Engaging an infinity in actuality: exposing political space in the authority of experience itself

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In this short response piece, I use the distinction, following Claude Lefort, between the political (le politique) and politics (la politique) to frame an evaluation of the retreating of the concept of authority as presented in this special edition. The piece takes up Jean-Luc Nancy’s presentation of a different regime of thought for politics that takes the actuality of singular experience as that which keeps open the constitution of any political act, event or space in its infinite potential. Arguing that the concept of the event plays to the heart of our questioning of politics, I spotlight the disruptive and unpredictable space at the cusp of the (as yet) inconceivable threshold of conscious awareness which points towards the space of politics attuned to the molecular beat of habit, affect and plasticity.

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At the heart of all the papers in this special edition is the question of what counts as politics, in particular how the implied contestation opens up ways of refiguring the political power, and almost necessity of some form of authority. As social scientists, we might feel the pressure to be discerning about the precise nature of the political application of our work – if we were not for the fact that ‘an off-beat claim hovers at the horizon of our thoughts, pronouncing that everything is political’ (Nancy 2002, p. 15). It is commonly argued that ontologically, politics is already settled: that its key terms, namely equality, fraternity and freedom, are its universal foundation. As a result, the task of the political remains solely an epistemological and practical one: how to decide and act upon the most effective emancipatory means for realising each of these three central tenets as the globalised ideal of politics. However, our modern elaboration constantly prompts a rethinking of the political, where politics rests as much in the arguments over its definition and therefore the parameters that that sets for transforming the world for the better. Each of the papers here, in their own exemplary way, takes to this task in rethinking the concept, practice and efficacy of authority as a key political concept. Not surprisingly, the papers draw currency from recent post-continental and post-foundational philosophy, in what some have called a Left-Heideggerian politics evident in the work of Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Louis Althusser, then Alain Badiou, Jacques Rancière and Jean-Luc Nancy, and includes Derrida, who himself made this observation (1993, p. 190).

In my short response to the papers, I want to situate and provide a broad framework for evaluating their arguments in terms of the distinction, following

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Claude Lefort, between the political (le politique) and politics (la politique). The political refers to the traditional sense of politics, one which is based on an essentially given universal experience, centred on normative evaluations of a discernibly ‘good’ State, and thus often focused upon the question of the legitimation of sovereign power. The political, after Badiou, is regulated by three norms: that of the economy or capital-parliamentarism, the national norm, and democracy; or as in Nancy’s work, the political arises from a traditional sense of ‘politics understood as a determined set of institutional mechanisms for organizing power’ (Smith; quoted in Nancy 2007b, p. 524). Politics (la politique), in the more radical sense thus argued for, is alternatively that which thinks the singular, or the politics of singularity, and for that it needs to rethink the characteristics that make the classic understanding of the political work – one immediately thinks of notions like the social contract and political representation, but equally, as in Kirwan’s paper (2013), this applies too to the more practical sense of ideas of community and governementality which get radicalized when addressed through the work of Nancy. Instead, as Kirwan argues, the radical beat of la politique for Nancy is precisely in the question of ‘the essence of the political as such’ (ibid.), of putting into question the foundational ground of the idea of politics itself (see Morin 2012, p. 97) such that one holds open the very withdrawal of the meaning of the political. The questions that philosophy sets out, in particular in the work of Nancy, solicits the production of presence which crucially acts to manifest a condition, be that a subject position, a social category or a territory each with its own modes of recognizability: this is not an instance in a singular guise. Emphasising these separate modes means that you do not ‘concede too much ground in advance’, as Sharp wonderfully articulates, to those traditional frames of what counts as political (2011, p. 151). Millner’s paper (2013) echoes this sentiment as an ethical position by articulating in both her testimony to events, as in her written paper, and in the actual empirics of the events themselves, a Rancérian presentation (aspiring for a redistribution of the sensible that attends to the singular presence of the events on their own terms) as that which disturbs the underlying order itself.

It might be questionable that this distinction between le politique and la politique is really post-continental: a fair critique to say that such questions are really most concerned with a self-absorbed European West. It is, however, less questionable, as Oliver Marchat has argued, to see that the post-foundational aspect is absolutely central to this questioning of the meaning of the political more widely: this is not an attempt to eradicate the grounding of any sense of politics, rather it is a working on the ‘assumption of the impossibility of a final ground’ and ‘an increased awareness of, on the one hand, contingency, and, on the other, the political as the moment of partial and always, in the last instance, unsuccessful grounding’ (2007, p. 2). A thinking, then, of the impossible, as Gutting succinctly appraises French philosophy since 1960 (2011). In agreement with Nancy, the space opened up for politics comes from being ‘more and more distrustful of everything that, in a critical intervention, seems to stem from an apodictic certainty in a “political” horizon’ (2007b, p. 526) as that which is already defined, even down to having a certain assurance in its conditions of possibility (see Peeters on this issue between Foucault and Derrida (2012, pp. 237–240), and Morin (2012, pp. 98–101) on its impact too within the work of Nancy. It is in this mix that I find myself much more fruitful and attracted by the problematic that the concept of the event brings to our questioning of politics where the event acts as a disruptive, unpredictable, moment when foundations collapse, or as a space at the crux of the (as yet) inconceivable, or as in the threshold of conscious awareness which points towards the space of politics attuned to the molecular beat of habit, affect and plasticity. Several of the papers here pitch their concerns precisely at this more micro, vital, present-tensed and uncertain wording of politics: be that in terms of creativity (Brigstocke, 2013), affective embodiment (Dawney, 2013) or the life of objectivity (Blencowe, 2013).

Across all the papers, principal problematics come to the fore, questions typical in the wake of post-foundational arguments: questions about the speed of politics; the organisation of politics, the aristocratic thinking of politics, the nature of solidarity in politics and the perhaps fundamental requirement to have authority to legitimate politics. And, if the event as a political, philosophical and indeed practical concept is to the twenty-first century what the revolution was to the 20th, three pivotal questions confront us:

1. How do we prepare politically for the unknowable?
2. How do we discern which event-like moments are seismic enough to count?
3. How do we mobilise a commons on such foundational fragility?

I am tempted to answer such questions with Nietzschean laughter at the pomposity of belief in the telological betterment of the world (our economies can keep on growing infinitely), but to answer these concerns in the political, why the event seems so radical. What commonplace assumptions about politics does the concept of the event undermine and unhinge? It unsettles the stakes of politics: the distribution of wealth and opportunity, setting the means by which we can most readily ensure equality; the determination or control of activity in the name of freedom, keeping order for a space within which to respect difference, perhaps, but nonetheless also operating off normalising forces; the formation of integration, creating solidarity, fraternity and the terms of reference for common ideals. It undermines the aims of politics: it acts against that very pragmatic rebuttal, namely that, as for Rorty, the aim of politics is defined only ‘as a matter of reaching accommodation between competing interests, and as something to be deliberated about in banal, familiar terms – terms which do not need philosophical dissection and do not have philosophical presuppositions’ (1996, p. 17). It unhinges the traditional sites of politics: it never quite seems to be the democratic chamber anymore – as Lord Denning remarked: ‘the House of Commons starts its proceedings with a prayer. The chaplain looks at the assembled members with their varied intelligence and then prays for the country’. Whilst one might be critical of the actuality of democracy there is something to be said for still believing in the demos; and before we ask, then, where it might be located if not in parliament, we should ponder on some of the key terms. It is perhaps the space of politics that unites all these papers in their endeavour, in the end, to relocate as much as retreat from the political. In his ‘brief remark’ entitled ‘Is Everything Political’, Nancy reconsidered the quintessential political space as the polis, the city as the scale at which the ideals for society are to be met; but this is a city for ‘free men and women’ where not all women and men, in differentially determined ways, are free (2010). Further, such a polis, comfortably and by its very constitution, sat atop ‘infra-political foundations’ (slavery and family-based units) (2010, p. 46). If the ideal on which our sense of politics is based is itself based on ‘an essentially differential and “non-totalizing” city’, the
reductive pragmatism of our commonplace political definitions is not structurally radical enough. Nancy astutely observes our present condition as beset by the phrase ‘political economy’ and its compounding of the notion of the oikos, the household (nearly a sense of relatively self-sufficient administration of subsistence and prosperity), with that of this flawed space of the polis. To paraphrase Nancy, whilst subsistence and prosperity define the ‘good life’, framing this increasingly in terms of self-sufficiency generates a world view that seemingly only values the production and reproduction of wealth, of ‘having more’; and as this ethos takes place at infra-political spaces of ever decreasing size, towards an individualism for those that have, a sense of the realistic scope of politics is ever more opposed to the whole ecological well-being of the city, and thus by extension of the world. All of which is to say, at the very least we should look with far more confidence and assertion at sites like the street, the factory, contingent crowds with affective fields, and synapse flickers suggestive of emerging affective tones, etc. And do so on their own terms, and as sites that also sit outside the logic of the State. We seem to fear the singular and ephemeral when it comes to questions of political efficacy; and we distrust the bodily impasse and non-conscious craft of action that mediates us in our pursuit of politics.

What if, then, in rethinking the distinction and relationship between la politique and le politique, we find ways of equipping social science with a new courage of political action? This is where philosophy has a role to play in our social scientific endeavours: can recent theorizations on habit and affect, inflicted by new soundings from the fields of material engineering, molecular biology and neuroscience, enable us to not only become attentive to alternative sites of political intervention, but also provide us with the means to see the tendencies and incipiences in those singular and ephemeral moments? What if the molecular creep of the human animal reveals itself to be the archetypal political space of the twenty-first century? And if that were to be the case, then answers to those three pivotal questions above might already be being answered at a much more subconscious and experiential level.

It is here that the micropolitical emphasis (see Sharpe et al. submission) and appeal to identify authority in unexpected locations and forms, in particular within that of experiential authority, in this collection of essays comes to matter. In his lecture series on The Government of Self and Others, Foucault distinguishes between ‘the political game as a field of experience with its rules and normativity’ on the one hand, and as ‘the political game as experience insomuch as it is indexed by truth-telling (parhèse) and involves a certain relationship to oneself’ (2010, p. 159), on the other (see Brigstocke 2013a). Further, in another pivotal move, Foucault sets out to define the reality of philosophy by asking ‘under what conditions can philosophy be other than logos, than pure and simple discourse? When and under what conditions can it affect reality?’ (2010, p. 259). Foucault positions the relationship of politics and philosophy as taking place precisely in this practical affect of reality, thus redefining philosophy, in a discernible Heideggerian move, in terms of its ergon (its task) ‘as a lengthy work comprising: a relationship with a guide; a permanent practice of knowledge; and (a) form of conduct of life’. What this does, he argues in a manner that reasserts his anti-Platonic credentials in what is his most Platonic text, is avoid two key figures: ‘that of the philosopher who turns his gaze toward another reality and is detached from the world; that of the philosopher who arrives with the table of the law already written’ (Ibid, p. 255). The stakes here are sharply captured in Blencowe’s paper (2012): what happens to the materiality of experience itself when our arguments are fundamentally epistemological framings defining the historical reorganisation of the capacities (embodiment) of being? Personally, I feel that political thought needs to dwell longer in ‘our character as corporeal, affective, and sensuous beings’ (Sharp 2011, p. 10).

As Connolly has stated ‘the emergence of a fecond thought is closer to a viscous fluid flowing through a membrane than to the clean contours of a recollected image’ (2010, p. 72). Are those other proto-selves acting as unconscious forerunners ‘for the levels of the self which appear in our minds as the conscious protagonist of who we think we are (Damasio 1999, p. 230, Malabou 2008)’? Now the question remains as to how this all fits into the question of politics. One point of synthesis arises with the concept of habit, as here we find an address of that earlier question as to how to ‘listen’ to the world in order to expose the body in ways that sharpen its capacity to experience? First, consider these words by Connolly:

A primary ethics of care for us is the prescription to cultivate sensibility to new circumstances and social movements that suggest the possible need to change entrenched habits. To accept that principle is to acknowledge the need to work periodically on your preliminary habits of thought and action by tactical means. (2010, p. 80)

What is explicit in his argument is the question of how we will the decisions and the actions we make; the political implication being, perhaps rather modestly, that without some more explicitly aware modes of self-reflection we fail to take care of entrenched and potentially politically bad habits. Crucially, in ways which connect to the emerging biopolitical debates about the status of life in the papers by Brigstocke (2013), Blencowe (2013) and Downey (2013), he cites this as an emerging biocultural formation: biologically we have these synaptic ‘incipient, ideationally imbued tendencies to action that well up as ... [we] respond to events’ coupled with a kind of open but nonetheless currently extant set of limited capacities ‘to veto or redirect some of these tendencies as they approach the tipping point of action’ (Connolly 2010, p. 82). The realm of politics here is precisely that of the logic of habit set out by Ravaillon (2008; see Bisell 2011, 2012) and implicitly alluded to here in the papers by Millner (2013) and Noonan (2013) namely the degree to which we can modify these biological tendencies over time such that we ‘recode some preliminary dispositions to action below direct intellectual regulation’ (Connolly 2010, p. 83).

Second, if the concept of the event is not so much the drastic irruptive gesture, but rather the incipient tendencies of material folds, several of which burn within our bodies subtly, incrementally wiring us this way and not that through those preliminary dispositions, then the ecologies of material and practical intertwinements become important (see Dewsbury 2012). How do we train our bodies to listen more attentively to the demands of the other, to the demands of the world? As Connolly puts it:

(To) alter the networks in which you participate is eventually to alter the relational mode of desire coursing through you ... when the next round of action by you or your assemblage expresses that altered quality either or both may be poised to take a more adventitious political stance or accept a new level of ethical responsibility than before. You may be ready to listen to a new mode of inspiration to which you were previously tone-deaf. (2010, p. 116)
To turn to Kant, pulling on Foucault, and using this affective, precognitive realm of proto-selves and incipient structures: Kant commented, in his essay ‘Is the human race constantly improving’, that where the ‘Revolution’ is ‘there is sympathy of aspiration which borders on enthusiasm’ (quoted in Foucault 2010, p. 18; see Hynes 2011). Politics exists in the spaces of enthusiasm, whether at the molecular level where it is triggered off, developing through habit in response to affective encounters, and towards the site and place-based level of contagious crowds of action.

To conclude, if we are to have political space, then these spaces are in their thinking as much as in their having. Thus it is that in The Sense of the World Nancy qualifies a difference between his notions of being-with and being-together with the former operating as an exposure to, the latter articulating an association with. In this way being-with as our ontological starting point exists without politics as an expression of an instance, a ‘puncturation’ as a presentation of the world ‘without spatial or temporal dimensions’ (2007a, p. 14); being-together then spaces out these punctuations, thus co-ordinating, making manifest, and sense of them to make them last. This spacing out constructs the place of the political within Nancy’s argument. The point being, therefore, that we need to think foremost about ourselves as beings constituted as being-with – with exposing affective, precognitive dispositions of habit – as much as we need to think politically about being-together. How, then, do the ontologies that we use instruct us in orienting our action, political or otherwise?

If we embrace this question seriously, the task presented in these papers is a task shared in its endeavour to open a new regime of thought: no longer the engendering of forms responsible for modelling some historical given that had itself in some sense preformed but the exposition of the objectives themselves (‘man’ or ‘humanism’, ‘community’ or ‘communism’, ‘sense’ or ‘realisation’) to a going beyond in principle: to that which no prediction or foresight is able to exhaust insofar as it engages an infinity in actuality. (Nancy 2010, pp. 10–11)

Note
1. Equally, we see Badiou argue that ‘O)ur task concerns politics (la politique) to the extent that it positions occurrences of un-tying in the order of the irrepresentable’ (1985, p. 17).

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