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Federalism (in One Person) *An Exercise of Institutional Fantasy for Contemporary Europe*

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Abstract

Every critical theory is a mixture of diagnosis and therapeutical proposal; it's not an opposition, rather something more nuanced: to find and trace, in the trends of the given situation, the progressive forces and potentials, and design institutional and political frameworks adequate to these forces. We need to start over the critical mechanism and shape a radically new form of critical theory, trying to invent unprecedented forms of political institutions. My proposal is a sort of hyper-federalism: a territorial and overlapping federalism - perfectly described by Dardot and Laval -, plus an "internal" and personal federalism, adequate to the *foamy* (Sloterdijk) contemporary panorama. To save space, I will focus now only on the second kind of federalism.

Keywords: Federalism; Neoliberalism; Assemblage; Sloterdijk; Latour

Prologue – A Thought Experiment

«Just go in your head over any set of contemporary issues: the entry of Turkey into the European Union, the Islamic veil in France, the spread of genetically modified organisms in Brazil, the pollution of the river near your home, the breaking down of Greenland's glaciers, the diminishing return of your pension funds, the closing of your daughter's factory, the repairs to be made in your apartment, the rise and fall of stock options, the latest beheading by fanatics in Falluja, the last American election. For every one of these objects, you see spewing out of them a different set of interested parties and different ways of carrying out their partial resolution» (Latour 2005, 14-15).

Latour wrote these words in an article entitled *From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik*, an introduction to the exhibition *Making Things Public – Atmospheres of Democracy* at ZKM – Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe. His article starts exactly with this thought experiment; actually, 11 years later we immediately notice that we still face some problems already mentioned by Latour, whereas other main topics of our time were absent or at least underestimated – above on: terrorism.

This diachronic difference is not so important in my view; two points are definitely more interesting: first of all the fact that in this list Latour mixes up macro-political issues – such as climate change, stock options market and so on – and micro-political ones, quasi "private" worries and concerns – like the crisis of your daughter's factory and the works that you have to make in your apartment. In Latour's approach these two levels are not just linked and intertwined; more strongly, they are melted together. Secondly, the quote continues in this way: «There might be no continuity, no coherence in our opinion» but this fact just means that «objects – takens as so many issues – bind all of us in ways that map out a public space profoundly different from what is usually recognized under the label of "the political"» (Latour 2005, 15). Each issue – or, as Latour calls them: each object, each *Ding* – gathers around itself different people and different stakeholders. Every issue is autonomously *politogena*, i.e. it is "creator of politics", because it gathers a collective around itself and simultaneously it creates conflict – in one word: it defines a punctual, defined and limited *we – they*.

These distinctions, conflicts and collectives are no longer represented in the usual map of politics build in XX century. When a map is anachronistic, it is a duty of critical thinking try to update it.

Looking at the World as an Experiment

• Uselessness of Politics

Idomeni 2016: hundreds of refugees press on the borders of Fortress Europe. Imagine that you really are concern about their present and future, that you really feel this situation as a moral scandal and a political shame. What are you going to do, what can you do? Well, probably you will feel the traditional forms of *political* action as useless. In this paragraph I would like to underline the systemic and external obstacles which impede a *political* output to *ethical* demands; in other words: why people prefer to turn to non-traditionally-political forms of action and engagement to express their ethical demands?

Facing the migrant and refugee crisis, you can consider joining a political party, but soon you will face several problems: the rules of political and parliamentary compromises will probably weaken and distort the impact of your effort; most importantly, contemporary political lexicon is built upon the semantics of necessity and inevitability: every political decision is passed off or perceived as a technical issue, as a matter of *Realpolitik*. The complexity and the pressing of systemic imperatives seem to make politics powerless; this situation causes the turn from active citizen to consumer of politics: you can choose between alternatives more and more similar to each other and trust the “political technicians” because the understanding of specific issues is for specialists. In this way contemporary world compels to adaptation «an das mediokre Undsoweiter» (Sloterdijk 1993, 22). You can consider joining a more radical political movement, but in this case you will face the insulation and tendential impermeability of neoliberal institutions: to impact and modify their policies, you have to be a political *majority*, and it takes time – and it's incredibly difficult – to build a majority in times of extreme individualization. So, for contemporary subject, the most effective and useful type of action in order to help the refugees in Idomeni is, actually, support NGOs, humanitarian organizations and associations working there or lobbying here.

• **The End of (This) Politics and the Silent Justification of the Existing**

If you are concerned about the fate of the refugees you can always go to Idomeni, help them to cross the border, protect them from police brutality, documenting and spreading everything. This is a political action, and many political activists made and make this choice. But only an extreme minority make this radical choice. Why? Because it is incredibly onerous, too onerous for contemporary subjectivity. Charity is the form of ethics which fits better the demands of contemporary subjectivity: in fact, it is an *ethique indolore* (Lipovetsky 1992), a painless and easy ethics. From this point of view charity is a “hobby-ethics”, that you can practice without particular sacrifices and strain. And that's why it is fascinating. I call it “hobby-ethics” in two senses; first, because it is a *win-win* ethics: with a simple donation you gain good conscience at low price. Secondly, because, like a hobby, it has no impact on your whole life or life-plans, it does not revolt you life: you can do charity and then return to your job and your normal social life.

In this sense charity and NGOs can be the end of politics (if we intend politics in a strong sense, typical of the last century, as the effort to build a different world in every aspects, to change the world as a whole) and a silent justification of the existing order. It can be not just the “fifth column” of neoliberalism (the excuse for outsource and divest welfare state), but also a way to propose a type of ethics which is entirely compatible with the prosecution of the existing world as it is.

• **New Forms of Politics**

Updating the exhibition *Making Things Public*. Idomeni 2016: hundreds of refugees press on the borders of Fortress Europe. Paris 2015: at COP21 State leaders discuss how to face climate change. Italy 2016: debate on same-sex civil unions. Three different issues, three different challenges for contemporary politics. Personally, a) I support the reception of refugees and migrants, b) I think we need to build now a carbon-free future (and present), c) I support same-sex marriage. Sounds great, but there could be some problems when I try to act *politically* on these issues. In a demonstration for the refugees I can find myself next to a Catholic, who has my same opinion about the migrant crisis, but s/he is also fiercely adverse to same-sex marriage. If I decide to give my vote to a party which is favourable to same-sex marriage, it can be a liberal party, which has opinion on environment or labour market that I cannot support. And so on.

This is a reason why nowadays politics is less attractive than non-political forms of action (NGO, Charities etc) for people who have ethical demands on different issues: because politics (in the way politics is currently structured) forces you to choose which is *the* most important issue for you and to sacrifice - at least for the moment - the others. So, if you think that *the* problem of our times is climate change, you have to be ready to vote a party that on other issue completely disagree with you. It is more satisfying to commit yourself to different single-issue organizations: in this way you can actually fight for all the issues you think are important, without compromises, and “building” your own total ethical action.

This is an effect of contemporary super-individualization joined with older forms of politics and representation. Modern subjectivity was built hierarchically, with one principal identity field: you were *first and foremost* proletarian, or Christian, or Italian, and the other sub-identities were secondary or directly deducible from the first one. That's why it was not a problem to join or vote *Weltanschauungs-Parteien*, with the task to represent citizens on *every* issues. Contemporary subjectivity has multiple-horizontal-identities, each one is perceived as equally important. But political structures still force these multiple-horizontal-identities to become “vertical” and to choose a party or a movement which provide solutions for everything (and, in time of super-individualization that means either the exodus from politics or the equation “one person, one party”).

Sloterdijk describes this scenario as a foaming landscape in perpetual motion, in which individuals, like bubbles, aggregate and disaggregate continuously on single-issues (Sloterdijk 2004). The solidarity bonds between individuals are not disappeared but have changed. Like bubbles, contemporary individuals tend to forge non-monogamous, non-smothering ties. These ties are intrinsically temporary, mobile, horizontal, based on specific issues. In our world it is impossible – theoretically wrong and politically blind – to identify *one* single and dominant subjectification dispositif; we experience multiple dispositives which shape multiple subjectivities: every single tile of our identity-mosaic is perceived as equally important and (literally) definitory. This is why collective subjects are – too – non-monogamous,

temporary, and gathered around specific issues. Moreover, as it was shown in the second paragraph, these collective subjects must be *indolore*, or better: enhancing, strengthening, they must not involve any form of self-sacrifice. This can sound awful to all the nostalgics of the past, but actually it can mean (also) that contemporary subject is inclined neither to sacrifice, to exchange goal (social justice *in exchange* of civil rights), nor to wait for (hopefully) future Perfect World.

Therefore I will argue that it is possible and necessary to change the political structures and institutions in order to make them more adequate to contemporary subjectivity. All-answers-parties are out of date; we can think to face and take advantage of this “federalism in one person” re-shaping political institutions, building – for example – multiple parliaments on macro-issues (like: environment, health care, labour market, foreign politics, civil rights, education, internal politics). We must abandon the universality of (political) representation, and create of institutions which both reflect and enhance the constitutive plurality of contemporary subjectivity. In this way, it will be possible both i) to change and update the *theory*, forcing it to recognize politics even where a XX-Century view sees only “social”; ii) to impact on the *praxis*, building new kind of institutions which fit better with contemporary world.

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