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Occupying Subjectivity: Being and Becoming Radical in the 21st Century: Introduction

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In the wake of the political, social and economic devastation caused by the 2008 financial crisis, we have seen a resurgence of resistance and revolution of many kinds across the globe. Whether in response to neoliberal austerity and the dismantling of welfare states, to increasingly securitized borders, autocratic leaders, unchecked movements of financial capital or the ever increasing militarisation of both liberal and illiberal societies, a new generation of disobedient subjects have captured the public attention in recent years. Particular sites of revolutionary and radical struggle, such as the uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa and the Occupy movement, have become the headline news stories of their time, and continue to have major social and geopolitical ramifications. These resistances have brought together disparate subjects across political and theoretical landscapes, who have found collective expression in forms of protest and resistance which borrow from previous generations while finding new articulation. This special issue does not begin from the premise that there is something in common about these processes, some new collective subject in-and-against authority/neoliberalism/capitalism, nor does it attempt to theorise the causes and effects of this latest wave in an ever-extending history of rebellion. It does, however, take them as a starting point to ask an urgent (though not by any means new) series of questions about the subject of radical politics; that is, who or what is it that engages in radical politics? Who or what should they be? And how are we to negotiate the many complexities of that second question?

These questions are expressed across much of critical or radical political thought. Despite substantial differences (many of which are expressed within this issue), the various theoretical traditions which comprise critical thought hold in common a desire to explore the character of (supposedly) revolutionary subjects. This has included ideas of the mass, of the revolutionary class, the rebel, the nomad, queer subjects, the multitude, and more. More specific identifications have found form in the international proletariat, the peasantry, women, blacks, the colonised, mestizas, etc. Whilst the insistence upon and search for a universal revolutionary subject has, at least to some extent, been discarded as the forms of domination that exercised themselves through such images has been continually and convincingly unveiled, the need to consider, explore, experiment and deconstruct expressions of radical subjectivity remains crucial. This special issue collects together a series of papers which seek to do just this. While the papers employ a diverse range of theoretical and empirical reference points, they all seek to identify and think through ways in which subjects have, are, and might possibly orient themselves in and against particular configurations of power.

The articles in this issue all recognise radical political action as a project of becoming otherwise, of contending with the ways in which subjectivities are produced by and implicated in their social context and of seeking to embody some forms of alternative. Visions of social change that ignore such dynamics are destined to reproduce that with which they contend. More importantly, the articles also grapple with the ways in which such abstract ideals of counter-subjectivities and creative alternatives are not easily realised, nor are they free from their own contradictions and violences. All of the articles, in different ways, shine light on how an intimate encounter with radical subjectivities reveals not a straightforward confrontation between alternative systems, but a web of contestations, a colossal loss of innocence, and a plethora of creative possibilities.

This last point, perhaps the major theme uniting the papers, divides into two sub-themes that run throughout the issue. I will outline each briefly, before introducing the pieces that follow. The first is an appreciation of the complex relationship between the practice of theory and the nature of subjectivity. The authors here use a range of theoretical traditions and conceptual tools to explore the ways in which different forms of radical subjectivity reflect, reinforce, displace, subvert or otherwise interrelate with entrenched social relations. Throughout the issue we are reminded that sweeping assignments of revolutionary content (whether in the form of ideas, subjects, projects or states of affairs) all too frequently mask the complex challenges and reperformances at play. Theory is mobilised as a tool for (de)constructing the politics of radical becoming. It can also work to recognise the ways in which attempts to resist and create alternatives to existing states of affairs might be understood as theoretical exercises in their own right – that is, must not be simply reduced to objects of curiosity or critique. In their (frequently frustrated) moves to reshape the world, disobedient or radical subjects reveal lines of friction, force and possibility which are of urgent relevance to anyone seeking to investigate the workings of power. However, the practice of theory can also close down explorations of radical subjectivity, delimiting who or what can be properly understood as radical (or, for that matter, political), and in what ways, and when. All of the articles pursue at least one of these questions. What emerges is a theoretical project which, whilst grappling with questions of significant social importance, situates theory as a deeply personal exercise. In asking whether and how we should read the politicality of particular subjects, be they political activists, humans, protest collectives, academics, settlers or those who have engaged in protest self-burning, the authors fashion revolutionary questions into intimate encounters.

Beginning from this point, the second major sub-theme is a common encounter with what we might loosely term revolutionary sentiment, albeit in a determinedly ambiguous form. Whilst the papers are all firmly seized of the non-innocent nature of professedly radical subjects, and of the consequent dangers of sentimentalisation, they also display optimisms, creativities and exhortations which pull their sceptical and critical investigations into a restless series of contestations. There are no heroes, nor critiques from a position of purism – instead, we have experiments, confessions, challenges and reflections which lay a plethora of critiques but which invite and excite further moves. They call to mind Foucault's reflections on judgment, in which he responds to the common criticism that his work invites political apathy by stating that 'my point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do. So my position leads not to apathy but to a hyper- and pessimistic activism' (1983: 256). The papers, even as they criticise, point towards a multitude of possibilities.

The issue begins with Aggie Hirsts's important moves to bring the interconnected but often separated concepts of deconstruction and resistance into dialogue. Leading off from the argument that both Gramscian and Foucaudian conceptions of resistance within international politics serve, at particular junctures, to leave the question of politics (and the subject) untouched, she suggests that, far from being apolitical or motivating a form of immobilisation, Jacques Derrida's conception of deconstruction can provoke a form of resistance which resists reinscription into prevailing forms of global ordering. We then

turn to Ruth Reitan's reflections on her experience as a scholar-activist navigating the tensions and even contradictions between her position as a non-violent Buddhist and as an anarchist activist. Engaging in an autoethnographic process which weaves together poetry and diary pieces, and which charts the many, everyday and often quite incidental moments which have made her who she is, Reitan gently breaks down grand revolutionary narratives and identities without sacrificing either respect or generosity for the more contested and ambiguous routes through which radical subjectivities are produced (and sustained).

Adam Barker's contribution focuses on the Idle No More movement, which emerged in 2012 as a significant moment in the ongoing resistance to settler-colonialism on the part of Indigenous populations in Canada. He argues that the protests in late-2012 and early-2013 represent the assertion of a specifically indigenous form of sovereignty, which, though emerging from movements with histories extending back hundreds of years, found particular expression through new forms of communication and new ways of conceptualising space. He also argues that some attempts on the part of settler Canadians to express solidarity with the campaign counterproductively threatened to pull the movement back into political terms defined by settlers, blunting the more radical priorities of Indigenous populations. His arguments are important both insofar as they highlight the significant struggles on the part of first-nation peoples to assert themselves politically *on their own terms*, and insofar as they demonstrate the ways in which even well-meaning gestures of solidarity can serve to reinscribe colonial relations when expressed without attention to those structures which determine the terms of political contestation.

Anna Szolucha explores the ways in which attempts to realise alternative ways of being were negotiated within the Occupy movement of 2011 and 2012. Based on extensive fieldwork in both the US and Ireland, her account of the contradictions at work within the movement moves beyond most treatments by taking seriously the aporetic nature of appeals to democracy, equality and so forth. Occupy matters not because it offered the space for an ideal embodiment of alternatives, but because it allowed participants to recognise and explore the limits of contemporary systems, and to learn some of the ways in which politics does not involve flight to a utopian outside, but precisely a politicisation and negotiation of these limits. Her mobilisation of Derrida and Jacques Lacan as theorists relevant to such a project does much to refute the suggestion that these thinkers have no purchase for radical politics. As she highlights the limitations of looking for particular and/or stable subjectivities in the context of radical political praxis, Nicholas Michelsen in his piece argues that the assignments of political content to revolutionary acts can obscure the more fundamental challenges at play. Specifically, he explores the political subject of self-burning, asking what it means to understand such subjects (and acts) as political. By considering the case study of Mohammed Bouzizi's self-burning, commonly recognised as the tipping point for the Tunisian revolution of 2010, Michelsen suggests that conceptualising such acts as 'self-sacrifices' places focus only on the retrospective interpretation by other actors – an interpretation that, whilst not unimportant, obscures the more originary or divine violence at the heart of such actions. The political subject of self-burning, in Michelsen's reading, constitutes a far more substantial challenge to the sovereign order than is generally acknowledged.

Andreja Zevnik suggests that the sovereign order is precisely what has been challenged in the assemblage of subjects that have constituted the core of many contemporary movements against austerity and authority. Looking across protests in Egypt, Tunisia, Greece and more, she argues that we can see the emergence of a new form of subjectivity that does not repeat the calls for new forms of authority ('new masters', in Lacan's formulation) in the manner common to previous periods of upheaval. She suggests that, rather than the multitude, we can see the emerging power of 'the crowd', which signifies collective and affective experiences of grievance, exclusion and violence, which asserts certain rights centred around ideas of the common, and which does not establish common claims tied to particular identities and subject positions. My own piece explores concerns not dissimilar to those introduced by Hirst, that is, that radical political projects can, despite the best of intentions, reproduce that which they originally set out to challenge. In an

effort to conceptualise a form of radical subjectivity which might take account of such concerns, I mobilise a joint reading of Friedrich Nietzsche and the anarchist-feminist Emma Goldman. In reading both of these thinkers as productive of a particular revolutionary archetype, The Dancer, I suggest that they can inspire ways of be(com)ing radical which champion perpetual insurrection, which focus attention on the ways in which totalising discourses of morality and strategy can serve to render radical projects authoritarian, and which begin from spaces of creativity.

Finally, Erika Cudworth and Stephen Hobden engage in an important and substantive defence of their previous moves to articulate a 'posthuman' approach to international relations. In response to criticism that a new-materialist and posthuman approach to international politics holds few prospects for an emancipatory politics, they argue that an approach which begins by recognising human beings' embeddedness within complex and material systems offers important resources for thinking critically about both the dynamics of political change and about ethical responsibility.

The articles contain no prescriptions, no clear or firm instructions for how radical subjects should be, or what they should do. Instead, they offer a rich series of provocations towards new ways of conceptualising, evaluating and imagining radical political praxis. In a world where millions of people are struggling to articulate fresh demands and build new forms of political community, the explorations here are of the most urgent and poignant necessity.

Foucault, M., 1997. 'On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress', in P. Rabinow, ed., *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault, vol. 1: Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*. New York: The New Press.