential *Ars Poetica*, actually an epistle to Piso family, where he claims: “The aim of the poet is to inform or delight, or to combine together, in what he says, both pleasure and applicability to life... He who combines the useful and the pleasing wins out by both instructing and delighting the reader.” (Horace 1990). Even though it was rather short and colloquial than an actual theoretical treatise, Horace’s epistle had enormous historical significance and, according to one source, “exerted an almost continual influence over poets and literary critics alike – perhaps because its dicta, phrased in verse form, are so eminently quotable.” (Leitch et al 2001: 121). Thus, after the Roman period such understanding dominated in the Renaissance and Classicism, and so Marco Girolamo Vida in the 16th century, and Nicolas Boileau in his 17th century *Ars Poetica* (the leading poetics of the Classicist era), did little more than appropriating Horace’s words (see: Cook 1926); it was not until Romanticism that poetics emancipated themselves from mimetic and instrumentalist understanding of poetry. A Marxist understanding of literature is again an altogether separate and complex issue, but let us mention here only briefly that Marx personally favoured literary works with strong revolutionary and emancipatory note, such as, for

To sum up: we reach here a serious paradox; while Sartre wishes to engage art in order that the one who shoots would shoot like a man, Plato wants to tame and censure it for the same reason – so that men do not weep and cry but instead fight bravely and fearlessly. Yet, both thus imply that literature has a rather significant power to affect the citizens and influence their formation. A number of other thinkers throughout history advocated, perhaps less explicitly, for a didactic role of literature. Still, Plato arguably remains the most representative because he, *mutatis mutandis*, sees clearly that it is impossible to have an equally literary and instrumental value, and hence that *literariness* must be sacrificed for the sake of *utilitariness*. More so, Plato understands that poets have a power that needs to be tempered, and that precisely those best among them, that move the audience the most, are socially dangerous and should be given honours and praises, but then actually kicked out from the state.

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Therefore, and these conclusions should be taken as mere notes, if literature really ought to be male, fiery, it can be so only by sacrificing the literariness. Furthermore, philosophers who expedite such request to literature do so in specific, militant circumstances – for Sartre, such dictum is a

instance, Aeschylus' *Prometheus Unbound*, which he mentions as his favourite work. Hence, Marx and Engels advocated for "tendency" in literature. Certainly, they were not altogether deprived of the taste for literary subtleties. Thus, for instance, in a well-known 1885 letter to Minna Kautsky, Engels reprimands her for being too explicit in propagating socialist ideas, and adds: „But I believe the tendency must spring forth from the situation and the action itself, without explicit attention called to it; the writer is not obliged to offer to the reader the future historical solution of the social conflicts he depicts.“ (Baxandall & Morawski 1973: 113) This is certainly a far more nuanced approach from, say, Stalin's, who in a speech at the Congress of Soviet Writers labels them as "the engineers of souls" and demands from them a spiritual industrialization of the Soviets (see. Ždanov 1972: 561). Yet, it appears that the Marxist approach to literature essentially sees it as secondary, derived from the economic basis and relations of production that condition it. Be it as it may, the conception of socially engaged art or social realism that clearly imposed utilitarian means on it sprung from a Marxist notion of literature (to what extent it actually vulgarized the original socialist teachings is, of course, open to debate). Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce once conveniently dismissed such utilitarian demands of literature of the utile cum dulce type by saying that literature is there reduced to being a tutor or a prostitute.

lesson learned from the occupation, while Plato discusses poetry in the context of educating warriors.

Engaged Literature or Shoot Like a Man

Let us assume that, indeed, literature should perform a particular social function. If one truly follows such logic to its ultimate consequences, does it not lead to the abandonment of literature *in toto*? In such case, why write anything at all when there are other, more direct forms of social action? Is it not more correct to fight than to write? Therein lies perhaps the crucial problem of the utilitarian approach – if we force a goal and purpose onto literature that is aside and outside of it, if we set it with strictly defined social-utilitarian criteria, we lose literary qualities or literariness, “that is, what makes a given work a literary work” or literary facts, as understood first by the Russian formalists Roman Jakobson and Yury Tynyanov in the early twentieth century (see: Waugh 2006: 215 et passim).

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Further, we do not see many reasons to follow Sartre’s *dictum* that the occupation taught us; on the contrary, writers often responded to occupation beyond utility – was it not that the Soviet literature of the pre-revolutionary and revolutionary period was profoundly avant-gardist, thus representing one persistent, non-referential, anti-referential perhaps, search for a different form of art and literature? What kind of literature did Osip Mandelstam, Daniil Kharms and other writers persecuted in the times of Stalin write but a “decadent”, “socially irresponsible” one as Stalin and his cultural commissar Zhdanov objected. From that perspective, were not Kharms’ surreal, paradigmatically disengaged *Incidences* (Случаи) representing a specific literary resistance to the demands for utilitarianism and ten-

dency in literature, and thereby the resistance to the very totalitarian order itself? Below are some of these *Incidences* (Kharms 2006):

The Plummeting Old Women

A certain old woman, out of excessive curiosity, fell out of a window, plummeted to the ground, and was smashed to pieces.

Another old woman leaned out of the window and began looking at the remains of the first one, but she also, out of excessive curiosity, fell out of the window, plummeted to the ground and was smashed to pieces.

Then a third old woman plummeted from the window, then a fourth, then a fifth.

By the time a sixth old woman had plummeted down, I was fed up watching them, and went off to Mal'tsevsky Market where, it was said, a knitted shawl had been given to a certain blind man.

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An Encounter

On one occasion a man went off to work and on the way he met another man who, having bought a loaf of Polish bread, was going his way home. And that's just about all there is to it.

The Red-Haired Man

There was a red-haired man who had no eyes or ears. Neither did he have any hair, so he was called red-haired theoretically.

He couldn't speak, since he didn't have a mouth. Neither did he have a nose.

He didn't even have any arms or legs. He had no stom-

ach and he had no back and he had no spine and he had no innards whatsoever. He had nothing at all! Therefore there's no knowing whom we are even talking about.

In fact it's better that we don't say any more about him.

Thereby, could the entire argument be reversed in light of this and could it be said that literature is all the more engaged when it is disinterested towards “social reality”, when it gives no clues for Sartrean and Platonic demands. In certain moments, it seems as if Sartre himself is pondering about this. Thus, for instance, he first dismisses Flaubert as “a talented *rentier*” and as “the most radically disengaged French writer”, but also adds that his disengagement is only “a reverse of a total engagement” (see Matvejević 1975: 89). Maurice Blanchot, in his critique of Sartre, puts forward precisely such attitude that to write is to engage; but, to write is also to disengage, dedicate oneself irresponsibly: “Writing is, at the limit, that which cannot be effected, thus always in search of a nonpower, refusing mastery, order, and the established order above all, preferring silence to the speech of absolute truth, thereby contesting things and contesting them incessantly.” (Blanchot 2010:117) In distinction to Sartre, for Blanchot (and George Bataille as well) “writing does not signify anything apart from naming words that are nothing else but words” (Călin 2016: 55).

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Danilo Kiš criticized Sartre in a somewhat cognate manner. Kiš was generally a strong proponent of the ethical role of the writer and exemplary author who considered that the Holocaust and Gulag are crucial modern events and that writers should write about them and take a stand towards them. Therefore, Kiš seems to fit perfectly Sartre's conception of literary engagement. Yet, in contrast to Sartre, he wrote: „I believe in the primordial qualificatives of art as

such, literature as such, and I believe that art, and literature, is an ethical and not just aesthetic choice; and that the so-called pure art, a term nowadays pejoratively used, is also a particular engagement; it is not only a school of aesthetics, but of ethics as well.” (Kiš 1995: 199) What is more, further on in his essay on engagement in literature, Kiš denies such possibility *in toto*: “For today, here and in general, I do not believe in the possibility of engagement through art, especially in literature. An engaged writer is *contradictio in adjecto*. One can be an engaged journalist, or engaged newspaper seller. In the best-case scenario, a solicitor, defense lawyer or prosecutor. The father of engagement, J. P. Sartre, showed and proved it” (Ibid., 201). This statement applies to Sartre’s literary works and implies that it is precisely the tendency in his approach to literature that is responsible for their modest literary value.

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In short, in his writings on engaged literature, Sartre aspires passionately, but naively and unconvincingly, to reconcile quasi-Marxist and existential understandings of freedom. In addition, his approach is “dangerously” humanist, one in which freedom is reduced to abstraction and never a concrete relation. Freedom becomes an empty signifier susceptible to be filled with any meaning. Read from today’s perspective, if we were to push further that kind of engagement, it becomes clear that the market and the state have filled the signifier freedom and turned it into a brand that can be bought and chosen. Freedom has become a cliché. Be it as it may, in its foundation, Sartre’s understanding of engaged literature is conservative insofar as it reproduces the capitalist understanding of literature as “function” and “instrumentalization”. An irresolvable problem with Sartre is that he subsumes literature under aesthetic ideology reproducing a Romantic understanding of politics and aesthetics.

As an implicit response to Sartre, Theodor Adorno will write

an essay several years later, in 1962, in which he will offer a different understanding of the relation between *committed literature* (in the English translation the term is not engaged but committed) and autonomous literature (2). For Adorno, committed literature is literature that does not carry a specific political message in service of ideals but that still has a message. The key to understanding committed literature is maintenance of tension between autonomous literature and its sociality. Literature and arts emerge in antithetical relation to society. Such danger, for Adorno, of politically committed literature is a political act. The danger lies in the fact that committed literature will either end in bad literature or bad politics. With such a change in understanding of literature, Adorno offers also an image of committed or engaged writer that is embodied in the figure of Samuel Beckett (3).

Tones of Adorno's critique remain deeply traditional and vertical because they rest on the aesthetic judgments of the good/bad binary of literature which reproduces class difference gearing toward the instrumentalization of literature and its social role. By reproducing the modernist understanding of literature which is based on a superior position of author-supposed-to-know, Adorno forgets the unnecessary fixing of meaning and infinite play of differences. Adorno as well as Sartre cannot imagine a third possibility that is articulated by Jacques Rancière in his *Politics of Literature* as a way out of the pedagogical machine (2).

Rancière changes the language and mode of the ways we speak and think of literature and arts. If Adorno and Sartre remain vertical writers for whom literature guards its pedagogical function, Rancière tries to think a different approach and way of reading texts and its interpretations. He is not interested in aesthetics neither as theory nor as education but politicization of aesthetics and its histori-

ty as a regime of distribution of sensible relations between heterogeneous signs in anti-literary texts. By sensible, Rancière understands “a system of self-evident facts of perception of sense which simultaneously reveal the existence of something in common (2011: 5)”. For Rancière, literature describes a system of implicit rules of seeing, speaking and making that unite and separate the community. Before it is an official politics, community is first of all a domain of the sensible constituted by the rules and habits of perception. Distribution of the sensible, therefore, is not a simple ethos or a system of social behaviours, but a space of possibilities that remains plural, political and perceptual. The main argument is that literature and arts are constitutive acts of cutting or rupture within the order of the sensible, intervening in the dissident forms of subversion.

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For Rancière, literature’s radicality emerges in new ways of relating what can be sayable and visible, words and things, words and sense. Literature and arts intervene in the struggle over experience. The politics of literature, its engagement, is not in the thoughts of writers (Sartre) nor is it sending a message (Adorno) but it is a reversal of direction, in order to make possible for words to constitute a “common world”. He is clear: “what links the practice of art and literature to the question of the common is the constitution, at once material and symbolic, of a specific space-time, of a suspension with respect to the ordinary forms of sensory experience” (2011: 7). What is happening in this constellation? Rancière is not interested in literature and arts as theory nor institution but as a practice. It is no surprise that he will state that human is not only a political animal but a literary one for only humans are capable of making relations where previously there were none. He uses this peculiar word “to link” which implies technics and the artificiality of literature and arts. The question of common and its con-

stitution is at once material (neither realism nor idealism) and symbolic (therefore, social) as an intervention into the relation between space and time. Such a relation is inseparable, which makes possible the suspension of forms of sensible experience. If we consider the word “ordinary” as that which is usual and familiar, or that which the market offers, it seems that Rancière opens the possibility of a differential relation to that which is vulgar and already known. Different, unconventional, unknowable, strange or unusual opens up the possibility of interval or inscription of different relations to time, whether as an opposition or an alternative (2011: 23).

César Aira’s *Favela* as a Possibility of Contemporary Literary Engagement

Within such a context, Aira’s novel *La villa (Favela)* (Aira 2006) exemplifies an opening to a Rancièran kind of reading and the possibility of engagement in literature. The novel is dedicated to the lives of the dispossessed, *cartoneros*, at the edges of Buenos Aires, in favelas that emerge in the 1950s in Argentina and Latin America as a symptom of economic and political crisis. Maxi, an anti-hero, helps cartoneros to found a library. Maxi has a mysterious characteristic. Maxi does not think. Through the absence of self-in-reflexive-life outside of every calculation, Maxi helps cartoneros to found a library shop with Borges’ stories. Books, made out of cardboard, receive a magical creation. Books are singular because none of them is identical to another; made of recycled cardboard, the books do not act as usual commodities. As objects, books interpellate through the excess of affect and anti-capitalist mode of production returning dignity to those who participate in a creative act. The mode of production establishes a tension at the limits of the

capital, separating interiority from exteriority (exteriority as a mode of production not yet totalized under capitalist production). Anonymous and discrete members of the community embody a symbolic revenge against the productivism of late capitalism, making value without value, drawing from the perception of singular and unknown subject – a maker who is outside of biopolitical capture. The novel suggests that we are not bearing witness to creating an identity that would melt into political representation but about the withdrawal into the zone of anonymity that temporarily protects singularities from biopolitical regimes. Thus, the figure of cartonero at the edges of the social gestures toward the possibility of living together as equals in the world of inequality, maintaining the sense of tragedy but without disaster or catastrophe. It points to living together beyond identity and identification:

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The terms are hostile to life: he is damned; he will die in few seconds. He is a living dead. And yet, in the meantime, (*mientras tanto*), he is alive, arriving to the world with others, to the world and its brutal reality. And that, in the meantime, is all that is left. (Aira 2001: 142).

The importance of those little words, *mientras tanto*, exposes that which neoliberal hegemony supposedly eliminated: the thought of future as radically other, as new and unexplored world on the one hand and, on the other, it exhausts the theological trajectory of modern historical time, what Walter Benjamin calls “the empty homogenous time” (2009: 10). *Mientras tanto*, still tragic, inscribes the thought of meantime, a thought irreducible to an understanding of history as one-dimensional historical time. With such a phrase, Aira affirms the existence of a meantime that is yet to be captured with modern techno-science and neoliberalism, and yet a time that does not belong to the metaphysical notion of time as here-and-now tied to the notion of prog-

ress, self-realization and movement toward a predetermined goal. As a zero ground of relation, the meantime is an opening to the other, to that which still remains uncanny in the familiar, and an opening to the unknown future.

On the one hand, the time of the novel coincides with the time of capitalism and, on the other, the time of cartoneros exposes the incompatibility. The suspension of time of domination and biopolitical control, that absorbs every situation into a global process and the politics of identity and identification, makes possible for those who live in it to make a different sense, *poiesis*. Such an attitude points toward a novel notion of the politics of engaged literature. Aira's cartoneros and Maxi gesture toward the possibility of constructing and redistributing time that can suspend the reproduction of disaster and linear understanding of time.

Aira's politics is not the politics of master-narratives but politics of relations making a part of *poiesis*, which creates events through marking time as the meantime. For Aira, relations do not reflect but make history, a subaltern history, history of those who are outside of Western modernity and coloniality of power. This is not because "everything is fiction or construction" (an old postmodern cliché) but because relations are conditions of possibility for temporality and spatiality. That is the meaning of relations: language and relations are for cartoneros the very possibility of breathing, life and overcoming of disaster; hence, the publication of Borges. Aira, as a contemporary writer writing about contemporary problems presupposes a certain decentering, displacement in relation to the absolute absorption into the contemporary moment, into the here-and-now. Paradoxically, someone belongs to its time when s/he does not coincide with it and does not become complicit with its demands. Such a distancing and exemption, inactuality of one's own time makes for a specific non-fas-

ination and non-infatuation with contemporarity, which is the condition of possibility of the contemporary. For Aira, a contemporary engaged writer is someone who perceives gaps and excess, mapping events as thought that inscribes within the inertia of homogeneity of linear time a notion of non-linearity and heterogeneity.

Conclusion: Poetics or Politics

236 If the question of engagement in literature is organized within a larger context that includes the role and responsibility of the work itself as well as the writer in/towards society, we can see – even though, implicitly and without reference to the word engagement – that it interweaves the whole critical literary tradition. Older and newer authors, philosophers, writers, ideologues, and statesmen offer diverse and conflicted views. It seems, however, that in its foundation the question of *how* literature becomes engaged remains open: is it engaged when it speaks of certain (contemporary) social problems, is it engaged when it speaks through language or the being of language?

In that line of thought, the two introductory quotes, one from Orwell's essay "Why I Write?" and the other one from Nabokov's 1936 short story "Spring in Fialta" reflect one another negatively and represent two approaches to literature: the first one passionately advocates socially engaged themes, while the other believed that "literature is not a postman to deliver the message". These two authors personify such a dualism, a dilemma whether literature is most engaged when it is self-absorbed, when it is realized as pure literature with its specific nonreferential and poetic notions, when it "chit-chats" as Orwell would have it, or when it refers to and engages readers with themes that are

of social interest?

This possibility, in our opinion, comes from Rancière and his understanding of literature. Following his line of thought, engaged literature today is not concerned with establishing values (as in modernist and sociological interpretations of literature) nor is it interested in an autonomous and indivisible individual (as in the liberal-romanticist function of literature). Rancière is concerned with the rethinking of “common life” within community, with the possibility of creating a new relation with experience. The aesthetic experience in which literature participates, represents, in a nutshell, symbolic performative spaces, political laboratories that give a different sense and meaning to democracy or the lack of it. Considering that literature is a relation, it follows that there can be no one politics – that is, it has to be at least double. Literature’s engagement happens when and if a reader is confronted with the finitude of his or her single common sense. The implicit obligation of engaged literature is not to complete a historical “image” but to make history move, to create and make relation as well as new unthinkable “common” relations outside of social domination, hegemony and the identity/difference dialectic.

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Engaged
Researcher

Notes towards the Political Culture of Engagement

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The aim of this paper is to offer an analytical sketch of the *political culture of engagement* as different from, but nonetheless complementary to, what is usually known as participatory political culture (Almond and Verba, 1963). I will start from an understanding of political culture as a content which fills the empty shell of the social structure of (local, national, global) society in its political domain – evolving around political institutions and political organizing. Then, I will try to show that there are several layers that need to be properly explained, from the most abstract to those linked to the everyday action of citizens. My intention here is to bridge the subjectivist/psychological approach (focused on individual actors and their behaviour), structural approach (focused on institutions) and practice approach (focused on the relational production of social meaning in the everyday life of citizens). Bridging these approaches could help us avoid an ecological fallacy which happens when we generalize about political culture by using overly simplistic understandings of culture(s). This was particularly the case with the psychological approach based on individual beliefs that dominated the political culture research for a long time, drawing on the very important and unavoidable

contribution of Almond and Verba with their capital work *Civic Culture*.

This article should be understood as an attempt to offer a heuristically potent sketch that could guide us in mapping those aspects of political life that foster citizens' engagement in the public sphere. Recognizing the complexity implied in the notion of political culture, I will try to grasp its components that delineate the political culture of engagement.

Background to the Political Culture Research

Political culture comes with different meanings and definitions. It is understood as the pattern of orientations to political institutions, conventions and traditions (Almond and Verba 1963), the sum of fundamental values, sentiments and knowledge that give form and substance to political processes (Pye 1995), the set of discourses or symbolic practices (Baker 1990), socially constructed normative systems deriving from social and psychological influences (Wilson 2000) or beliefs about the purpose of governance, common good and frontiers of political activity (Elazar 1972), to name just a few. The notion of political culture could be loosely linked to Max Weber's notion of elective affinity that connects Protestantism and its ethics to capitalism and its ethos (Weber 1905 [1989])¹. However, its firm roots are situated in the Parsonian understanding of society as a tripartite structure entailing the social, the cultural and the individual (psychological) system (Parsons 1965). While Parsons understood culture as coherent sets of norms, values, and attitudes and emphasized socialization as a key process in sustaining institutions and

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¹ For more on the concept of "elective affinity" see Howe 1978 and McKinnon 2010.

hence what we name political culture, he was heavily criticized for setting these cultural elements as prerequisites that are not subjected to empirical research.

Echoes of Parsons' overly structural theory can be found in the dominant approaches developed in the decades following his major works in the 1950s. In an almost immediate reaction, the behaviouralist approach strived to empirically found Parsons' grand system theory and concept of culture. Almond's and Verba's work (1963) had a major impact in such endeavour:

When we speak of the political culture of a society, we refer to the political system as internalized in the cognitions, feelings, and evaluations of its population. People are induced into it just as they are socialized into nonpolitical roles and social systems" (Almond and Verba 1963: 14).

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Understanding political culture as a realm between micro and macro politics, they formulated a conceptual model that, unlike the Parsonian highly theoretical one, could be tested empirically through individual political orientations and self-reported behaviours (Almond 1980). Assuming that political culture is dependent on individual cognitions, feelings, and evaluations, they put citizens into the focus as political actors with their agency. However, they were heavily criticized for generalizing based on data which reflected individual attitudes which was overly simplistic and ignored the complexities of societies in the search for comparative conclusions. Their concept of national political culture was an extrapolation of minor inter-state variations in individual responses to entire populations (Newman 2002: 608). Also, their theory was circular as it is not clear whether a stable democratic political system leads to a participatory civic culture or vice versa (Alexander 2000: 20).

The subjective approach became popular in the 1960s, after the end of the dominance of structuralism which was difficult to apply, measure and compare in order to build a testable theory. Such development led to the “third way” in theory – the middle range theories that made efforts to bridge the individual and highly structural approaches of previous decades. While dealing with path dependences and modernization processes in Third World countries, many of these authors emphasized specific aspects of political culture. One of the most influential theories comes from Ronald Inglehart (see Inglehart 1977, 1997, 2018), whose work on (post)modernist values marked a significant portion of political culture literature in the last decades of the XX century. Inglehart also grounded his theory in the materialist, mixed, and post-materialist values which were explored among individuals. However, he makes a step further and changes his units of analysis from individuals to generational cohorts which allows him to generalize on state populations (Inglehart and Welzel 2003; Newman 2002). This move helps Inglehart to answer the critics that claim that his twelve-item index of post-materialism on the individual level is insufficiently coherent. Inglehart understands socialization as the key factor of possessing (post)materialist values which resonates completely with Parsons. In spite of having introduced socialization that is socio-economically determined, Inglehart never captured the institutional framework that affects personal choices, values and agency.

Institutions also play a role in demarcating political culture. In parallel with the modernization theories and Inglehart’s work, the institutionalist approach has been revived to bring back the neglected structures of political life. The followers drew on the reaction against behavioural models that saw politics as sometimes conditioned by political culture, but largely unmediated by institutional structures (Steinmo et

al 1992). This approach entails a view on culture as *the institutional limits on decisions that influence individual choice*. As Steinmo and Thelen emphasize: “A critical body of work in the mid to late 1970s and early 1980s pointed to intermediate-level institutional factors – corporatist agreements, policy networks linking economic groups to the state bureaucracy, party structures – and the role they play in defining the constellations of incentives and constraints faced by political actors in different national contexts” (Steinmo and Thelen 1992: 6). The structure and performance of political institutions affects the political culture in an interdependent relation where institutions are reversely affected by the political culture (understood as individual values and beliefs) as legitimization provider (Lepsius 1982).

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The renewed interest in institutional factors has resulted in two influential approaches – the new historical institutionalism and rational choice institutionalism. While the latter emphasizes the role of institutions in shaping actors’ strategies, it is rather the historical version of institutionalism which is relevant for this exploration of political culture since its authors see the actors’ goals and preferences as also shaped by institutions. Consequently, institutional aspects, that is, the enduring formal and informal rules of political institutions and organizing influence not only the stability of political life, but also its changes. While engagement introduces political (and social) changes, I will try to show that it is also instructive to include the analysis of institutional influence on engagement in the public sphere as one of the key pillars of political culture (of engagement). In his latest book, *Cultural Evolution*, Inglehart comes to a similar conclusion when he says that the political institutions and the citizens’ value orientations must have mutually coherent values in order to have legitimacy and be durable (Inglehart 2018).

Finally, the practice approach theories in political science are derived from general theories of culture (i.e. Sewell 1999). Within this stream, the political culture is usually understood as:

The set of discourses or symbolic practices” through which “individuals and groups in any society articulate, negotiate, implement, and enforce competing claims they make upon one another and upon the whole (Baker 1990: 4).

By emphasizing the cultural aspects within the political culture concept, this approach delineates this term as a relatively autonomous and temporal realm with its own internal rules, dynamics and relations from other domains of social life throughout time. Within this realm, the process of the meaning-making of specific practices shapes the political culture². “In sum”, claims Somers, “the most dramatic distinguishing quality of the rejuvenated political culture concept is definitional: rather than a collection of internalized expressions of subjective values or externalized expressions of social interests, a political culture is now defined as a *configuration of representations and practices* that exists as a contentious structural social phenomenon in its own right” (Somers 1995: 133; emphasis added). The focus here is on analyzing the relations between practices like habits, everyday life patterns of social actors related to political system and the meaning, signification they assign to them (Weeden 2002). If we assume that these meanings are different in different contexts, the problems with using popular surveys for measuring the prevalence of certain values and opinions is even more problematic. Therefore, careful reading of the processes that change ongoing practices and systems of meaning, generating multiple significations within social groups is highly significant³.

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2 An excellent study on meaning-making and engagement could be found in Lee and Chan 2008.

3 We can find a very interesting study of political culture in Russia

Understanding Political Culture

What is then a political culture? Situated in-between the macro and micro levels, individuals, practices and institutions, it is close to the notion of the public sphere, also potent with different meanings. Manifestations of political culture emerge in a public sphere as “a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed” (Habermas 1974: 49) building “a zone of civic life oriented toward political issues and public life but free of the direct control of the official state and its coercive mechanisms” (Somers 1995: 124).

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In order to formulate an initial model of political culture that reflects its complexity, I will try to outline a diagram which captures and presents different relevant aspects and levels of political culture to be taken into account. In my elaboration of the model I see political cultures as inherently plural, without limiting its meaning and scope to the usual national (nation state) framework. This understanding of political cultures can thus be diversified on the more macro levels of geopolitical regions, but also on the more micro levels of diverse smaller regions within the states or cross-bordering them.

authored by Nikolai Petro, who claims that political culture research was too narrowly focused on searching for elements of “civic culture” development, while failing to grasp the complex political cultural symbols in society (Petro 1995).

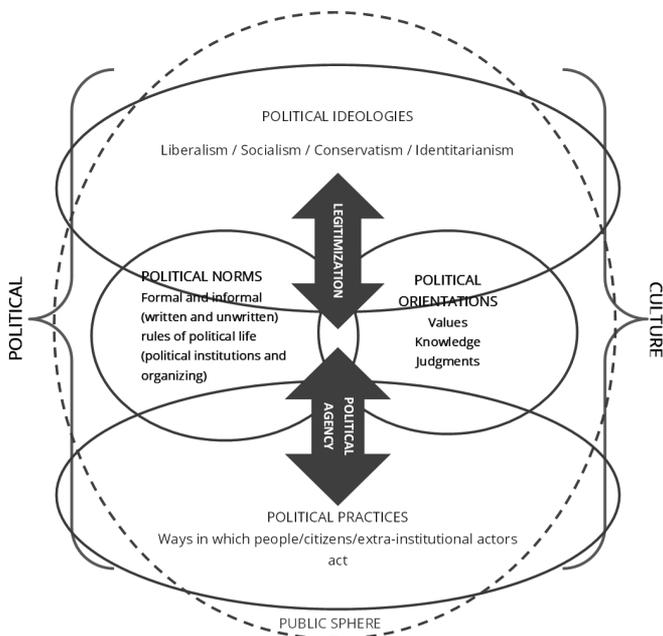


Figure 1. Political culture model diagram

The most abstract, macro level of political ideologies (Heywood 1998; Freedman 1996, 2003; Vincent 1992) must be taken into account when discussing political cultures. Each of these major ideologies is a “complex of doctrines” (Geuss 2002) and their specific mixtures represent a base of any particular political culture. Ideologies lie at the foundation of political norms and political orientations, and especially of values and judgments. They legitimize structural and institutional rules, but also individual beliefs that build into political cultures. Following Mannheim’s political theory (Mannheim 1954; Breiner 2013), I consider the ideological influx into political cultures extremely important. His the-

ory allows us to be “sensitive to the contingent historical development and the durable elements of politics and to the specific constellation of political ideologies whose adherents use political means in the struggle for pre-eminence” (Breiner 2013: 39). However, Mannheim’s key contribution, also known as Mannheim’s paradox (Geertz 1973) states that every analysis of political ideologies is always done from the perspective of another ideology. The fluidity of the ideological components and their shifting from one to another ideology, together with the setting of different priorities in the “complex of doctrines” is what can later be identified in Freeden’s (de)contesting concept of political ideology (Freeden 1996). Next to the three major ideologies – liberalism, conservatism and socialism – and several “minor” ideologies which are not explicitly named here, I included also identitarianism as a reference to all identity-based ideologies (i.e. nation, religion, gender) that cannot be reduced to any of these major three, but can substantially shape political cultures. Ideologies as “explicit, articulated, highly organized meaning systems” are especially important during times of change, or as Swidler (1996) argues during unsettled periods, when ideologies are used to establish new strategies of action and specific demands in particular areas of life, leading gradually to – cultural change.

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Within the *mezzo* level, political cultures encompass two major components that are usually identified with political culture as a whole. The interplay of the political norms that are reflected in political institutions and organizing (institutionalism) and political orientations (behavioralism) give a specific character to political cultures and none of these can be separated as solely determinant. Institutional factors as well as informality, the grey zone behind rules and norms that define institutional and organizational functioning,

set boundaries for the possible in politics. They inform the knowledge of citizens and they are the object of citizens' judgments. With the political values of citizens that derive its content from political ideologies, the concept of political orientation, as described by Almond and Verba, is fully incorporated into the diagram, but is here only one of the components of political culture. Both political norms and political orientations are prerequisites for the political agency that stands behind political practices.

Finally, on the lowest, micro level, we need to take into consideration these political practices as particular manifestations of political action borne by different political actors – from the individual level of citizens to the level of citizens organizing *beyond* and *outside of* political organizations and institutions. Among all aspects defined in this model, this one is probably the most difficult to grasp, as it is mostly connected with the everyday life of citizens and the meanings they attribute to different practices. Its focus lies in the extra-institutional realm in order to avoid heavy overlapping with political practices that are clearly the result of the institutional and party systems with their norms and rules already captured at the mezzo level. However, these institutionalized practices shouldn't be neglected, including i.e. voting, petitions or deliberative arenas.

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Political Culture of Engagement

After drafting the model that potentially allows me to grasp social engagement as a distinct characteristic of a particular political culture, a few words could be said about the notion of the political culture of engagement.

The concept is based on the understanding of social engagement as a collective practice that exposes a double movement constitutive of the engagement itself – reflection

on the existing social norms and rules, and consequently, acting upon or against their modification or change (Losoncz and Cvejic, forthcoming). Following this, the political culture of engagement entails a twofold action – participation of political actors (from citizens to group actors) which is based on the reflected insufficiencies of current political life and the subsequent moving beyond the current state of affairs.

Departing from the above sketched diagram, we could identify political cultures of engagement by investigating three relevant factors: political norms that set incentives for engagement, political orientations that value engagement as important and political practices in the ordinary life of political actors (again individuals and group actors) that bring engagement into life.

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Political norms can be designed in such a way that encourage the engagement of political actors to reflect on the insufficiencies of current political life and act to remove them. Empirically, this aspect could be researched through the analysis of rules of political institutions that refer to decision making, participation and instruments of changing the policies and rules themselves⁴. Obviously, those communities that give voice to the citizens using legal tools could score better in this aspect. Another important aspect of analysing political norms that encourage engagement would be the examination of the internal norms of political parties as key forms of political organizing.

4 I.e. In the case of Serbia, the normative framework in political institutions and organizations that would pursue and encourage engagement exists with some deficiencies. The Constitution of the Republic of Serbia (2006), together with the Law on Local Self-Government (2007) and Law on Referendum and People's Initiative (1994) regulates the instruments (of direct democracy) for the citizens' influence on political elites, beside the classical tools of political participation in elections. However, the Law on Local Self-Government leaves to the local self-governments to define through their statutes specifically how these instruments will be used on the local level. Such mechanism is under strong influence of the dominant parties that have a possibility to limit the scope of citizens' participation through lower-level acts (CRCD 2008). To which extent this is the case demands further investigation.

Political orientations that reveal a high value of social engagement and political and interpersonal trust are the second relevant factor. In Almond's and Verba's words, there is a high reserve of influence among citizens that affects their agency. This is typically researched through cross-national surveys of values and beliefs expressed in citizens' attitudes within Eurobarometer, World Value Survey and similar⁵. The self-reflection of citizens on their political efficacy is important for the political culture of engagement, as the citizens' feeling that they are able to initiate changes has proven to boost political agency and encourage engagement (for more on internalization of efficacy see Pateman 1971).

Finally, we have to take into account political practices that show evidence of engagement as a series of realized social acts oriented towards bringing change into the political realm. Depending on the recorded characteristic of the modes of citizens' action, a certain engaged political culture could be potentially characterized as a *dissentious* or *reformist* one. Dissentious cultures channel engagement using the dominantly extra-institutional modes of political action, while those reformist ones are dominated by institutionalized modes of action⁶. This component is sometimes referred to as political activism (Dalton and Welzel 2014) or "repertoire of contention" (Tilly 2004).

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5 Taking again the Serbian political culture as a showcase, we could say that it is characterized by a lack of trust towards institutions in general, and especially trust towards political institutions and organizations, which nowadays stands at the lowest level in Europe (Bešić 2014; Fiket et al. 2017). Interpersonal trust is also declining, being among the lowest in Europe (Bešić 2014: 185). There is no direct evidence about the orientation towards social engagement, but it can be indirectly extrapolated from the data that show an utter lack of agency and belief that citizens can bring about any changes (Pavlović 2008; Fiket et al. 2017). This apathy is strongly linked with the perception of politics as a "dirty business" and with refraining from any form of engagement that wouldn't have immediate and direct effects on the personal lives of individuals at stake. Citizens in Serbia don't recognize or acknowledge their own agency, which deprives them of any reserve of influence in Almond's and Verba's terms.

6 Again, data from Serbia show that 85% of respondents never participate in the work of local authorities/self-government, 37% has no interest in politics and an additional 51% is not active for different reasons (CESID 2017).

Political cultures of engagement are to be differentiated from cultures of disengagement, characterized by apathy, alienation and cynicism (Dasgupta 2011). Also, they are not to be equated with democratic political culture, as we could imagine a highly engaged political culture that does not give voice equally to all its citizens, but discriminates certain groups (based on race, caste, wealth, health etc). This concept also differs from civic or participatory culture, where the emphasis is clearly on the behaviour and beliefs of individual citizens and participatory value-orientation is strongly intertwined with the rational choice approach. Contemporary studies of social movements and other forms of social engagement often neglect affective or emotionally driven behaviour (see Vasiljević in this study) which fits well into the third factor of political practices in the model presented here. The triangle of *political norms, orientations and practices* defines the three-dimensional continuum with three axes along which we can situate all particular political cultures observed through the lenses of engagement through time. High score on all three dimensions will, most probably, be found in developed democracies, as I assume that it is not likely to identify political norms encouraging engagement in autocratic environments, even if practices and orientation might exacerbate the importance of engagement. But we might find that it is exactly engaged practices and orientations that help in sustaining ruling elites in power in countries where i.e. identitarian ideologies prevail as a cultural base, providing a mighty tool for preventing the development of embedded democracies (Merkel 2004).

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The model, as it is here drafted, does not allow us to make conclusions about the durability and changes of the political cultures, but captures them in the moment. Any reflections on change and its indicators as well as impetuses should encompass a much wider picture, in which socio-economic factors and historical and geopolitical contextualization all

figure. Also, we have to bear in mind that the history of the past engaged political practices of citizens strongly influences political culture. However, this is a discussion far beyond the scope of this article and remains to be developed in further work, as the model presented above needs to get empirical testing for us to be able to say more on political cultures of engagement.

Conclusion

In the above section I attempted to sketch a model of the political culture of engagement that could be further utilized and could be beneficial for understanding, among other, how it is possible that certain regressive and counter-democratic changes occur. The model represents a possible corrective to the widely spread notions that engagement, participation and political activism necessarily lead towards more democracy and more inclusive societies. It is necessary to develop a wider perspective and put into focus not only the orientations of citizens, but also structural constraints and incentives, as well as political practices voiced in actions that are manifestations of the possible and realizations of agency. This model might prove useful in exploring specific indicators influencing the political cultures in societies where popular dissent is significant, but at the same time political changes are minimal. By acknowledging the political norms and institutions as relevant factors together with political practices that bring into life very specific forms of engagement, we could be able to set up a comparative overview – a map that will tell us more on the backsliding of democracy in the twenty first century and possible paths to counter this development.

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Research as Social Engagement: Learning from Two Situated Experiences in Zaragoza and Barcelona

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Introduction

Recognition of the intersubjective character of human experience within the dynamics of social, cultural and historical relationships leads to the argument that engagement is the very condition of life. Social engagement can then be understood as a prior condition to volitional action. Consequently, we are “always already engaged”. This is the opening argument of Athena Athanasiou’s (2016) paper *Becoming engaged, surprising oneself*. In the same text, however, she also establishes the possibility of “becoming engaged”,

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which means becoming “answerable to the pervasive social norms and resources through which we come to be formed as engaged and engaging subjects” (2016: 153). The intertwining of these two processes points to the situated contingency where performativity takes place. At the same time, the unattainability of this contingent process is the very condition by which engagement is sustained.

Social engagement thus refers to a process of becoming engaged from an already engaged position. It cannot be conceived without interconnectedness to others. The very action by which engagement is performed relies on – and also generates – multiple contingent and non-fully determined relational bonds. And in doing so, engagement enacts commitments with particular people, spaces, projects, ideas and so on. Or, as Zaharijević (2016) puts it, engaging involves adhering to a cause and dismissing other concurrent or futable causes. As much as pledging to a cause may take many different forms, this substantial antagonism, she suggests, is the core politicality of engagement.

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In this sense, Prijic-Samaržija (2016: 429) goes further and argues that “the very term ‘engagement’ necessarily involves the starting awareness of a social deficit or flaw and presupposes a critical attitude towards social reality”. In our view, however, assuming that the politicality of social engagement rests in this “perceived lack” presupposes a teleological standpoint that can prove problematic. For this kind of awareness implies the existence of a privileged space (exempted from the turmoil of social life) from which a subject-agent is able to perceive the mechanism by which social visibility is regulated (Žižek 1995). Following Chantal Mouffe (1992), we can contend that meanings are produced in an incessant contingency; this is the basis that marks the impossibility of a definitive closure from which to extract any teleological conclusion. Political engagement – or rather

the political in engagement – is thus a matter of query. It is for this matter that the concept of articulation, as formulated by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985), may be of use. For them, articulation refers to a process by which a set of meanings is temporarily established through political alliances between different social agents. As a result of an articulation, a relatively unified social and political space is created as antagonistic to other spaces. In this process, the different positions or elements of the articulation become signified and acquire their meaning. Or in their words, implying “a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice” (Laclau & Mouffe, [1985] 2001: 105).

In this text, we present an account of social engagement that is grounded in the metaphor of articulation. More specifically, we will use this theoretical framework to help us build up the idea of research as a form of social engagement. We will do this by drawing on two ongoing experiences, in which we are currently involved, that combine activism with research. One is the Community Social Centre Luis Buñuel, in Zaragoza, an urban common that emerged from political organizing during the “*indignados*” movement in 2011. The other, the different pro-migrant solidarity and activist initiatives born in Catalonia in response to the so-called “refugee crisis”.⁴

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We argue that engaged research can be conceived as an articulation of different positions that become modified as a result of establishing a set of relationships. At the same time, this process contributes to the formation of antagonistic relations within the different social spheres in which they are imbued. This understanding of research as social engagement is based on an epistemology that underlines

4 Although each of them represent different individual projects of research, we will mostly use a plural “We” throughout this text. This way we stress the collective and relational nature of the arguments included here.

the precarity and partiality of the different positions involved in research and, therefore, the inherently relational nature of knowledge production (Haraway 1988). Engaged research will thus not look forward to producing a knowledge that “represents” those contexts it is in contact with, but to articulating itself in meaningful relations that diffract the hegemonic knowledge present in them. In this sense, the engagement of research is best described as a contribution to a *possible* opening of opportunities for the emergence of new – promising – worlds that are open to multiplicity and difference.

1.

Engaging Research

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Considering academic research as a form of social engagement situates the discussion of engagement within a larger set of traditions that problematize the epistemological privilege implied in positivist science; a privilege that is conferred to the scientist, precisely on account of the “distance” from the object of study. By not adding anything of his own opinions, of his inherent corporeality, the “modest witness” is legitimized as an authorized ventriloquist of the world of objects. The “God trick of seeing everything from nowhere” (Haraway 1988; 1997) is grounded in disembodiment and de-responsibilization.

Our aim here is exactly the opposite. We wish to explore the relational bonds and political commitments that are involved in researching from an engaged perspective. In this case, the “already engaged” nature of research refers to its normative and institutional location. Research is enacted within an institutional structure that is often driven by positivist models of science and capitalist academic logics

(Prijić-Samaržija 2016). Articulation is never an innocent space, it is imbued in networks of power. Assuming that we, together with a multiplicity of other actors, are part of these articulated networks does not then mean that all the positions involved are engaged in the same way (Martínez 2014). Articulation can be understood as a political space to the extent that it is a site where the limits of subjects, opinions, values and guidelines for action are forged; inclusions and exclusions are defined and connections (both voluntary and involuntary) are established.

Engaged research – as in articulation – refers to a political positioning in engaging the social where antagonism is constructed through a series of meaning-making operations. As we will develop later on, however, the kind of political horizon delineated by articulation cannot be previously defined, but it is contingent on each of the spaces in which it takes place. No preconceived meaning or idea prior to an articulation can conduct us towards a previously expected result. Horizons of transformation emerge as much as they create situated new possibilities of signifying social practice. Similarly, “becoming engaged” entails a politicization movement that aims at contesting solidified social orderings. The particular positions and relations to engage with are only knowable in the concrete articulations and their specific social and historical contexts. The experiences below attempt to illustrate some of the ways this may take place.

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1.1 “Coming Out” as a Researcher

The first research experience shaping this chapter is the Luis Buñuel Community Social Centre in Zaragoza (Buñuel hereafter), a participatory project that emerged from 2011’s 15M Movement (also known as the *indignados* movement). In 2012, the neighbourhood self-organized through an

assembly, occupied an abandoned former high-school and turned it into a social centre to be managed in an open and horizontal way, an example of urban commons (Harvey 2013).

From the first moment, the project had the will to negotiate with different political agents about their legitimacy – or not – in the use of this public place. We began participating in the project in 2013, attracted by what we thought was the challenge of changing the relationship between citizens and public authorities such as the City Council. After three years in the social centre, we had attended events and assemblies, proposed activities, kept the keys of the building or took part in different commissions. We had contributed to the incubation of a “collective intelligence” (Hardt and Negri 2004). It was at this point when we began academic research, based on the project that was motivated by our interest in community-run participatory processes. The following excerpt corresponds to the day we asked the assembly if we could utilize Buñuel as a case study:

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Explaining in the [social centre’s] weekly assembly that I would like Buñuel to be part of my doctoral research has been uncomfortable for me. Although I didn’t feel evaluated and no one objected, it meant unveiling a role that I had neither wanted nor needed to unveil. Before, I was not recognized as a researcher. I was a participant. In fact, my proposal was based on the will to continue being so. (Fieldnotes, 26 October 2016)

We could relate this uneasy feeling of “coming out” as a researcher to a more general discomfort and disagreement with traditional conceptions of the researcher’s position. We derived this research from an Activist-Research (Martínez & Lorenzi 2012) and Participatory Action Research (Montero 2004) background. These methodologies intend to actively engage both researchers and “subjects” of

research. However, we still found it problematic to situate the project of researching Buñuel inside those frameworks. Although these perspectives promote a collaborative relationship to trigger political transformations (Montero 2000; Kagan and Burton 2005), a clear differentiation between community members and research team is still performed (Colmenares 2012). On the contrary, the metaphor of articulation eludes this differentiation and provides a different lens to look at how we as researchers engaged with Buñuel's project, as well as the mutual transformations that took place from this moment. While the previous methodologies draw on the social transformation that takes place within the boundaries of a community, from an articulation perspective attention is paid to the constant reformulation of the different positions that become engaged, and to the unpredictable outcomes of these processes. An instance that may exemplify this was the moment when the participants of Buñuel were constructing a collectively written narrative on the project's history by including a diversity of points of view. This process of composition and the piece itself were also intended as a part of our fieldwork:

I did not plan to intervene in the construction of the collective story, however, with a "We miss your part" J.L. surprised me and invited me to participate in it. (Fieldnotes, 27 March 2017)

At a point in which we thought we were only embodying a researcher position, we were reminded of our role as participants in the same process we were also researching. This interpellation modified our view and made it obvious that the rest of the participants in Buñuel were also actively modifying our research process. It is in this sense that the many relations that are built along the way may also be conceived as a "result" of engaged research. Conversely, Action Research and Participatory Action Research would point to

changes within targeted communities as a tool to achieve a desired result in research, thus neglecting how engaged research practice may transform previous subject positions and generate new configurations of them.

As the case of Buñuel shows, engaged research may involve transformations in both the context and the positions of the researchers. It may sometimes be a source of unsettlement and change. It is in this sense that to conceptualize the transformations and the uneasy feelings that come from dwelling the borderland of academia and activism, Itziar Gandarias Goikoetxea (2014) argues for the embracement of an “ethics of discomfort”. In her case, the rearticulations that her project triggered gave way to a process she refers to as *becoming an activist*. In the case of Buñuel and our project, we could describe a different movement. By triggering an articulation of a research project in which we were already participants, we paved the way to our *becoming researchers*.

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1.2 Engaging a Movement

We were moving a few metres away from the scene to find a place to buy some food when a police car stopped us to ask, in a suspicious and harsh tone, where we were going. Once again, the policeman’s face changed when we showed them that piece of plastic, the Spanish ID card. “What are you doing here”, he seemed to mean, as if we had not realized that this place “was not for us”. (Field-notes, 14 December 2016)

In this tale from fieldwork we recall an episode from 2015’s so-called “summer of migration”. During this time we were travelling down the Balkans to Greece, the opposite route of those who were on the move from the Greek islands to central Europe. Waiting to cross the Greece–FYROM border in a place with constant arrivals and departures of

trans-migrants, our southern European bodies made us the target of a police control. The moment when we showed our national (Spanish) ID cards, however, altered this interaction. That small plastic piece condensed a whole set of bordering discourses and practices by which a population is stratified and subjected to exclusion/inclusion. We were “positioned” by our national belonging. This travel marked the beginning of our engagement with migration struggles.

After this, we have taken part in some of the many transnational solidarity initiatives with migrants and asylum seekers that have emerged across the European Union in recent years (Youkhana and Sutter 2017). We were present in border areas such as Calais, France and again in the northern part of Greece, places where the violent enforcement of the European Union’s borders has become prominent. Soon after this first travel, we landed in Barcelona, joined the anti-racist movements in the city, and at the same time enrolled in an academic programme in social psychology. From this time on our engagement with the movement, our training as social researchers, and our dissertation project, evolved together and were closely intertwined.

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Following Spivak (1994), that first engagement with this context may be seen as the cultivation of a kind of responsibility towards others in the community, a response to a call that at first “cannot be grasped as such” (1994: 22) and that nevertheless demands an answer, an answer as in “being answerable” to others. Engagement then refers to entering a sphere of influence in relation to that or those we work with. Along this narration of events, we developed multiple bonds that ultimately entangled us with that which we study. Once imbued in these relational networks, the different positions involved in them became modified. In the case of this project, this meant that our initial view and role regarding migration struggles was changed.

One of these turning moments was our visit to the refugee camp in Calais in February 2016. At that point we had already enrolled in a master's programme and we were driven there in response to that "call to engage" we previously experienced. After a few days in the harsh reality of the camp, however, we started to experience an uncomfortable feeling of "pointless" research. We went there expecting to gather narrations from the migrants that lived in Calais to be able to "trace" in them the violent effects of borders. While living together in the Calais "jungle", the feeling of "just" looking into dwellers' histories appeared as a mere instrumentalization and appropriation of the experience of "others". Far from committing to a transformation of their situation, it further contributed to their marginalization (Read 2010). It was at that point that our research shifted to the study of the social construction of borders, the power dynamics they are involved with and how these become contested. We decided to focus on an approach in which we explore how Western societies act in solidarity with the efforts of those on the move, and in demand of freedom of movement.

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As the changes in this trajectory may show, social engagement means embracing an aperture to the multiple (mutual) modifications that take place in research, how in articulating with each other, "[o]ntologies and identities are also affected by collective politics and positionalities that put into question given boundaries of existing worlds" (Puig de la Bellacasa 2012: 200).

2.

A Situated Perspective:
On the Relationality of Engagement

Critical traditions within social sciences have pointed to the ways in which positivist methods have contributed to the stratification, exclusion and subalternisation of different groups. Feminist perspectives, among others, have highlighted how this kind of scientific knowledge is based on neutral – not engaged – ways of access to truth that are validated through social and institutional support (Fox-Keller 1985; Harding 1986). Likewise, post/de-colonial perspectives have shown how discourses about certain groups and territories construct “alterity” from an occidental gaze (Said 1978; Hall 1996; Mohanty 2003). A set of operations in which historical colonial north–south relationships can be traced (Mbembe 2003; Castro-Gómez and Grosfoguel 2007), in which a sort of “sociology of absences” is performed to silence the voices of a myriad of gendered, racialized and colonized “others” (Santos 2006).

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Here, we will draw especially on feminist scholarship. In particular, Donna Haraway’s perspective that argues for the contingent character of knowledge, and at the same time, aims at providing a theoretical basis for political action. She proposes the term “situated knowledge” (Haraway 1988) to question the totalizing and universalizing effects of the biased forms of “objectivity” in technoscientific practice. Similarly, the author is critical towards relativist positions that, by proposing that there is no absolute truth, assume that all positions and constructions are potentially valid, and produce knowledge from “nowhere”. In her view, both approaches fail to understand that the subject of knowledge is located and therefore necessarily partial. As universalist and relativist claims are not traceable, they cannot be

held to account. The moral is simple, she says, “only partial perspective promises objective vision” (Haraway 1988: 583).

As Prins (1995) argues, even if the moral may be simple, the message is intricate and intriguing. What Haraway does with the “promise of an objective vision” is a challenge to the opposition between objectivity and partiality and situatedness. These two notions are commonly associated with subjectivity and therefore invalidated as legitimate knowledge. From Haraway’s perspective, situatedness and partiality draw attention to the material, historical and social conditions from which knowledge is generated. Situated knowledge is produced through partial connections between material and semiotic positions, which include a wide diversity of entities such as human, technological, “natural” and hybrid actors, whose particular positions and articulations are in continuous transformation (Haraway 1988). Hence, “that knowledge is situated means that knowing and thinking are inconceivable without a multitude of relations that also make possible the worlds we think with”(Puig de la Bellacasa 2012: 198).

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To confront traditional objectivist science’s politics of representation, Haraway proposes the metaphor of *diffraction*. “Situated knowledge” does not aim at reflecting but *diffracting* what is being seen; and in doing so, makes up interference models. The “consequences” of this generative technology are new “interference patterns” or “geometries” dispensing with existing subject–object boundaries, making room for the emergence of “wonderful” and “promising monsters” (Haraway 1992).

This epistemological approach entails a radical relationality, considering that social – and material – engagement works as a necessary premise to generate “objective” knowledge. An understanding that seeks to avoid the ventriloquistic

distancing “that speaks for” the represented and that reproduces a “political semiotics of representation”, which stands for the mythical paradigm of modernity (Haraway 1997). Instead, a “political semiotic of articulation” seeks to generate contingent and situated articulations. This approach emphasizes responsibility in producing knowledge, “since we can never separate ourselves from the frameworks to which we are linked: we are irremediably stained” (Dauder and Bachiller, 2002: 47, *our translation*).

In the sections below, we discuss this relational view of knowledge through our two experiences of engaged research. Although different in nature and development, they illustrate two different ways in which articulation in engaged research is the source of distinctive kinds of knowledge and collective processes that aim to transform the contexts in which they are imbued.

2.1 Using Research to “Make Things Happen”

Different narratives of ‘crisis’ have been performed in the last two decades. From the consecutive “financial crises” to the more recent “migration/refugee crisis”. This situation has been depicted as a humanitarian emergency, a matter of urgency that requires special efforts to alleviate the suffering of those who arrive at the shores of the European Union (EU). The narrative of “the crisis”, in this case, has been very effective in framing this situation as exceptional, concealing “the global, systemic nature of violent processes of late capitalist, neo-colonial dispossession and displacement” (Tsilimpounidi and Carastathis 2017: 409), as well as the recent changes in the governmentality of the EU’s borders (Garelli, Scirba and Tazzioli 2018). More importantly, the frame of the crisis is being effective in shaping the way European societies mobilize in solidarity with those on the move. In other words, responding to a “crisis” involves a particular ethical framing of the possible political actions to be taken (Pallister-Wilkins 2017).

It is in this sense that, in the context of the Spanish state, and Catalonia specifically, the rise of awareness of the situation of those identified as “refugees” has paved the way for a dangerous, new stratification process. Those who are not considered to fit in the “refugee” legal category, risk being considered not worthy or “deserving” of solidarity (Holmes and Castañeda 2016). This is a critique that has long been present in recent years within social movements of Barcelona and was especially visible during the mobilizations that followed the big community-led media campaign *Casa Nostra, Casa Vostra* (Catalan for “Our Home, Your Home”) in 2016 and 2017. During the campaign, migrants and their support groups demonstrated against its mainstream discourse and the display of solidarity around it. It was considered to ignore a wider picture of the situation, including the structural violence suffered by those already living in the territory. As an active part of this movement, we also worried about the implications of such growing discourses. While we considered it important to understand the positive potentiality of these wide solidarity initiatives, we also thought that the issue of “who deserves solidarity” should be put at the forefront of the ongoing struggles for migrant rights. To do this, we thought, a space in which to raise this discussion with a wider audience was needed.

To engage with this scenario, we considered that our research could contribute to building that space, a relational framework under which different conversations and exchanges could happen, a heterogeneous network from which a situated knowledge could emerge as a result of a new articulation. At the same time, we thought that we could contribute to problematize dominant discourses on solidarity and help to build a more inclusive and critical response to the situation. We decided to name this project “Cartography of Solidarity” after Felix Guattari’s idea

of cartography; a concept that points to the author's idea of social analysis, the will to "forge new coordinates for reading and to 'bring into existence' new representations and propositions" (2013: 17). Using the same metaphor, our intervention could be read in terms of "drawing the frame of a map", that is, posing the questions that would set up a collective discussion around a common territory, trying to create "dialogical, discursive spaces" (Nencel 2014).

The project comprised different public workshops and events, as well as a series of individual and collective meetings that resulted in various collaborative texts. These artefacts – that we call Narrative Productions (Balasch and Montenegro 2003; see also Ávila 2015; Sadurní, Montenegro and Pujol 2017) – were aimed at *diffracting* the hegemonic construction of the so-called "refugee crisis" and the way this image was shaping solidarity movements in Catalonia. During the project, we tried to engage the participants in a series of meetings to decide the direction of the events or actions that would be carried out. These meetings were conceived as interventions in themselves. They were, in some instances, useful for some of the groups to widen their networks; in others, they enabled unusual encounters between, for example, public workers and grassroots activist groups, or academics and activists.

This project is an example of many possible ways in which research may engage the social. In this case, engagement involved "using" the privileged platform of university, aligning ourselves to those who argued for a more inclusive view of solidarity with those on the move, in an intent to interfere with a problematic and discriminating stance. "Drawing a frame", a frame is then an intervention that addresses the situation by setting up the *conditions of possibility* for new articulations and networks to happen.

2.2 A “Federation of Knowledges”

The collective experience of Buñuel is based on a myriad of knowledges that interact and complement each other in the everyday life of the project. According to Buñuel’s own participants, the social centre is defined by a practice of “radical inclusion of difference” (Arobes and Navarra 2018), assuming that the project is composed by a multiplicity of networked voices. In this section we propose that Buñuel’s activity may be conceived as an active practice of care politics (Tronto 1993) that sets the ground for an articulation of differences.

As social psychologists, we bring to the collective a series of skills which are gradually integrated into Buñuel’s technical, everyday informal knowledge. These knowledges are performed in the work of the so-called “care commission”, a group inside the project in which we take part that tries to preserve the participation of everyone who wants to get involved and also deals with opening spaces and moments to address the emotional side of everyday conflicts in participation. Similarly, from the moment we adopted one more role inside the project as researchers, the whole range of possibilities that this new situation brought was offered to the project. It is at this point that we decided to use the methodology of Narrative Productions (Balasch and Montenegro 2003). In a way that differs from the case of the Cartography of Solidarity, our aim here was not diffracting the knowledges present in the context but to contribute to the collective process of inclusion by generating a (textual) frame for it. This process, which we also previously referred to in one of the fragments, was found useful to prompt collective self-reflection, fueling debates and revisions of the project.

Buñuel’s conception of radical inclusion can be related to what Luis Moreno-Caballud (2015) calls “cultures of anyone”.

This term refers to the entanglement of technical and “expert” knowledges with others that are based on everyday experience. These are seen to work together, beyond social protest, to put forward alternative ways of life based on cooperation. The metaphor of cultures of anyone highlights the power of a non-hierarchical collective intelligence in which no particular position stands out above others. Moreover, it refers to a process in which singularity and difference are understood as a potentiality for collective action. This is a similar point to the one made by Stavros Stavrides (2016), who considers that the transformational nature of urban commons such as Buñuel lies in their capacity to be “spaces of encounter” between different identities. It is by way of creating spaces that acknowledge difference that “differing identities [have] the ground to negotiate and realise their interdependence” (2016: 239).

Following the classical definition of care politics made by Joan Tronto, we can see Buñuel’s will to include difference as a way to maintain, continue and repair “our world”, we would add, by becoming engaged in an articulation that “includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web” (Tronto 1993: 103). From this point of view, the kind of knowledge that emerges from engaged research in a project such as Buñuel should be valued by its ability to create shared notions that emerge from the many relations of which the project is composed. In this, it seeks to challenge the vertical logic of academic production by which a differential non-valuable status and legitimacy is attributed to practical, non-formal and everyday life skills. For a practice of radical inclusion to take place, the conditions for totally open participation must be assured. Regardless of the position they come from, the skills and knowledge that are part of Buñuel constitute the project as far as they engage

in what we call “a federation of knowledges”. By this term, we refer to a horizontal relation among the many wisdoms that form the collective. This is the condition that sustains a diverse multiplicity in a joint endeavour.

In this context, engaged research entails a type of engagement that seeks a horizon of social transformation. A kind of research allied with a “semiotic politics of articulation” that does not lose sight of the asymmetric relations that may occur between academic and activist knowledge (Juris and Khasnabish 2013), but that nevertheless is committed to an articulation to build ‘more livable worlds’ that are grounded in the inclusion of difference. In this practice, the dynamics of collective action frame the way in which different knowledge and capacities become articulated. It is this processual nature, as we will see in the last section, that makes the political horizon guiding articulation not previously defined. As the Zapatistas would say: “Asking we walk”.

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3. “Surprising Ourselves”: The Crafting of Possible Futures

The previous section illustrated how researchers may engage their different fields by crafting methodologies that are grounded in a relational epistemology. By immersing themselves in the context of study, researchers participate in a new articulation that contributes to the construction of new antagonisms. Considering the role of antagonism in social engagement is in line with those who argue that the political nature of engagement rests in choosing sides (Zaharijević 2016). Choosing sides is the first step on a path towards a particular ethical horizon, an idea of public good

(Prijić-Samaržija 2016). Nevertheless, and here lies the question, how and by whom public good is defined remains problematical.

It is here that the lens of articulation in discussing social engagement appears as a necessary intervention. In an articulation, the kind of political horizon which is delineated cannot be previously defined, it is rather contingent on each of the contexts in which connections take place. In this sense, no previous meaning before an articulation can guide us towards a preconceived result. Research as social engagement does not aim at providing definitive answers or solutions to those contexts it is involved with, but rather seeks to make a contribution to a *possible* opening of opportunities for the emergence of new and promising worlds that are based on multiplicity and difference. Desired visions of transformation then come to light as much as new possibilities for signifying social practice are created. In this, we take a distance from visions of engagement that are based in a necessary intervention into the social sphere that is based on a preconceived higher order and abstract values (i.e. notions of a “greater good” or neutral and universal ideas of “social justice”).

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In the case of the Cartography of Solidarity, this takes place when we generate a frame that aims to trigger a new articulation that is able to diffract the mainstream account of solidarity in the “refugee crisis”. Our engagement in this context is not a guarantee of change, but a gesture that aims to trigger new connections. These could result in new promising articulations and connections, ideas and actions, that question the problematic aspects of the narrative of the “refugee crisis”. For the Buñuel Social Centre, our participation as researchers (or researchers in becoming) may be interpreted as a contribution to a wider practice of radical inclusion, an approach that foregrounds care politics

and considers difference as a site of potentiality where the emergence of new transformative socialities is forged.

By understanding knowledge as produced by means of located relational bonds, these examples challenge the idea of an epistemologically privileged position (Prodanović 2016). They contribute to eroding the “political semiotics of representation” by which the researcher is authorized to speak for and of “the other”, and seek to foster more horizontal and, hopefully, democratic relations. As suggested by Athanasiou (2016), engagement has to do with displacing the mechanisms by which normativity is settled and in this, “open[ning] the political to the incomplete, unforeseeable, and co-existential historicity of “surprising itself” (2016: 455).

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Off the Beaten Track – Sensory Ethnography as the Missing Layer in Urban Planning

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Introduction

For the Russian formalists, defamiliarization is in the very center of literary (artistic) creativity: it consists of a world view, and above all, a view of the everydayness that reveals something we've never seen before in things we have been taking for granted. This new, asquint view has the power to undermine our acceptance of the reality into which we are immersed and to reconsider its alleged self-understanding and justification. The process of ethnographic mapping, which will be in the focus of this paper, can be understood as the *defamiliarization of the city*. Cities, as complex spaces, crowded with places, people, communities, rhythms, sounds, memories, routines and conflicts, create special environments that are constantly changing. However, cities do not change by themselves. Since one of the goals of this paper is precisely putting an emphasis on agency (Tilley 2001: 260) of the inhabitants and residents of the city - I will say that these places are being constantly changed. By changing, cities do not lose but rather acquire plurality and affluence of meaning.

As a young girl, I used to play improvised strategic games with my peers, drawing maps of our neighborhood with chalk, or with a stick in sand or engraving it into the wall of a wooden garage with a divider. Later on, and yet before the Google maps, when I began to travel, I started to collect the maps of cities I visited as some kind of relics. Photos gave memories a clear visual component, and the maps spatialized them. This mapmaking hobby attained new shape and intensity during my first serious encounter with *the field*. Ethnographic curiosity was, as it usually does, sparked by the challenge of facing the unknown city and being surrounded by people whose language I do not understand. By obtaining knowledge, adapting and pursuing familiarity, arbitrariness of meanings in cities became palpable. Ethnographic mapping voyage presented in this paper was my way of grasping that arbitrariness, enduring it and learning from it.

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Making sensory ethnography on foot

This paper is a result of ethnographic mapping project that took place in Poznań between 29.04. and 30.07.2018. Poznań was imposed since the University of Belgrade, where I am a doctoral student at the department of ethnology and anthropology at the Faculty of Philosophy, and the University of Adam Mickiewicz from Poznań established an *Erasmus+* partnership.

During the field research in Poznań I went for long walks with my informants that were inspired by the works of Tim Ingold (2008, 2015) and sensory ethnography methods (Pink 2008, Grimshaw 2001). We didn't, however, choose some random paths but the ones they – as inhabitants of socialist-modernist housing estates on the right bank of

Warta – take every day. Even though it may sound trivial, walks are a very convenient way to “enter” the field, to get information that would otherwise remain “behind the scenes” during formal interviews. Walks, due to a more informal approach, are also well-suited for the exploratory part of ethnographic research. They are also very suitable for informants to get used to the researcher’s presence, to get to know each other and to spend some time in a joint activity before they let a complete and extremely curious stranger into their home and share with him/her their everyday life and intimate thoughts.

During these two-hour strolls, we walked through the roads and shortcuts where they are going every day - to the bus station, to the bakery, we followed a path they take while jogging and went to see where they leave bicycles. But it was far more than a neighborhood sightseeing. They showed me not only the landmarks such as the favorite bench, a mural or a blossoming lilacs tree, but also the unlit underground passages they avoid, the corners where “suspicious types”, local hooligans (*blokersi*, pl.) are gathering or simply areas that smell bad.

Besides the semi-structured in-depth interviews made during those walks, we both took pictures of the visited area and significant objects, and I made recordings of the distinctive sounds and noises of the neighborhoods. Including and even provoking different sensory stimuli built in the layered mental image of their housing estates was a big and important part of the interviews and I believe it shouldn’t be considered negligible since “multisensory experience of any physical and material environment is inseparable from the cultural knowledge and everyday practices through which the city is built and experienced“ (Pink 2008: 96). The material collected during these walks is so stratified and valuable that anyone who has dealt with a similar type

of research knows how painfully monotonous is the process of its systematization. As a final result, we get folders. Each informant has his/her own. Within one folder there are more of them. Photos. Sound recordings. Transcripts. And then for the next encounter one more, exactly the same folder, with a different date in the description. And then all of it again for the next informant and so on... Besides that, my reflections on the research process and the encounters themselves are located in a completely separated place, outside of all the folders, in the research journal. But all these precious records about the city do not communicate with each other, located in electronic folders.

The problem is that, most obviously, fragmented knowledge is, by definition, incomplete knowledge, and, less obviously, fragmented knowledge - because it lacks a surrounding context - is difficult to evaluate. Not only is there much that we do not know, then, but it is also hard to judge how important or generalizable what we do know may be. (Lofland, 1998: 19)

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I needed to defragment the ethnography I was creating, to establish a system of communication among the narratives of the respondents, their memories, their shortcuts and local tales. The first encounter with one of the respondents helped me find the system I yearned for. The following ethnographic vignette is an excerpt from the field diary that describes that encounter:

I lost myself a little bit while trying to find that bar called "Dragon", but it was worth it. A blond guy with glasses waited for me in front of it, comfortably sitting in a deckchair. I apologized for being late, he approached, said "I am Sasha" and hugged me, although I offered my hand clumsily. This immediacy was refreshing. Somehow we just clicked, like real buddies. We even smoke the same cigars, LM Forward. He told me about his parents and panel housing he grew up - a settlement built for workers at the Ukrainian power

plant. He kept talking about illegally built terraces that appear overnight like mushrooms, renovation and fake black birds on the windows used to scare pigeons, and about Polish non-existent attitude towards public spaces that he explains with the Cold War paranoia. By using cigarette packs, glasses, ashtray, lighters and phones and, we created the Poznań map on the table and mapped all the settlements I had visited so far, the ones where he lives or has lived, and the ones I should be visiting. I was amused by the fact that we are thinking about space in a very similar way. We must have looked weird to everyone around us because we were the loudest and most expressive. Bestriding our benches, we were surrounded by that “map” of the scattered inventory in which we only managed to find a way. When a waitress came to clear the tables, we “protected” all those settlements and buildings, the glasses we placed on the table and pots around us. We even made Warta river and the train racks out of cigarettes. If we were to make a digression, of course we would forget about that map, but soon, returning to the topic, we would continue to draw the city around the garden table. The ease with which we communicated with the help of that imaginary map gave me the idea. Was it always that simple?

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The map is available for preview via MyMaps free service offered by Google.¹ It is a result of eight in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with seven informants, inhabitants of five different housing estates in Nowe Miasto. Housing estates encompassed by the mapping are: *osiedle Lecha*, *osiedle Czeba*, *osiedle Rusa*, *osiedle Orta Białego*.² The following chart contains basic information about the informants:

1 <https://goo.gl/nLGYI6> Accessed: 09.10.2018.

2 Osiedle is a Polish word for housing estate or any form of settlement and researched housing estates contain it in the official, administrative name. Informants were often referring to the housing estate they live in as „my osiedle”. That combination of English and Polish can bring us to the conclusion that the concept of osiedle is crammed with (informal) meaning, similar to “blok” in New Belgrade.

Name	Age	Gender	Housing Estate	Time spent in that HE	Occupation	Members of household	Color
Lukasz	44	Male	osiedle Czeha	1976-1999	Anthropologist (professor at AMU)	5 (mother, father, 3 sons – he is one of them)	Red
Milchał	21	Male	osiedle Czeha	October 2017 – present	Student (Law)	4 (girlfriend and 2 flatmates)	Blue
Ewa	20	Female	osiedle Czeha	October 2017 – present	Student (Economy)	4 (boyfriend and 2 flatmates)	Blue
Michalina	26	Female	osiedle Orła Białego	1994 – present	Civil servant in the Poznań city development department	3 (mother, father and daughter – herself)	Pink
Ewa	50	Female	osiedle Orła Białego	1994 – present	English language professor for foreign students, AMU	3 (husband, daughter and herself)	Pink
Oleksandr	25	Male	osiedle Rusa	2013 – present	Economist	1	Yellow
Piotr	20	Male	osiedle Lecha	2016 – present	Student (Neuroscience)	3 (friends, flatmates)	Green

As indicated in the table, each informant's responses are marked in the legend using a different color (red, green, blue, pink and yellow). In some cases, two informants are marked with the same color and the reason for it is that they belong to the same house-hold. It is also worth mentioning that in those cases, interviews weren't conducted separately.

Moreover, the map contains several "layers" or segments: domestic territory, sounds, smells, flavors, churches, objects, shopping, home, memories, avoided places. Layers labeled as: domestic territory; objects; and avoided places are inspired by Lyn Lofland's "provisional formulation of person-to-place connections: (1) memorialized locales, (2) paths/rounds/ranges, and (3) hangouts and home territories" (Lofland 1998: 66).

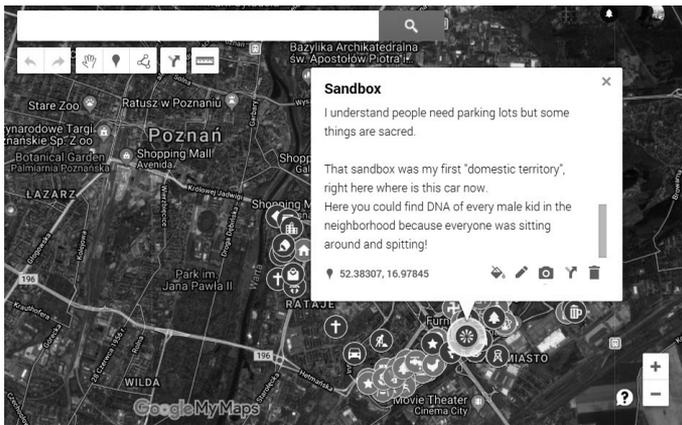


Figure 1

Memories, or "memorialized locales" by Lofland's typology, are clearly one of the most personalized layers in this map. She defines them as "small pieces of the public realm that, because of events that happened and/or because of some object (e.g. a statue) that resides within them, take on, for some set of persons, the aura of "sacred places" (*Ibid.*)

According to the same typology *Paths/Rounds/Ranges* is the “concept-cluster composed of paths, rounds, and ranges refers to locales that persons encounter or move through on a daily or nearly daily basis and with which they establish a familiar relationship” (*Ibid.*: 67). Nowe Miasto is often perceived as “the bedroom of Poznań” and as a result of insufficient services and facilities on the right bank of Warta the rounds and ranges of my informants often went beyond the borders of explored housing estates, knitting the net across the city. Bearing that in mind, I have decided to focus solely on the avoided roads.

When it comes to the domestic or home territory, the original articulation of the concept (borrowed from animal studies) is to be found in Stanford Lyman’s and Marvin Scott’s 1967 piece *Territoriality: A Neglected Sociological Dimension*: “Home territories are areas where the regular participants have a relative freedom of behavior and a sense of intimacy and control over the area” (Lyman & Scott 1976, in Lofland 1998: 70). The kinds of space that can serve as home territories are remarkably varied (*Ibid.* 71) as well as their scope. That is, I believe, obviously represented in this map (domestic territory).

Layers labeled as: sounds, smells and flavors are inspired by the following pieces: Sarah Pink, *Doing Sensory Ethnography* (2009), Anna Grimshaw, *The Ethnographer’s Eye: Ways of Seeing in Modern Anthropology* (2001) and a collection *Ritual, Performance and the Senses* edited by Michael Bull and Jon Mitchell (2015). The thread of inspiration which originates from these works is embedded in the mapping process more implicitly and less structurally. Sensory ethnography is not, however, “just another route in an increasingly fragmented map of approaches to ethnographic practice” (Pink 2009: 8). It is a critical methodology which insists that ethnography is “a reflexive and experimental

process through which understanding, knowing and (academic) knowledge are produced” (*Ibid*). Insisting on the bodily, sensory experience of cities gains importance in a contemporary context. By no stretch of imagination today’s researcher with academic affiliation could commit to the ideal of long term, old-fashioned participant observation fieldwork. In the chapter titled “What is sensory ethnography”, not only does Sarah Pink explain this methodological concept, but also explains why it could be tailored for contemporary (urban) anthropology:

While classic observational methods certainly produce valuable in-depth and often detailed descriptions of other people’s lives, this type of fieldwork is often not viable in contemporary context. This might be because the research is focused in environments where it would be impractical and inappropriate for researchers to go and live for long periods with research participants, for instance, in a modern western home or in a workplace to which the researcher has limited access (Pink 2009: 9).

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These newly developed, innovative methods are not shortcuts to the materials that could have been produced through the classical approach, they are rather taking us off the beaten track. Methods of sensory ethnography are “alternative, and ultimately valid, ways of seeking to understand and engage with other people’s worlds through sharing activities, practices and inviting new forms of expression” (*Ibid.*).

Layer labeled as Objects is the most extensive and the most abundant. It could have been merged with other layers such as Memories. However, the noted objects spatialize locales in the researched housing estates that have become localities, public realms that have become known, familiar, more personal.

Layers labeled as Churches and Shopping were not part of the initial idea of mapping. However, through the interviews they crystalized as of particular importance to the informants/dwellers of the researched housing estates. When it comes to shopping and consumer habits, one discount store, Biedronka, plays a significant role in all the narratives. Those findings have already gained in importance among human geographers in Poland - Magdalena Fuhrmann from the University of Warsaw wrote about “the biedronkization of the public space” (Fuhrmann 2017: 47-55). Postmodern Catholic temples are also an integral part of the housing estates and the urban landscape in Poland since the late 1970s, and passing them by during our walks instigated informants to express their opinion on the growing influence of the Catholic Church and re-traditionalizing of the contemporary Polish society.

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Although it is interesting to analyze different meanings that the same places carry for different people (the same school building can evoke blithe teenage memories for one, while evoking “the symbolical end of childhood” and death of a close friend during the construction of the school for the other informant), it is even more important to pay attention to what places in the settlement always bear meanings (e.g. Church, Elementary school).

Finally, within every layer there is a large number of markers, each of them is illustrated with the informants' quotes and (in most cases) photographs. Although I have collected recordings of the distinctive sounds of the housing estates, it wasn't possible to create a soundscape and include them in the map by using services offered by Google maps. Narrative descriptions of those sounds can, however, be found in the map.

Theoretical Framework

Mapping is a form of place-making. Anthropologically built maps help in the process of understanding, but also in the process of the production of social space (Lefebvre 1991).

‘Space’ is more abstract than ‘place’. What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value (...) The ideas ‘space’ and ‘place’ require each other for definition. From the security and stability of place we are aware of the openness, freedom, and threat of space, and vice versa. Furthermore, if we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place. (Yi-Fu Tuan 1977: 6).

Since the ethnographic mapping that I refer to in this paper did not take place in the territory of the whole city of Poznań, but only in housing estates in its eastern part, it is significant to introduce a theoretical concept of public realms I will be using for the study and analysis of housing estates, and later cities.

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According to the Oxford Dictionary, *Housing Estate is a residential area in which the houses have all been planned and built at the same time.*³ On the other hand, human geographers such as Ivan Andraško define them as “dynamic, ever-changing socio-technical-spatial formations constantly passing through a continuous process of (re)production by various forces/actors and (power)relations” (Andraško 2017: 4). Housing Estates in Nowe Miasto, where I have conducted this project of ethnographic mapping, correspond to both definitions.

Although green and recreation areas, playgrounds and walkways between buildings of a housing estate are open,

3 https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/housing_estate Accessed: 10.10.2018.

public spaces they are, however, not as public as for example a city square. Already in the sixties Anselm Strauss noticed that many public areas are not very public which led him to distinguish between what he called “locations” and “locales” (Strauss 1961, in Lofland 1998: 33). In that sense housing estates are seen as *locales*, although they may become locations for some of its residents. Locales are “bounded portions of non-private space dominated by strangers or categorical relations” (*Ibid*). Although green and recreation areas, playgrounds and walkways between buildings of a housing estate are open, public spaces they are, however, not as public as for example a city square. Already in the sixties Anselm Strauss noticed that many public areas are not very public which led him to distinguish between what he called “locations” and “locales” (Strauss 1961, in Lofland 1998: 33). In that sense housing estates are seen as *locales*, although they may become locations for some of its residents. Locales are “bounded portions of non-private space dominated by strangers or categorical relations” (*Ibid*).

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Like ‘real’ kingdoms, the public realm not only has a geography, it has a history, a culture (behavioral norms, esthetic values, preferred pleasures), and a complex web of internal relationships. Again, similar to ‘real’ kingdoms, it is the object not only of perceptions, but of conceptions as well. (Lofland 1998: 16).

In her eminently influential book, *The Public Realm: Exploring the City’s Quintessential Social Territory* (1998), Lyn Lofland defines *the public realm* as social, not physical territory “constituted of those areas of urban settlements in which individuals in co-presence tend to be personally unknown or only categorically known to one another” (Lofland 1998: 30). Basically, public realms are inhabited by “strangers”. In that regard, it is worth mentioning that my informants didn’t know each other despite living in neighborly housing

estates, and moreover they weren't familiar with other people's everyday uses and interpretations of the same paths, objects and facilities. Bearing that in mind, defining open, common spaces in housing estates as public realms, rather than public spaces, seemed quite appropriate.

Application

Urbanites are seen as interacting almost subliminally, demanding nothing of each other, making no contacts with each other, merely passing near each other (Strauss 1961: 63-64).

Ethnographic, mental mapping of the housing estates on the right bank of Warta created a dialogue between silent, personal practices, everyday habits and trajectories of my informants, occupants of the "public realm" (Lofland 1998) of Nowe Miasto. Inspired by the possibilities of reading, overlapping and combining various narratives and memories offered by this map, I began to think about the ways in which ethnographic research can contribute to the understanding of urban phenomena, and more specifically how it can contribute to the research of cultural dynamics and sociability in large modern cities, as well as smaller ones.

The built environment of the city, or "hard territorial capital" (Petrović 2014: 371), is in direct interaction with our world, more precisely, it *is* our world. Understanding the different housing estates and their inhabitants requires from a social scientist to descend to the ground, to understand that the life-worlds focus on the everyday life and meanings created by the repetition of activities in this material environment (Hyer 2013: 372). The life-world is primarily "something that you think with rather than think

about” (Frykman & Gilje 2003: 36-37). Bearing this in mind, it is clear why my informants were astonished with almost every asked question, why they initially provided quantitative data on the number of tenants in their building or the number of students in their elementary school. It was just after my insistence that the respondent recalled how she chose one of the three (identical) kindergartens in their estate for her daughter. Ewa remembered that she chose that one because in its courtyard grew a beautiful bush of yellow flowers and she loved to picture her daughter playing there. One other informant, Piotr, was completely confused by the question whether he is always jogging around his housing estate in a counterclockwise direction and why. Just then he realized that it’s because jogging that way he can avoid more trams and noise pollution. These are not things we think about. We live them, repeat them mechanically, feel them, take them for granted. This engaging reflexivity of my respondents probes into possibility of researching both their individual and collective – private and public – (social) engagement within the given public realm. Considering that “street” and “kitchen” are two out of four research areas within the Research Platform for Social Engagement Studies of the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory (Research Platform for Social Engagement Studies, 2018), the informants’ reflexivity on their neighborhoods that are trapped between private and public, could offer a new perspective for understanding civic participation and community engagement. Researchers gathered around this platform are united in an endeavor to include “the private dimension of everyday life into the broader understanding of social engagement and strive to demonstrate that socially engaged actors face various deterrents in their willingness to produce social change” (ibid). Although I am more than interested in both individual and collective practices

that occur on one's way from the "kitchen" to the "street", mapping the voyage is not a sufficient methodological tool. Grasping it would require more sophisticated and refined methodology that wouldn't be too intrusive in everydayness of the observed community.

Neighborhoods and individual places in Poznań, or any other city, must be understood through the multiplicity of life-worlds existing there, creating different meanings about the same objects, events and spaces – together and separately from each other. It is obvious that the explored housing estates were interpreted and lived very differently in relation to those who constituted them through everyday use.

On the other hand, in the sociology of the city and related disciplines, cities are often interpreted as "entities independent of their inhabitants" (Magnani 2005: 11-29). They are conceived as completely determined by the transitional economy, local elites, political lobbies, demographic variables and other macro factors. Lyn Lofland claims that this tendency for sociologists to denigrate the study of certain areas of social life that they define as not "big" enough, not "important" enough, and not sufficiently amenable to "hard" techniques is a part of a syndrome she labeled as "exaggerated manliness" (Lofland 1990).

On this occasion, I do not want to challenge the influence of these macro factors on the appearance and future of our cities, but to offer an additional perspective in which the city is not just a set design deprived of everyday life, activities, actions, places of meetings, social relations – a city whose citizens are not passive recipients (Barthes 1991), where people aren't added to the rendered images of the city just for scale.

In many ways, urban planners have the task of constant (re) constructing urban environments, especially public spaces (Hyler 2013: 365). As a result of such practice, public and social life is determined by the possibilities that space - and finance - allow. In her book *Culture and Planning* (2011), Simone Abram argues that city planners also produce culture and in order to bring culture into focus in planning, it is necessary to problematize the structures and categories surrounding it. In contrast, people also create places, inhaling life into empty plots within blocks for which there was not enough money to build an outpatient clinic, or by illegally making communal gardens in times of inflation. These practices are the best illustrations of Lefebvre's concept of the production of social space (Lefebvre 1991).

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Ethnographic research brings us insights "from close-ups and within" (Magnani 2005). The change of focus that anthropological perspective permits, largely the result of ethnography as a method, allows us to avoid the dichotomy that puts individuals and urban mega-structures and actors into opposition. If we understand built environment as an outline for engagement that was imposed from above by various stakeholders, the inhabitants / people / citizens are coming out as the ones who are getting around those rigid outlines by redrawing and tailoring the public realms through their networks of relationships, everyday trajectories, lifestyles, habits, conflicts and memories, thus transforming and dividing space into places. Even though methods of sensory ethnography could be applied to the analysis of macro factors' and stakeholders' impact on the microcosms of the everydayness, and despite the unquestionable significance of such insights for understanding urban phenomenon, further debate on that is beyond the scope of this paper. The research, from the very beginning, insisted on the emic approach by focusing on the life-worlds of inhab-

itants of large *osiedles* (pl. housing estate). Narratives about power relations, even though theoretically analyzable, did not appear during walks and neighborhood mapping. Of course, I do not attempt to annihilate the existence of such power-relations, but to stay modestly converged to the ethnographic mapping potential for engagement.

The practices of detailed, ethnographic mapping open the possibility of a different understanding of the places, based on human, lived, experience. „The mutual shaping of place constitutes its particular identity and the identity of those within it“ (Hyler 2013: 372). As Casey puts it, “lived bodies belong to places and help to constitute them” (Casey 1996: 24). This new understanding does not only apply to the way in which the spaces are produced, but also how they are figuring in the experience and consumption of local identities. According to Samantha Hyler, “cultural mapping” explores knowledge gathered through ethnography, translates cultural information into folders and finds possible points of application (Hyler 2013: 374).

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How can physical, infrastructure planning incorporate ethnographic research of communities and everyday life in urban environments? The methodology I practiced in Poznań was experimental and certainly too phenomenological in relation to what the applied, engaged urban anthropology could have been. However, this map is not the answer, but just a spark that triggered the avalanche of questions. One of those questions is how the knowledge derived from ethnographic research on the culture of life in housing estates and place-making can be used in human-centric urbanism?

The approach I advocate is very modest, so modest that even this map seems too ambitious. The anthropological analysis I propose does not take into account the entire city. Of course, the reference framework of research takes

into account a macroeconomic context, historical, political and cultural. These are not factors that can easily be overlooked. However, in order for the ethnography of the settlement to be applicable, it must be detailed and it must offer a bottom-up perspective.

A goal in all mapmaking is to render the visual image in such a way that different phenomena are distinguishable from one another: oceans from land masses, for example, or one nation-state from another (...). But as we move into mapmaking, the very simplicity of the dichotomy makes it less useful; exactly because it is simple, it distorts the messier empirical reality it is supposed to illuminate (Lofland 1998: 31).

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By narrowing the focus, ethnography becomes denser and our descriptions become thicker (Geertz, 1973). By setting up a narrow framework to the ethnographic research and composing a detailed map by focusing eclectic curiosity of an ethnographer just to a scope of a single settlement, pigeon-holed surfaces or avoided roads, the contribution and thus engagement of ethnography becomes substantial.

The incorporation of these players (regular people) and their practices would enable one to introduce other points of view regarding the dynamics of the city, going beyond the “competent” examination that decides what is right and what is wrong and also going beyond the perspective and interests of power, which decides what is convenient and profitable. (Mangani 2005: 11-29)

This form of mental, ethnographic mapping is not just a process of visualization, but an understanding of the city, a tool for involving people and their participation in planning processes. If ethnographic knowledge is transmitted through maps and the process of their use in planning, it can be reflected in development strategies.

Concluding Remarks

In pre-election promises and urban planning ideas of city authorities, we often meet concepts such as “social sustainability”, “human-scale”, “cities for people”. Despite honorable exceptions, these concepts still appear merely as floccules and ornaments of the urbanistic and local government’s discourse, since the people rarely get to be asked and involved in the city-making and decision-making processes. On the other side, individual or collective engagement for improvement of the quality of life in cities or housing estates is often perceived as an impossible task or wasting irrecoverable resources of one’s energy and time.

Urban planning usually focuses on physical details and concepts, the production of maps and rendering materials that transfer experiences and development opportunities. People are primarily perceived as statistical abstractions, and participation is measured quantitatively by how many citizens came to meetings, took brochures home, or answered a questionnaire. What citizens usually achieve in all this kind of activity is that they have “participated in participation”. Rendered images of the future projects displayed to them during public debates are ornamented by imaginary, often stereotypical, “potential users” of public spaces.

However, in order for “cities for people” to become more than a lip service, I argue that urban planning practice (and theory) should incorporate ethnographic methodology and explicit social goals (Hyerl 2013: 365). Mediation between institutions, experts and citizens could be one of the possible ways for applying urban anthropology and ethnography in city-making. Ethnography, engaged through its application in urbanism brings in a stronger focus on questioning what potential spaces mean for real, rather than potential

individual users. Because people are real. Spaces are potential.

Ethnographic mapping and engaged urban anthropology could develop phenomenological and sensory approaches to urban space, places, and communities in order to make the unique place identities as well as the life-world experiences resulting from the person-to-place connections visible. In order to achieve the ethnographic ideal of participant-observation and truly participate in city-making, we must develop and improve ways of translating our anthropological knowledge through cultural maps into strategic city planning processes, as a mediation between city planners and citizens.

The practice of creating and using ethnographic maps must become a mean of mediation in order for ethnographic knowledge to be involved in the process of planning and building of space and built environment. Ethnographic maps as a medium transmit the voices, ideas and priorities of real, not potential, users of space. In the struggle for the Right to the City, ethnography is a sidekick.

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Social Engagement and Personal Activism: Some Research Reflections and Fieldnotes from Conversations with Activists in Two Belgrade Protest Initiatives

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Introductory Caveat

In this paper, I wish to describe the reflections, insights, and doubts I had following the preparatory and initial stages of ongoing research about solidarity and protest movements in Serbia. Thus, it should be read as a subjective, still-in-process contribution to the study of *social engagement*, to which this volume is dedicated. Let me stress from the outset that the aspect of social engagement I am primarily concerned with is the *lived experience* of collective mobilization and organization. I am interested in personal and group narratives about coming together around shared ideas; about expanding and negotiating these ideas and managing their transformation into organizational forms; about forging short- and long-term alliances; and also about experiencing distancing, factions, and burnouts. I am especially focused

on the ways individuals and groups experience and interpret the dynamic relationship between reflections on values (*ethical orientation*) and reflections on situational context (*pragmatic orientation*).

Within these general inclinations and affinities in researching social engagement, I have developed a research project that examines emerging protest movements in the region. The scholarship on these recent protest movements is only in its inception phase, just like the very object of study (Horvat and Štiks 2015, Fagan and Sircar 2017, Bieber and Brentin 2018).¹ My research, with a preliminary emphasis on two protest initiatives in Belgrade, is meant to be a first step within broader research that aims to map the landscape of protest movements in Southeast Europe, where I am particularly interested in *personal narratives* of activists and the role *solidarity* plays in their activism, both on the level of direct action and as a guiding political principle.

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What follows is a “confessional” exposé of a research process, encompassing my fixation on a problem/research idea, the development of a research plan, and a slight detour from the anticipated research path. In short, this is a theoretical-methodological contemplation about a work in progress.

My interest in protest movements is principally motivated by my broader research interest in the topic of solidarity. Solidarity has received heightened attention in scholarly writings in the last couple of years, due to the multiple crises we are experiencing at all levels: the crumbling of welfare economies; a refugee humanitarian crisis; and

1 Due to the fact that this form of contentious politics is a fairly recent social phenomenon within this region, and with limited and specific mobilizing effects, I believe they should be termed protest movements, rather than social movements.

“post-democratic” and populist tendencies that have urged us to rethink the impact of institutions, states, and concrete policies on the ability of citizens to maintain (or obtain) basic living standards, have their rights met, and secure a sense of belonging to a wider community. Emerging literature on solidarity – covering topics from the *solidarity economy movement*, self-organized aid to refugees, and citizens’ attitudes toward state-redistributive mechanisms, to social ontological questioning of the notion itself – amply testify to the growing public and academic interest in the subject (Rakopoulos 2014, Cabot 2016, Greenberg and Spasić 2017, Banting and Kymlicka 2017, Lahusen and Grasso 2018, Laitinen and Pessi 2015).

My approach to solidarity is threefold, and I will briefly outline it here. On a theoretical level, I am interested in two questions: How do we differentiate solidarity from other pro-social and emphatic behaviors (with a focus on its presumed political character, see Arendt 1990 and Scholz 2008)? And, how do we interpret the problem of scale; meaning, do intra-group, intergroup, and humanitarian solidarity belong to the same phenomenon (is solidarity a group-bounded concept, and does the size of the group matter; see Bayertz 1999)? Secondly, I am interested in how solidarity is employed for *discursive* purposes, when its rhetoric is used to mobilize people and to legitimize certain social and political agendas (what do we ask of people when we call upon solidarity?). And, finally, I am interested in *lived experiences* of solidarity: How it is performed, by whom, and when and with what goal? Is it a situational or a lasting choice? And what are its (social and personal) transformative effects?

It was mostly this third line of inquiry that captivated me when initially designing my research about emerging protest movements in Serbia. However, it could not be de-

tached from the second, as discourses inevitably influence the attitudes, norms, and values that incite individual and group actions. To construct a theoretical framework linking research interests in solidarity and in new protest movements, I relied on the notion of *citizenship agenda*, as put forward by de Koning, Jaffe, and Koster (2015),² and based my research on the claim that the current *neoliberal citizenship agenda* – which frames desired subject-citizens as “entrepreneurial actors” (Mavelli 2018; see also Sparke 2009, Van Houdt, Suvarierol and Schinkel 2011) – renders the notion of solidarity highly ambivalent.

The “do-it-yourself” imperative is emblematic of neoliberal structural reforms and ideology, which expects citizens to be “proactive” and entrepreneurial (in all aspects of their lives, not only in business) and even engaged in mutual cooperation in order to overcome whatever obstacles they may encounter in their daily lives, without seeking help from the state (thus “curing” them of “state-dependency syndrome” – an oft-raised topic in post-socialist countries). In this respect, it can be said that examples of solidarity among citizens are welcomed by new political elites in the region, because they can be seen as an impulse toward acceptance of new political realities. Indeed, some examples of mass solidarity in this region (which often crosses the borders of post-Yugoslav states) – such as helping victims of disastrous flooding in May 2014 that affected Bosnia, Croatia, and Serbia; self-organizing to help refugees crossing the Balkan route; or raising money via text message donations for children who need urgent medical treatments abroad (a prac-

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2 “We define citizenship agendas as normative framings of citizenship that prescribe what norms, values, and behavior are appropriate for those claiming membership of a political community. These agendas are concerned with defining the meaning of membership in explicitly normative ways that go beyond conventional, legal-formal citizenship status. Citizenship agendas prescribe relations between people and larger structures of rule and belonging, which are often but not exclusively nation-states. Such citizenship agendas invariably imply models of virtuous and deviant citizens, favoring particular subject-citizens over others, and suggesting ways to transform the latter into the former” (de Koning, Jaffe and Koster 2015: 121).

tice especially widespread in Bosnia and Serbia) – testify not only to the readiness of “ordinary” people to come to each other’s aid, but also to the incompetence or unwillingness of state institutions to offer crucial support. Therefore, however unintentionally, this *situational* solidarity becomes complicit in normalizing a new order in which citizens’ self-organized actions fill the gaps left by retreating institutionalized solidarity, and the notion itself is drained of its political connotations.

I contend that demands for *political* and institutionalized solidarity are instead to be found in emerging *protest movements* in the Western Balkans, which have started to appear in reaction to growing authoritarian tendencies and a lack of accountability for local political and economic elites in the region. It can be argued that these movements represent forms of *activist* citizenship (Isin 2008, 2009), capable of bringing “into being new political subjects making justice claims” (Fagan and Sircar 2017). Further, it could be said that they belong to globally developing “*new, new*” social movements (Feixa, Pereira and Juris 2009) and to the *contentious politics* of the post-2008 global crisis (Tarrow 2011, Mew 2013), which often promote the idea of *political* solidarity, demanding institutional and lasting responses to issues of exclusion, alienation from decision-making processes, poverty, etc.

My primary intention, therefore, was to initiate research on solidarity that determines how it is used as a mobilizing tool, how it is enacted as a political principle, and how it is lived through activism in several Belgrade protest movements. However, the research process thus far has led me away from a sharp focus on solidarity and closer to a mapping of the motivating and constraining factors that influence the activists themselves. I began this process by

analyzing two movements: Don't let Belgrade D(r)own (*Ne davimo Beograd*) and United Action "A Roof over Your Head" (*Združena akcija Krov nad glavom*). Don't let Belgrade D(r)own (NDBGD) is probably the largest and best-known protest initiative in Serbia, originally focusing on resistance to a large-scale urban renewal project, the Belgrade Waterfront, which is backed by real estate investors from the United Arab Emirates and has been mired in multiple corruption scandals. The initiative evolved into a social movement similar to Right to the City and even participated in the 2018 Belgrade City Assembly elections. NDBGD focuses on issues related to urban commons, public spaces, and participative democracy, but also on housing problems including the right of citizens to affordable housing.

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It is this last issue that directly links NDBGD with United Action "A Roof over Your Head" (ZA), which principally protests to prevent evictions. ZA has so far organized a couple dozen collective actions, gathering and mobilizing activists and concerned citizens to stop private executors³ from forcefully evicting tenants – a practice that has gained a sinister momentum since recent changes to the Law on Enforcement and Security Interest afforded private executors greater authority and tenants less legal protection (a majority of cases have involved rightful homeowners who have fallen victim to investor fraud or other dubious activities, yet have been ordered to vacate their homes despite ongoing and unresolved legal battles). ZA's social engagement employs several approaches and tactics: primarily, their activists mobilize as many people as possible to physically prevent evictions from taking place; and secondarily, they advocate for the right to housing as a basic human right, pushing for a political agenda that relies on solidar-

3 The Law introduced an efficiency mechanism whereby private executors – who are licensed by the state – were instituted to carry out the work of the courts at a faster pace. These private executors are thus responsible for enforcing evictions.

istic principles to order and control private interests. They are thus committed to turning the energy of mobilization into a political platform where solidarity acts not only as an ad hoc remedy to social injustice, but as a political principle guiding citizen engagement.

Though they use different strategies to mobilize their activists and raise their concerns in the public, both NDBGD and ZA focus on social justice and citizen engagement by addressing urban space concerns, the right to housing, and the general growing neglect of citizens' concerns and rights. Through in-depth interviews with activists, I sought to learn more about their motivation for participating in these initiatives (and for those who are active in both, to determine whether they follow different motivations, and if so, how), as well as how this participation impacts and shapes their identity as activists.

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Aiming to record the personal narratives of activists, my main research tool was a semi-structured questionnaire; and I carried out in-depth interviews with 15 activists. Additionally, I employed participant observation in many more informal conversations and to observe interpersonal communications and behavior among activists. I also consulted online material, including the webpages and Facebook pages of each initiative, along with press statements and interviews with activists by media.

The insights and information collected in this first phase of research, drawn primarily from interviews with a relatively small number of activists, led me to slightly modify my initial research plans, as both the research process itself and the data informed me of new problems, venues to be explored, and constraints. I realized that exploring the rhetoric and practices of solidarity requires further, and

continuous, research that is largely based on participant observation; whereas, the information I have collected so far only enables me to comment on *attitudes* towards solidarity, not to establish a solid hypothesis on how it functions as a political principle and transformative experience. Still, the materials I collected compelled me to think about and problematize issues that were not initially in my focus, but which are helpful in better understanding protest movements in Belgrade and relations among activists, as well as their personal reflections on their own engagement. This is valuable when it comes to mapping the activist scene in Belgrade, and in wider Serbia to some extent, and for understanding personal, political, and organizational networks in the making (these are all very recent movements, after all). Beyond a doubt, this will aid future research on solidarity as well.

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Finally, the research also guided me to divert my attention from just the two protest initiatives that were originally in my sights. Interviews with activists from NDBGD and ZA, intended to help me draw comparisons between the two, revealed a much more *intertwined and thicker matrix of relations* than I anticipated, not only between these two movements but with other initiatives as well. ZA was actually formed by several NDBGD activists, and the two initiatives support each other in ways that transcend mere political support stemming from the fight for similar goals. The nascent activist scene in Belgrade is vibrant and diverse, but also relatively small in terms of numbers of devoted activists. Almost all of the activists I interviewed or had informal conversations with are involved in numerous initiatives with similar goals and agendas, but employing different strategies of action and mobilization and different approaches to sensitizing others to their causes.

It turns out that these different *activist outlets* – a notion on which I intend to further elaborate in future research – also

serve the needs of activists themselves to express different, sometimes conflicting, attitudes and ideals of political action. For instance, several interviewees I spoke with are active participants in *three* movements: NDBGD, ZA, and 7 Demands (*7 zahteva*), the latter of which emerged out of the spontaneous April 2017 protests that followed the presidential elections. As activists explained, each initiative nourishes a different identity and uses different tactics to address political problems – although never to the point of imperiling complementarity – and they feel proud they are involved in all of them. They described NDBGD as the “most open,” “citizen-oriented,” and ideologically non-polarizing movement, “involving ecological themes.” ZA, they said, is direct-action oriented, open to cooperation with different political subjects (“if right-wingers want to join in stopping the evictions they are welcome... the most important thing is to stop unjust evictions”), and committed to raising awareness of growing social injustices. And 7 Demands was characterized as the “most politically mindful” movement, “oriented towards the workers” and “sharply self-identified as left;” although, they admitted that the initiative is “facing much bigger problems in attracting new members, or widening its scope of actions” than others.

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Shifting my attention from initiatives to the activists themselves, and to their personal narratives, helped me appreciate the psychological-functional role various initiatives play in channeling, giving shape to, and sometimes providing feedback on the ideological views of activists, as well as on their desires to be proactive and to be recognized as activists in various fields (ideological, political, legal, etc.). In a way, these activist outlets allow activists to test their capacities and comfort zones when engaging in different modes of political protest.

Following the initial phase of research, I found it useful to organize findings into several topic clusters, which informed the most salient questions for further exploration. Here I will outline several, briefly commenting on insights they generated.

1. *Becoming an activist*: Early exposure to socially polarizing, contested issues is important; activism is influenced in the family or immediate surroundings; many experiences of volunteerism and working in civil society were cited (a very frequent theme here: splitting from NGOs, or channeling NGO activism in a certain direction); concrete, “decisive” experiences are significant (for instance, the blockade and occupation of the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade, for a younger generation of activists); and exposure to new literature and involvement in reading groups and discussion forums is impactful.

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2. *From “friendship core” to practicing horizontalism*: In a majority of cases, strong friendships preceded initiation into activism; problems are faced when “enlarging” the group, including issues of trust, delegation, commitment, etc., all of which challenge proclaimed ideals of horizontalism; implementing/imposing bottom-up organizations creates paradoxes; and close friendships help build a sense of “fraternity,” solidarity, and “common goals,” but can constrain engagement with new people and limit the cultivation of horizontal networks with them.

3. *Polarizing issues*: The joining of coalitions, or joint actions with other initiatives; “disputes on the Left,” i.e. liberalism vs. leftism; theory vs. praxis; and difficulties reaching consensus about *when* and with *what means* to act in public.

4. *Generational gaps*: This unexpectedly proved to be an extremely important topic, deserving of further research. Growing up in different political environments builds dif-

ferent attitudes and ideas about social engagement. In Serbia, activists born between about 1978 and 1983 had their formative political experience in opposition to the Milošević regime, and the regime change of 2000. For younger activists, their first formative experiences of engagement were related to austerity measures, the commercialization of higher education (the raising of tuition fees), and the recent global upsurge of protests (reanimating the academic and political Left).

5. Gendered experiences: This is another extremely important topic, for which explorations of personal accounts are especially worthy. As one activist explained: “sexism on the Left has a very peculiar form... because leftists have learned what the socially desirable attitudes and behaviors are... they know that they can no longer think of women as mothers, sisters, lovers... but they still don’t really appreciate a woman as a person... but it happens in subtle ways... it becomes observable when relationships (between activists) break up... I doubted myself many times after these experiences...”

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To briefly conclude, I wish to underline several things. First, in-depth interviews and informal conversations with activists, coupled with participant-observation, resulted in only a limited understanding of the role solidarity plays in organizing movements and orienting their social engagement. This will require more extensive research over time, but also a combination of methodological approaches – including extensive desk research and probably discourse analysis – to capture the mobilizational and rhetorical potential of solidarity. However, exploring the personal accounts of activists brought forth many new and insightful perspectives through which emergent protest movements can be analyzed. Interviews revealed intricate connections between movements and organizations, defying the assumption that

they could be studied in isolation; and shifting focus from initiatives/movements to activists themselves revealed how the former can be seen as *activist outlets* for the latter – raising the issue of how *different* movements serve to fulfill the personal needs of activists to exercise *different* forms of social engagement. Finally, the *clustering* of themes proved an effective method of classifying materials obtained in the research, and some clusters – such as *generational gap*, or *gendered experiences* – seem especially deserving of concentrated study in the future.

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