Unfolding the political: Voices of aesthetics and emotions

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political perspectives

Roland Bleiker identifies two shifts in the production of knowledge about world politics. In the first of these shifts the so-called "postmodern" scholars began to challenge positivist foundations of knowledge (Bleiker, 2001: 510). They raised questions about how the "parameters" of knowledge made it difficult, if not impossible, to locate and explore a wide range of other insights into world politics (see for instance Smith – Booth – Zalewski, 1996). In the second, interlocking, shift scholars began to explore different forms of knowledge. Their pursuit of knowledge was characterised more by diversity, than by a single and coherent set of positions and assumptions. As Bleiker argues, "If there is a unifying point […] it is precisely the acceptance of difference, the refusal to uphold one position as the correct and desirable one" (Bleiker, 2001: 522). We, the editors, were specifically interested in *aesthetic* approaches to world politics: insights that emerge from images, narratives, and sounds such as art, music, cinema or literature (Shapiro, 1988, 1999, 2001; Bleiker, 2001, 2003, 2006, 2009; Holden, 2003, 2010; Chan, 2005; Amaturo, 1995; Weldes, 1999; Burke, 2000; Costas, 2000; Rajaram, 2002; Disch, 2003; Doane, 2004; Campbell, 2004; Devetak, 2005; Jabri, 2005; Weber, 2005; Moore, 2010; Hutchinson, 2010; Steans, 2010; Carver, 2010; Frost, 2010). We were interested in how aesthetic approaches broaden and widen our understanding beyond the comfort of academic disciplines and, moreover, rather than simply adding an additional layer of interpretation how they "transform" our very understanding of world politics (Bleiker, 2001: 511).

In addition to, but not detached from, the aesthetical dimension scholars have more recently raised questions about *emotional* approaches to world politics: insights that emerge from

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feelings and expressions for instance of fear, hope or loyalty. Emotions, arguably, more than aesthetics, have long been a source of annoyance and of methodological concern for many researchers. The consensus was that since emotions were immeasurable and unquantifiable they had no place in the production of knowledge about world politics. Nonetheless, emotions have, over the past two decades, started to find their way back into our field. Having already carved out a firm position within political philosophy, perhaps most notably with the works of Martha Nussbaum (2001, 2004) and Robert Solomon (1990, 1993, 1998), emotional approaches to world politics are establishing their presence both within the disciplines of politics and sociology, both which are crucial to understand the link between emotions and resistance (Aminzade and McAdam, 2001; Bleiker and Hutchinson, 2008; Calhoun, 2001; Clarkeet. al., 2001; Emirbayer and Goldberg, 2005; Goodwin and Jasper and Polletta, 2001; Kingston and Ferry, 2008). To us, the editors, this welcome change indicates a much-needed shift in understanding not only how aesthetics but also how emotions come to "shape" world politics.[3]

In putting together this edition of *Political Perspectives* we were interested in research that explicitly examines how representative practices located within the aesthetic or emotional realm come to "shape" world politics. How they produce meanings, constitute identities and establish relations, in short how they make sense of the world we live in. We wanted to attract papers that not only challenged - "troubled" and "collapsed" - the foundations of knowledge but also sought to locate and explore different forms of insights. Papers that were more open to the twists and turns in the stories we hear; that "unfolded" world politics. We specifically invited contributions that addressed aesthetic and emotional approaches to reading, writing and, ultimately, speaking, and focused on either dissembling mainstream or assembling alternative *voices*, in other words "voices of resistance". This issue then brings together a number of cross-disciplinary papers that we felt made the *unheard heard*.

The first paper, entitled, "Toward a Cinema of Revolution: 18 Days in Tahrir Square" draws upon an extensive and rich history of photography criticism to examine the "visual grammar of protest" (see for instance Benjamin, 1936; Debord, 1967; Sontag, 1977; Barthes, 1980). Walker Gunning invokes Guy Debord and Walter Benjamin in his analysis of how Tahrir

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[3] It is apparent to us that feminist and postcolonial theory have been breaking much ground with regards to aesthetics and emotions, and that other disciplines are heavily indebted to them (see Moore and Shepherd, 2010: 307; Copjec, 2002).

Square became a focal point for the Egyptian Revolution. He explores how the "spectacle" represented by the "screens of phones, computers, and even white sheets, broke the media's hold over the events." How the protesters were not mere objects of the camera's gaze but producers and consumers of images that were broadcast both at home and abroad. Whilst careful not to overemphasize the impact of Tahrir Square Gunning points out that one lasting contribution may be to reshape notions of the public sphere, the "lack" of which is often cited in research on Egypt and, more broadly, the Middle East. His contention that, "those 18 days in Tahrir Square, and the impact of a revolution imagined, contested, and remembered through its images, should teach us to keep our eyes on the screen" proves timely given recent coverage of dissent in Egypt. Whilst it is evident that Egyptians disagree on what they want to project, the visual grammar of protest continues to play a crucial role in making their voices heard.

Whilst familiar with Debord and Benjamin's work on images and politics we were less familiar with the literature on music. However we were pleased to receive not one but two papers which introduced us to an extensive, and often harrowing, literature on music and politics. The following two papers clearly spoke to one another, they both spoke to themes of resistance. Both Alessandro Carrieri's paper "The Voice of Resistance in Concentrationary Music" and Silvia Rosani's paper "Resistance Music Finds New Shapes" referred to the historical relationship between music and politics making particular reference to music composed during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Carrieri's paper, specifically, attempts to make the voices of musicians interned in concentration camps during Nazism heard. It focuses on Viktor Ullmann's composition "The Emperor of Atlantis" which was written during his interment in Theresienstadt, Czechoslovakia. An "ethical manifesto of political resistance" he argues his opera, "tries to give shape, overcome and forget the daily routine of the ghetto". What is striking about his attempt to make Ullmann heard is that music is by no means absent from the ghetto rather life is set to music, "the tunes are few, a dozen, the same ones everyday, morning and evening: marches and popular songs dear to every German." Carrieri reveals how Ullmann transforms music from an instrument of oppression to one of resistance. Moreover in drawing attention to an intimate connection between life, power and resistance in the camps - biopolitics - he argues that in countering the guards' music, to which the daily routine of the ghetto is set, Ullmann's, music becomes "salvation".

Rosani's paper not only traces the influence of politics on the compositional process over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but also realizes this relationship in her own compositions. She describes her compositions about the Italian politics of immigration and corruption, along with their relationship to illegal organizations, as an "aesthetic of resistance". This profoundly innovative paper reveals how Rosani experiments with elements such as choruses, stage action, rhythm, pitch, resonances, and spectral analysis and performance spaces in order to "mirror" the political content of a text. However, what she argues is that whilst her compositions are inspired by texts for instance by Roberto Saviano or Cesare Pavese that, "the written word becomes sound an audible metaphor of the unheard, giving voice to those who can no longer speak or never did". In this sense she not only challenges who can speak but what counts as speaking.

In these three first papers, the aesthetic dimension of politics has been the focal point. Exploring music and photography as practices of resistance, has proved to be a both successful and important endeavour. However, in the two remaining articles, emotions take centre stage; the authors demonstrate their relevance to the study of the political and resistance.

With reference to the inclusion of emotions into the political realm, Claes Wrangel has in his article "Reading the War on Terror through fear and hope? Affective warfare and the question of the future" constructed his contribution around the notions of fear and hope, emotions that we are all familiar with. However, these are not merely individual experiences, but also demonstrate a collective function when we consider their impact on, for instance, foreign policy. Wrangel brings up the issue of the recent post 9/11 events, where the Bush administration constructed its policy based on an immanent threat, an everywhere present uncertainty, a *fear* which could justify almost any counter-terrorism act. This, Wrangel notes, has also been heavily criticised, but what these critiques seem to omit, is that we might think of the Obama administration's use of the word *hope* in the same critical manner. This builds on the notion of the future, the potentiality of what is to come, and the uncertainty thereof. Indeed, Wrangel states:

> "Because if both fear and hope thrive in, rest in, indeed demand the indeterminancy of the potential, then how do we distinguish them analytically, given the necessary indeterminacy of every affective experience of potentiality?"

Thus, when we are criticizing fear, and the usage of the uncertainty of the future for political purposes, the very same argument can be applied to that of hope. If both hope and fear are constructs, which depend on this uncertainty, and can be used to create hegemonic discourses, then why should there be any major distinction between them? In making this argument, Wrangel interestingly builds on an analytical difference between emotions and affect (which has become commonplace within much emotional politics, see for instance Gould (2009) or Massumi (2002)). Emotions are here thought of as the articulation of the more non-cognitive affect, an appropriation, and at times a colonisation of our unconscious. This is a useful separation, enabling us to understand the mechanisms of how power lingers in emotions, which Wrangel clearly demonstrates in his article.

Fear and hope are both concepts which we could traditionally classify as emotions, but, in putting together this issue, we were also interested in concepts which would perhaps not occupy such an obvious position in the study of emotions as politics. Such concepts could be fraternity or sorority, something which our last author, Ramona Rat, has investigated further. In her article, "Saying Fraternity", she explores another, more theoretical, side of what resistance can mean. While the other articles in this issue focus on an approach more pertaining to the expressions of resistance in our everyday life, this article has instead chosen to analyse a conceptual figure which can be seen as a resisting practice. Rat investigates how we can conceive of the Levinasian concept of fraternity as a locus of resistance against totality. Here Rat touches upon a common theme in several of the articles in the issue; she puts her finger on what resistance for the critical tradition seems to be incessantly fighting: the closure of conceptual space and totalising practices.

In our shared attempts to unfold the political, we constantly encounter a battle between two poles, are our political beings and views universal and valid for all, or are they limited to my own self or community and therefore particular? Fraternity, says Rat, exposes signs of being part of both of these fields. Thus, we can witness, not a conflation, but a duality of the notion of fraternity, made possible by refusing the synonymy between fraternity and homogeneity. This duality is not a dual relation between two separate entities, but rather a place where neither the universal nor the particular can reign, and thus it resists this dichotomy, and reintroduces a space where the political can linger. Rat has consequently introduced another layer of what (and where) the political can be.

In conclusion, these papers reveal how, in making the unheard heard, aesthetic and emotional approaches "trouble" and "collapse" the parameters of knowledge. In this sense the inclusion of emotions and aesthetics in politics can be thought of as more than merely a "broadening" or "widening" of the discipline. As the contributions to this edition uncover, emotions and aesthetics are also voicing resistance. Aesthetics and emotions act as an articulation of the political, opposing those practices imposed on us by a dominant discourse, which make claims as to what politics is and is not. Thus, we want to conceive of the political as the instance when Obama uses the word hope to construct politics, or where the concept of fraternity refuses hierarchical distinctions between totalities. We want to think of the political as when composition becomes resistance against migration policies, or where music becomes an unlikely outlet of dissent in concentration camps, or as when crowds on Tahrir Square document injustices with their mobile phones.

To us, all of the above are modes of speaking. In unfolding the political they assemble and dissemble claims as to what counts as world politics. Ultimately, in order to make the unheard heard, we merely have to listen.

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