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BARTŁOMIEJ BŁESZNOWSKI
University of Warsaw

In Defence of the Political

The Crisis of Democracy and the Return of the People from the Perspective of Foucault and Rancière

Abstract: Taking as his point of departure the London Tottenham riots, a product of a mob lacking political consciousness and postulates, the author strives to identify the fundamental deadlock (*aporia*) confronting western parliamentary democracy. Nowadays, collective phenomena are analyzed within a moral-economic framework which reduces the perspective on society to a sum of individuals. This contradiction is responsible for the reductionism which is leading the latest theories of social and political philosophy to the conclusion that we have reached "the end of politics" and are venturing into the "postpolitical era." According to this author, rather than describing the essence of the problem, these terms are merely skimming the discursive problem. If, as Foucault would have it, discourse is always a specific practice, the aforementioned reductionism can also be approached as a political strategy. Therefore, in order to grasp the "political" as a feature of the situation in which the people are participants, rather than in substantial terms, the author discusses the theory of development of the modern political subject within the framework of Michel Foucault's liberal "government" paradigm and Jacques Rancière's theory of democracy as a proper political element. Drawing upon these two thinkers, he sketches the genealogy of contemporary liberal democracy, stigmatized by the increasing rift between the people's political activity and the managerial class's apolitical reproduction.

Keywords: democracy, Foucault, people, politics, the political, Rancière.

> Sooner or later a new generation arrives that tries to reinvest certain words with meaning, certain hopes linked to those words, but in different contexts and with differing, indeed aleatory, forms of transmission.
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> Jacques Rancière, *Democracies Against Democracy* (2011: 81)

Factum Loquendi Politica

"Something is profoundly wrong with the way we live today" lamented Tony Judt (2010: 1), the British historian and social thinker, in his last book and his intellectual and political testament. Judt despaired about both the wellsprings of community life, which Europe had felt for decades to be her greatest achievement and contribution to the development of free societies, and about the foundations of future political existence which, in the face of increasing social and economic problems in Europe herself and in the wider western world, had not seemed so fragile and self-destructive for a long time. Social and cultural unrest in developed western countries (pauperization

of the young generation as it enters the labour market or deepening ethnic animosities), the global financial crisis and, above all, the increasing mistrust of political leaders and institutions, and the consequent reluctance to vote, all lead us to question the very roots of political ideas believed until only recently to be our undisputable beacons.

The basic problem facing European societies today is the crisis of parliamentary democracy, increasingly criticized from various sides of the political and intellectual arena for its ineffectiveness and superficiality, but most of all for the alienation of the elites and the resulting disconnection between the "will of the people" and the "government," between the legitimacy of public institutions and the trust which is testimony to the maturity and cohesion of a particular democratic structure. Although it would seem that western democracies are a completed work, many thinkers, respresenting radical post-structuralist tradition (Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou, Jacques Rancière or Slavoj Žižek), critical leftist ideas (Tony Judt, Pierre Rosanvallon. Wolfgang Streeck), or even liberal (John Gray) or post-conservative (Jesse Norman) thought, are now treating them sceptically, viewing them as a relatively meaningless collection of slogans which continue to be voiced by politicians who remain oblivious to these critiques.

Could it be that Rousseau was right when he exposed the ineffectiveness of representative government as executor of the common will?[1] Is the fundamental principle of electoral game and parliamentary system presently undergoing merely a transitory albeit definitely deep crisis requiring new legal-institutional solutions at the national and European level? Does this modernizing and corrective way of thinking in the post-"grand narrative" age still have healing potential? When inquiring in this context about present-day democracy should we not ask what it actually is and what is its status? After the post-political breakthrough with which we are familiar thanks, for example, to Ulrich Beck's theory of "reflexive modernization," it is no longer certain if we should inquire about democracy within the context of political system or within the context of some administrative cover on the social and economic relations which are the real "driving force" of the global society network. If the term "political"—remember Jacques Rancière's famous term "post-democracy"[2]—has lost its previous meaning, can we still deliberate over such problems as freedom, participation, justice, emancipation, or equality? After all, until now they only made sense in light of what we called politics.

As far as the current events in Western Europe are concerned, it seems to be emblematic that many British (and not only British) experts have denied political status to the recent riots in Britain. They write: "What started out as a protest against the Tottenham police action evolved into destruction of private property and commodity theft. This has nothing to do with politics" (These riots were not political, 2011: 9). As a matter of fact, at first glance it is hard not to agree: furious youth fight with the police and plunder and destroy shops. It is equally hard not to agree that groups of

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[1] Comp. the words of Rousseau in chapter XV, book III of *On the Social Contract*: "[…] the moment a people allows itself to be represented, it is no longer free: it no longer exists" (2003: Book III.15).

[2] So telling in this context is Rancière's phrase: democracy *after the* demos (1999: 102).

"hooligans" (as the media called them) had no program and were not fighting with or for anything in particular.

Does this calming dichotomy exhaust the difference between the political and the apolitical, i.e. the division between the collective and the individual or private? Could it be that these riots were instigated by individual agents and were episodic and literally a-political? Could it be that the riff-raff (ibid.), as the media christened the young British people who fought with the police, really was a non-political phenomenon, a fleeting return to a Hobbesian state of nature in which everyone is a sovereign to oneself and strives to rule everybody else (1996: I.13)?

When making such bold generalizations one must be careful lest the universal categories emerging from moral-legal discourse conceal the real problem: is it true that the political (and hence the democratic) is limited to the parliamentary game whereas riots such as the Tottenham ones are a reversal of the social contract? Are we not depriving ourselves too lightly of the opportunity to gain a broader view and narrowing our research perspective on politics to substantial assumptions concerning its agent, based on the principle of identity?

Let us quote Tony Judt once again: "We too readily assume that the defining feature of modernity is the individual: the non-reducible subject, the freestanding person, the unbound self, the un-beholden citizen" (2010: 214). Are we not too hastily rejecting the political action perspective, viewed from the collective level, and focusing instead on interactions between separate atoms, easy to isolate as carriers of law. It is easy to blame them[3] and punish them for being psychologically and morally responsible for conduct whose consequences we are observing, after all, at the social level. In this context it really is difficult to speak of a political event because the political has been pushed out of sight and viewed as an emanation of simple, particularistic individual and group interests.

Both Judt, the contemporary critic of neoliberal discourse in economy and politics, and also Michel Foucault or Jacques Rancière, thinkers from quite another intellectual register, whose theories I shall refer to presently when reflecting upon the genealogy and construction of current political discourse, have pointed out that economic and administrative assumptions (the problem of how to manage masses of individuals and their relational networks), now hidden by eidetic questions—focus on the "nature" of the collective life of the human race. Both Judt, who was more inclined toward a balanced, British, old-school social democracy, and Foucault and Rancière, who were much more inclined toward the continental poststructural tradition, observed that the problem is of a discursive nature. According to Agamben, one of Foucault's contemporary followers, it is a question of the *factum loquendi* of contemporary political thought. This Italian philosopher argued that postmodern societies are a domain where the original distinction between nature and language, external and internal, violence and law, private and public, has become so obliterated that, no matter what political doctrine or system we adhere to, we are no longer

[3] Comp. what Nietzsche said about the psychology of will, morality, promise and punishment (1998: 35; 2003: 64–65).

able to formulate a positive political program other than a total biopolitical theory of control of all social upheaval (be it Marxist, neoliberal or Kojève's "end of history," realized via the "end of politics" slogan). The stake around which we can outline the one and only "positive" emancipation project is the very fact that people live in communities, not this or that specific content, because this content has been appropriated by the postmodern spectacle, in accordance with the logic of administration of mass consumption.

> The experience in question here does not have any objective content and cannot be formulated as a proposition referring to a state of things or to a historical situation. It does not concern a state but an event of language; it does not pertain to this or that grammar but—so to speak—to the factum loquendi as such (2000a: 115).

In other words, and reverting to the source categories of political philosophy, all this fact implies is that we are moving within the *polis*, the field of pure potentiality of participation which affects us from everywhere via language, relations with others and political decisions. Therefore, the problem is not so much participation or lack of participation of a certain group in the community but "communitarianism" itself, the very potentiality of community as a place where citizens achieve happiness by realizing ethical and political virtues.

Approaching this problem vis-à-vis Aristotle's understanding of *polis* as a natural creation, the most complete realization of humanity (Aristotle 1908: 28–29), let us try to look once again at political community "as such." Let us finally enquire about contemporary democratic politics from its own point of view, from the point of view of what it is and—in accordance with Michel Foucault's perception of power and Jacques Rancière's doubts concerning the political status of contemporary democracies—whether or not it can still be understood as a political regime. This is why we must conduct our discussion of the meaning of the political in contemporary democracies (formulated, as already noted, from so many sides of the intellectual-political scene) in such a way as to not only test the concept of democracy itself but also to recapitulate the process of depoliticization. Foucault's theory of the birth of the biopolitical state and Rancière's critique of contemporary democracy cannot be overestimated here.

Therefore, the stake is not so much to expose some error in the history of ideas or some false perspective on phenomena belonging to the realm of "democratic politics." Rather, it is to indicate the political as the context in which democracy is realized and fulfilled, also in its sharpest, most radical, final forms. Our goal is to observe the obviousness of democracy "[…] to explore the heart of democracy, in its most common manifestations as well as its gray areas" (Rosanvallon 2008: 317).

Foucault—the Sovereign Subject and the Liberal Rationality of Governance

In a series of lectures initiated at Collège de France in 1976, Michel Foucault launched a several years long[4] project in which he analyzed political rationality which had per-

[4] The series began with the famous cycle *Society Must be Defended* which lasted from January to March 1976, in the interim between the publishing of two books, *Discipline and Punish* and *The Will of Knowledge*,

meated European political systems since the 16th century, culminating in the modern idea of the state. Foucault's approach has two basic methodological advantages for the present discussion. First, it enables us to analyze transformation of the political field as an element of the epistemological changes which began in Europe with the entry of the humanities into the knowledge scene in accordance with the principle that power is knowledge and vice versa. Foucalt wanted to demonstrate not so much the birth of yet another technology of "governance"—had he done so, this would inevitably have caused a regression to earlier substantial, metaphysical conceptions of legitimacy and law. His intention was to analyze the birth of the modern state within the biopolitical paradigm of *gouvernementalité* which he associated with the general reformulation of the structure of the subject in European thinking. Concluding his last lecture in the *Security, Territory, Population* series, Foucault said: "Society, economy, population, security, and freedom are the elements of the new governmentality whose forms we can still recognize in its contemporary modifications" (2007: 354). Hence Foucault's deliberations on power and politics, appended with the context of archaeology of knowledge, allow us to see the history of political institutions in the light of the history of ideas in general.[5]

Second, Foucault's theory allows us to consider the "problem of democracy" as a historical phenomenon whose evolution we can trace without getting mixed up with meaningless apologetics of "the best of the worst" political systems or, reversely, nihilistic abandonment of all emancipating ideals relating to the achievements of civic democratic movements. Hence, if we want to conduct an argumentation concerning

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the book where Foucault first put the biopolitical conceptual framework developed earlier to practical use. The next lectures, delivered between January and early April 1978, were entitled *Security, Territory, Population* and were followed by yet another series, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, delivered between January and April 1979. Together with the already mentioned published books they create the *corpus* of Foucault's theory of biopolitics and governance, and the development of modern political agency.

[5] Foucault himself thought that one should view his work in terms of Kant's "transcendental critical tradition" rather than the philosophy of politics or classical philosophy (based on the universal idea of continuity and linear development, according to Foucault) of the history of ideas, as some would like. Therefore, although it may seem so, the genealogy and archeology of the state is not the history of the relation it developed with modern anthropocentric thinking or even the history of political discourse (treated as documents of the past concealing the nucleus of its own social genesis). Foucault wrote: "Archeology tries to define not the thoughts, representations, images, themes, preoccupations that are concealed or revealed in discourses; but those discourses themselves, those discourses as practices obeying certain rules" (2002: 155). Rather, it is a component of the history of "emergence of ideas"—"historical epistemology," interested less in epistemic effects as such, and more in the process whereby cognition is made possible at all, where discourses function thanks to the power which supports them, and which at the same time are its only limit and internal logic. Hence we should not exaggerate the distinction between level of knowledge and level of power in Foucault's thinking, or the archeological and genealogical periods, because Foucault's objective is always the same—the process of subjectification by means of the technique of objectification—the moment in which discourse is practiced and which thus constitutes the subject's positive being in the context of a given *episteme*. Of course here "transcendental" is only "seemingly" understood according to the meaning given to it by Kant. The formations which Foucault studies should be understood not as universal meaning structures. They are more like the field where meaning is practiced, and forever transformed. We should really apply the terms "formations of discourse emergence" or even "discourse practice formations." Therefore, Foucault's history researcher does not apply metaphysics (unless it is the "metaphysics of matter itself"). He operates within the framework of an element which we should call, after Deleuze and Guattari, empirical-transcendental, thereby rendering both categories purposeless (cf. Foucault 1984).

the current withdrawal from politics in democratic systems, we must first conduct an operation which will allow us to analyze democracy independently of any pragmatic or ethical criterion of an adequate or inadequate system.

Ever since his first works on the birth of the modern psychology and history of madness, Foucault considered the turn of the 19th century to be definitely the most significant moment in the development of the contemporary "thought system" (*episteme*). As he was later to write in *The Order of Things*:

> It was simply that [at the turn of XVIII and XIX century] mode of being of things, and of the order that divided them up before presenting them to understanding, was profoundly altered [in relation to Classicism—previous formation of knowledge, based on the idea of mathematical Deal, in which the human being represented only inherent element in the great mechanism of the universe] (2005: xxiv).

Foucault later analyzed discontinuity, which had so powerful a bearing on the development of the history of ideas, from several aspects: the archaeology of the humanities, their relation to the emergence of penitentiary-medical epistemic technologies and methods of disciplining individuals,[6] and finally the genealogy of the subject within the framework of contemporary governance theory and practice whose birth coincided with the establishment of a whole series of procedures for the controlling and normalization of the population and management of individual lives. In light of Foucault's works we must view the 18th century as the moment of shift of position of the subject in epistemological space, providing the coordinates for the emergence of positive and empirical forms of control of reality. The author of *Discipline and Punish* analyzes this shift on both the knowledge plane—transformation at the level of "fundamental codes of culture" (Ibid.: xxii) which govern the emergence of new thought potential and, on the governance plane—empirical practices of formation and control of reality by the cognizing subject. If, as Foucault claimed, power is knowledge and knowledge is power, both these levels are to each other as two sides of the same process "in which the subject is objectified with respect to self and other by means of certain concretized 'governance' procedures" (2001: 1455).

Within the grand Enlightenment project, Western man (and woman) finally sees his/her connection with the previously isolated and relatively autonomous world of symbols, by means of which he/she had heretofore cognized reality, and history is where this relation between human beings and symbols has been diagnosed. However, this is not "the grand history of memory and myth" which, up to the 18th century, continued to express the unity of the world, the "vast historical steam, uniform in each of its points" (Foucault 2005: 401). Instead, it is history within which human beings recognize the historical nature of things so as to understand their own historical nature thanks to this awareness.

> And it was this unity that was shattered at the beginning of the 19th century, in great upheaval that occurred in the Western episteme: it was discovered that there existed a historicity proper to nature; […] Things first of all received a historicity proper to them, which freed them from continuous space that imposed the same chronology upon them us upon man (Ibidem: 401–402).

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[6] For a discussion of the relations between the humanities and penitentiary-medical discourse see: Foucault 2003a; Foucault 2003b: 252–253.

Human cognition has now been woven into history which has lost her redeeming and mythical potential as the exponent of infinity; the history of infinity has become the history of infinity—absolute cognition rooted in the infinite form of God who controls history has now been referenced to the powers of the human being as both the finite and ultimate epistemological centre. Time in which the secret relation between words and things was realized, and which once belonged to the sovereign God, has been returned to those who were previously located within the framework of grand historical dialectics and had no history of their own.

The great change which Michel Foucault tracked from his very first books can be reduced to the linking of scientific cognizance of human beings with the placing of the nature of their own being in their hands. Toward the close of the 18th century, parallel to the social and political transformations initiated by the industrial revolution and the French Revolution of 1789, there were heated disputes and controversies which gave way to our modern understanding of the place of human beings and citizens in the modern political system. In light of Foucault's intellectual pursuits, the forming of the representational model in Europe involved several different processes: first, the process leading in effect to historical-political discourse on racial struggles and conquests, formation of the political identity of nation, class and people, and second, the linked genesis of biopower whose principle task is to govern by means of such categories as life and its production, and third, with the development of the humanities whose invention is the human being, at the epistemic level—the final centre of cognition, at the political level—the sovereign citizen and element of the population[7], which will initiate the positive concept of "society."

> Hence the theme of man, and the "human science" that analyze him as a living being, working individual, and speaking subject, should be understood on the basis of the emergence of population as the correlate of power and the object of knowledge. After all, man as he is thought and defined by the so-called human sciences of the nineteenth century, and as he is reflected in nineteenth century humanism, is nothing other than the figure of population (Foucault 2007: 79).

Individualism and cognition, freedom and control, choice and submission to norms—this is the dialectic in which the modern subject is entangled. As Foucault wrote, at the end of the 18th century "man appears in his ambiguous position as an object of knowledge and as a subject that knows: enslaved sovereign, observed spectator […]" (2005: 340). This is happening at a moment when reflection on mankind, human existence and political community is entwined with the development of penitentiary-medical cognition which, due to its individualizing view of individuals (elements of the population), has enabled the coming out of the epistemic, but also social and political

[7] In his last lecture in the 1977–78 academic year Foucault conducted a very interesting analysis of the relation between population, understood as a malleable mass, formed by the power apparatus (as perceived by 17th and 18th century theorists of reason of state) and inchoate society—the self-aware aspect of the population which turns against the forces which govern it as a sovereign definer of its own existence. Hence the birth of society is the critical moment which will demarcate the new economy of power in the 19th and 20th centuries: the state enters a dialectic relationship with society as both a population and a sovereign."Whether one opposes civil society to the state, the population to the state, or the nation to the state, it was in any case these elements that were in fact put to work within this genesis of the state, and of the modern state" (2007: 360–361).

identity of the subject as he/she defines his/her new political rationality. Foucault stressed many times that this relationship is decisive for the formation of modern political doctrines according to which the standards of liberal democracy are specified, on the one hand, and on the development of modern, rational management of the state governance, initially based on 18th century systems of disciplinary institutions but later completely eschewing their corrective and normalizing function on behalf of management of "natural society," on the other hand (2007: 350; 2008: 62).

These two indivisible areas—self-aware sovereignty and the self-defining individual on the one hand and population and society as an area if interplay of social and economic forces, which 18th century liberals no longer tried to harness according to the ancient models of monarchic administrative apparatuses, preferring instead to fit into them and let them function according to the seemingly chaotic and unknowable logic of the market on the other hand, must be held accountable for the profound contradiction of modern western democratic systems. As he wrote in *Discipline and Punish*, one of those books which surely paint the best portrait of the inherent dissonance of the western political sphere:

> And although, in a formal way, the representative regime makes it possible, directly or indirectly, with or without relays, for the will of all to form the fundamental authority of sovereignty, the disciplines provide at the base, at the guarantee of the submission of forces and bodies (1995: 222).

From the perspective of Foucault's theory, parliamentary democracy in the form it took in the 19th and 20th centuries is a compound of two elements: universal electoral game which is played between individual subjects and is the expression of the individual approach to politics (pastoral power) and governance which, according to liberal logic, is incessantly criticized, and which is supposed to be the natural effect of self-regulating market-society. This society is an area which on no account are we to reduce to the old "human resource," possessions at the disposal of the sovereign irrespective of anybody's will. Society is a domain where political decisions emerge, just as decisions pertaining to the particular interest of an autonomous actor, *homo economicus*, emerge in the economic domain. At this point, the ancient technology of governance maximization (derived from classicist police doctrines) meets the completely different idea of "liberation" of the social element; a new type of governance which must incessantly curb its prerogatives with respect to individuals, but not to such an extent that it ceases to be connected. After all, "those whom one governs are people, individuals, or groups" (Foucault 2007: 122).

Therefore, the basic issue for liberal democracy is not maximization of governments but their legitimization—in other words, indication of the connection between the rational actor in the electoral game and the level of governance and law. The problem of liberal society, argued Foucault in his 1978–1979 lectures, is "society" itself.

> It is society—as both condition and final end—that makes it possible to no longer ask: How can one govern as much as possible at the least possible cost? […] Instead of turning the distinction between the state and civil society into an historical universal enabling us to examine every concrete system, we may try to see in it a form of schematization peculiar to a particular technology of government (Foucault 2008: 319).

In other words, rather than being one of two things—an unambiguous form of "liberation" of society, originally enslaved by sovereign power, or, as some writers have customarily simplified the problem formulated by Foucault, an instrument of population control, liberalism is an incessant renewal of the problem within which the political actor enquires about the limits of his power over himself, about the relations between the "sovereign" as the political life of citizens and society, or the people as the natural socio-economic foundation of all governance.

During his lecture presented at Collège de France on 24 January 1979, Foucault clearly expressed this peculiarity of liberalism:

> The new governmental reason [biopolitical liberalism] needs freedom, therefore the new art of government consumes freedom […]. The formula of liberalism is not "be free." Liberalism formulates simply the following: I am going to produce what you need to be free (2008: 63).

According to Foucault's biopolitical theory, the principal function of power is to produce agency (cf. 1990; 1982). At this point we find an unexpected correlation between seemingly incompatible (Hindness 1997: 130) analyses of panoptic control of individuals in *Discipline and Punish* and the 1978/1979 lectures. The disciplines which were still the object of reflection in 1975 gave way two or three years later to studies of "government" within the biopolitical paradigm, in which the ideology and practice of "liberal governance" are the correlates. Of course sovereignty which was typical of *ancien régime*, disciplines and politics viewed as ideal types, must not be treated as identical[8] but the crux of Foucault's work was the moment when these three grand historical forms were syncretized in the body of a new type of actor—a population of free individuals (2007: 107–108). This is only made completely possible by 18th-century liberalism with its previously unknown respect for economic freedom. Economic freedom in turn is the "freedom" (or sovereignty) to be controlled by norms, "to be produced" as one of many rational actors of the social spectacle, operating on the free market. Liberal politics means managing and reinforcing individual choices but lacks clear coercion. Through such mechanisms as reflection and individualization, responsibility is located at the individual level whereas resources are available in the process of market exchange. Individualism and consumerism are the foundations of the new civic formula.

To summarize: the liberal political actor has a new type of sovereignty, one which could not exist were it not for disciplinary mechanisms at the individual level and governmental self-restrictive strategies in the name of freedom of rational action and choice. The "king's place" is now taken by the citizen/*homo economicus* who, by means of his particular interests, always remains outside the political order. Therefore, political freedom is a copy of economic freedom and participation in the community and governance comes at the price of the risk of being caught up by the mechanism

[8] In Foucault's works discipline and biopolitics are two series of one and the same process of formation of modern rationality of governance: as specific modalities of the process of "normalization" of society they are sometimes parallel process which take place at the level of individual existence (the body-organism-discipline-institution series), at other times on the level of the population (the population-biological processes-regulative mechanism-state), and at still other times consecutive technologies of governance whose form and outcome is a controlling and regulating society (Foucault 2007: 242; Lemke 2011: 47).

of control and supervision. Paradoxically, the goal of this strategy is to incessantly deprive the subject of his political potential in the name of productivity and reflection in the private sphere. Like man in *The Order of Things*, this peculiar *homo economicus* manifests himself only in action, as if outside the political order of which he is the centre. As the transcendental idea of citizen and the people he is the basis of metaphysics of governance but as an empirical being he renounces all power. He is always "between," visible only when he claims his rights.

Giorgio Agamben once called the form of the plebs "a remnant" (2005: 57). Not without reason he was responding to Foucault's argumentation concerning the "plebs," the boundary form of the people which has renounced its freedom to stand opposite power.

> The plebs is no doubt—Foucault said—not a real sociological entity. But there is indeed always something in the social body, in classes, groups and individuals themselves which in some sense escapes relations of power, something which is by no means a more or less docile or reactive primal matter, but rather a centrifugal movement, an inverse energy, a discharge (1980: 137–138).

So here we have the boundary condition of politics where the identity of the subject manifests itself in the impossibility of real participation, lack of politics. Just like man in *The Order of Things*, incessantly gnawed at by the immanent logic of representation, who finally reaches the limits of his potential, no longer able to find the ultimate foundation of knowledge, so too the population as the subject and object of governance gets entangled with itself and touches its limit and its "now" when confronted with the plebs, which cuts it from all sides, only then shows emancipation's real potential. Therefore, the population is both a source component of the democratic process (*nomos*) and an empty place, an uncountable, uncomfortable and excessive "remains" of the political (*demos*).

Rancière—"the Political" as an Ontological Perspective

It is no coincidence that Foucault's opinions concerning the phenomenon of plebs were voiced in an interview conducted by Jacques Rancière, a philosopher who courageously linked poverty, exclusion and marginalization with changes in the political domain which were responsible for the constitution of contemporary political agency.[9]

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[9] It is intriguing to find that Foucault once again recognized the motif of the plebs as redundant, dangerous or even unwelcome and troublesome from the point of view of security mechanisms, in the works of Lois-Paul Abeille. This 18th century physiocrat and theorist of the police who characterized the plebs as "those who conduct themselves in relation to the management of the population, at the level of the population, as if they were not part of the population as a collective subject-object, as if they put themselves outside of it, and consequently the people are those who, refusing to be the population, disrupt the system" (2007: 43–44). From the point of view of police logic the people are a murky point, a redundancy which "spoils" the statistics and refuses to be regulated by the state. A suspect, hodge-podge riff-raff which usurps the right to independence, or at least, by means of its conduct, violates the norm declared by the specialists in population management. By questioning its rules it questions its logic. By suggesting alternative solutions it demarcates the boundaries of political order. By going against the system it deconstructs the ontology of sovereignty. As something which originates at the "margin" of power, it

Rancière's interest in the parvenu origins of politics and democracy was already evident in his earliest works, together with *The Nights of Labour*, based on his doctoral dissertation. According to Rancière, relations between plebs and the people, political positivity and exclusion, visibility and invisibility were fundamental for the birth of modern representative democracy and the idea of republicanism. We could even say that this French philosopher equates politics itself with the modern project of emancipating action where the people (or rather its alter ego, the plebs or "cursed people") is dissented in the power structure due to transgression of its previous position within its delineated coordinates.[10]

In other words, political action begins where the subject invalidates earlier distinctions (time, space, work, etc.) and makes its presence as a new element, one which transcends the existing configuration of political positivity which no longer fits. "The insurrection of the shoemakers [Platonic workmen] is not a battle *for* their status but a battle *against* it" (Rancière 2003: 59). Therefore, politics and the political actor—and here the relationship between Rancière's ideas and Foucault's statement concerning the plebs seems to be quite clear—are the "immanent exterior" of power, the nondescript yet inexorable process of transgression which begins at the very heart of its structure.

This equation of political subject in democracy with those who are literally "nonexistent" as individuals is crucial for Rancière's theory. Whether we want to view them sociologically or economically, they pose a problem of multiplicity and polarization of groups and resources (to apply a concept which links these two orders into one—class) in the population. Or if we decide to adopt the "ontological" perspective, the political subject will be reduced to a void, an uncountable idea of community whose only function is to maintain political potential as such, that is, change of position within the social repartition game. And this "is the designation of subjects that do not coincide with the parties of the state or of society, floating subjects that deregulate all representation of places and portions" (Rancière 1999: 99–100). Democracy for Rancière is an element of realization of the community's political task, something more than an individual choice, but also something which enables independent choices in the proper sense.

The attentive reader will have noticed by now the certain duality of Rancière's understanding of political experience. This duality is also discernible in his definition of political identity itself in *The Nights of Labour*. "Politics is not the exercise of power" (2010: 27)—this is the first and most important thesis in *Ten Theses on Politics*. It basically coincides with Carl Schmitt's famous reflections on the concept of the

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creates politics. The correspondence between this brief reflection shared during the Collège de France lectures, and the quoted interview excerpt is obvious. In both cases, the concept of plebs is equated with the uncountable potential of politics inherent in the social structure. Incidentally, it is also worth pointing out the temporal coincidence between Rancière's interview with Foucault and Foucault's Collège de France lecture; the 1977 interview preceded the lecture by just a few months.

[10] In *The Nights of Labour*, Rancière conducted a historical analysis of the problem of the foundation of the modern labour movement within the transformation of the system of "political visibility," transcendental data responsible for the configuration of its position within the political field and deftly associated the development of the 19th century political field with the exclusion of large masses of the proletariat.

political. According to Schmitt, the political is a self-contained order which can take the form of state but can in no way be reduced to the technology of governance which is characteristic of the state. The political is a separate sphere, governed by laws of its own, not an attribute of this or that action, belief or act of will (1996: 25–27). Confusion of the political order with any other order, e.g. economic, religious, etc., is itself a sign of a specific power strategy.

In his "political ontology" Rancière makes a distinction between the "democratic" order (political calculation) and the "oligarchic order" (police calculation). These are two completely opposite ways of counting the people. As an object of governance (both repression and law), from the perspective of police logic, the people is a deficiency, a black hole, a political non-place whereas from the political perspective it is the only instance capable of conducting real political action.

Calculated according to the police algorithm, the people is viewed as a set of groups or classes differing in their qualifications to govern—society. The police's job is to qualify, segregate, organise social reality. Therefore, it is a natural, physical "organizing" force (this Foucault term fits the meaning of the concept police perfectly). The police is the *arche*—the principle for the structuring and primary selection of social matter.

Hence police's eternal dream—to establish "pneumatic" governance, overflowing with one spirit; governance which immanently links social multitude with political unity within a universal "republic of free spirits."[11] At this point Rancière's analysis of the police basically converges with Foucault's genealogy of modern organising reason and the birth of "society" as a positive entity within 18th century economic and philosophic theories. Society is nothing other than a countable entity, man's natural sphere of functioning in relation to other people; from the economic perspective, on the other hand, society is a market where citizens-consumers barter various kinds of capital. So if liberalism can be reduced to the statement that "one always govern too much" (Foucault 2008: 319), then it does not mean that governance must be ousted altogether, it means that it needs to be implemented in the social tissue itself. So if, like Rancière, we treat the police as a natural self-regulative process, a primary oligarchy of individuals who are most prepared to govern others, then liberalism is undoubtedly yet another historical form of governance of the species' biological life. A form unlike previous ones perhaps but one which operates according to the same principles as other types of oligarchies: they suck political content from all the institutions of collective existence. The other side of development of the idea of liberal governance of free individuals is the birth of the social sciences. Only they enable a real distinction to be made between the state—the domain of realization of community functions—and civil society, the "naturalness specific to man's life" and also "[…] a field of objects, as a possible domain of analysis, knowledge and intervention" (Foucault 2007: 349). They view the *polis* as divided into two opposing areas: the

[11] An expression used by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari to express the immanent relation between idea and state, whose goal is to eradicate multiplicity and erase the original difference within the community. The internalization which the form-state conducts with respect to the nomadic war machine is parallel in the epistemic plan to establish onto-theology, the metaphysical kingdom of *Cogito* (2004: 413).

state whose one and only function is to reproduce the mechanisms which safeguard the safety of management institutions, and market-society whose political potential is extinguished. Hence modern social sciences associate "the political" per se with the properties of specific social relations, customs or individual traits, thereby reducing them to the function of an institutional superstructure of non-political, economic and biological relations. The sociologization of politics is therefore leading to division of the primary collective element of the people. The sole purpose of this division is to be able to see its renewed syncrasia within "political order that is homogeneous to the mode of life of a society" (Rancière 2006a: 64).

Calculated politically, on the other hand, the people is not so much a specific group or society as an image of the political process in which society is, a process where governmental competencies are independent of natural rules, i.e. rules consistent with existing police logic. Jacques Rancière surprisingly defines democracy as a real political element, a fundamental relation, primary with respect to every form of governance and social organization. He writes:

> For the forms of democracy are nothing less then the forms in which politics is constituted as a specific mode of human being-together. Democracy is not a regime or social way of life. It is the institution of politics itself, the system of forms of subjectification through which any order of distribution of bodies into functions is undermined, thrown back on its contingency. […] Every politics is democratic in this precise sense: not in the sense of a set of institutions, but in the sense of forms of expression that confront the logic of equality with the logic of the police order (1999: 101).

From this perspective, therefore, democracy is a repeatedly renewed opportunity to introduce politics to the "political" scene, i.e. realization of the communitarian role of the people as that part of the political body which cannot be classified according to its predisposition to govern. Quite the contrary: "Political subjects are *surplus* subjects that inscribe the count of the uncounted as a supplement" (2010: 70). The people's right to govern is realized by means of its lack of rights. Hence there will always be a contradiction with the logic of primary sovereignty and identity of power. The people's social body is also the only political body. According to Rancière, "[…] the people's two bodies are not a modern consequence of the act of sacrificing the sovereign body, but instead a constitutive given of politics itself. It is initially the people, not the king, who has a double body" (2010: 34). In other words, the original form of the political, vis-à-vis which all *arche* discipline and hierarchy is secondary, is this original *demos* difference. As the fabric of human community it is the point of intersection of the social—the building material submitted to the power of *arche*, and the political—the power of community constitution over the natural (2006a: 55).

Therefore, *demos* is—according to the foregoing—both the effect of the political condition and society which does not as such have the right or identity to participate in governance. It is a zone of indistinguishability between the police—the positive (in terms of production of social entity) force of coding and order—and that which, from its point of view, is non-political, devoid of content and identity, and as such should be harnessed by management and regulation techniques. So, when asking *What is a People?* Giorgio Agamben recognizes the semantic ambiguity of this concept in western political tradition:

[…] on the one hand, the *People* as a whole and as an integral body politic and, on the other hand, the *people* as a subset and as fragmentary multiplicity of needy and excluded bodies; […] It is what always already is, as well as what has yet to be realized; it is the pure source of identity and yet it has to redefine and purify itself continuously according to exclusion, language, blood, and territory (2000: 30–31).

Therefore it is only when "the People" arrive on the scene that poverty and pauperization are viewed as reasons for depriving "the people" of their political property. By differentiating between rights, the police order opts for natural competencies and smoothes out the contradiction which infiltrates the *polis* due to democracy. By so doing, it unifies power and sentences the people to oblivion, reducing it to a carbuncle on "the healthy fabric of society." However, police order must henceforth always have to surgically remove this uncomfortable body, this outgrowth or residue, which is incessantly present in various forms (plebs, proletariat, underclass, etc.) after every counting of social multitude. Depoliticization of *demos* also assumes various discursive forms: social chaos, immoral individuals, selfish consumers, riff-raff … By nature and necessity, substantial police calculation eliminates the democratic ambiguity of the people and replaces it with its ethical and economic derivations (2010: 74–75): the consensus of rational actors and the vision of a self-regulating society of satisfied consumers. From this perspective, it no longer makes sense to conceptualize things in political terms and politics is equated with power (Rancière warns us that this will have negative consequences). "Politics, when identified with the exercise of power and the struggle for its possession, is dispensed with from the outset" (2010: 27).

So how are we to say what "political essentially is within the framework offered by Rancière? According to his conception, the political is not an attribute of power, nor can it be reduced to a form of objection to power. Lack of acceptance of existing conditions of participation in the community—the constitutive element of politics (understood in Rancière's terms as "reject the logic of *arche*, deconstruct the police algorithm of population management[12]) is a strength enabling the uncovering of a space in which both politics and the police operate. It is in this space that these

[12] We need to trace the source of this thesis to Foucault's theory of power. In his essay *Subject and Power* he defines it as a relation between at least two parties which is more akin to a war game than pure domination or violence in the narrow sense. Power is "a set of actions upon other actions, […] the exercise of power consists in guiding the possibility of conduct and putting in order the possible outcome. […] to govern, in this sense, is to structure the possible field of action of others" (1982: 789–790). In other words, power is the attempt to enforce one's opinion in such a way that the object we want to curb will not only submit to our will but also become a subject who acts according to enforced rules. One can only exercise power over free subjects and in its purest form it is the clash of two forces: a relation between power and counterpower, leadership and counterleadership, code and decodage. Every power relation becomes a moment of creation of subjectivity in the process of enforcement of meaning, code, discourse. Each and every time it is also a moment of potential liquidation of former power relations, invalidation, which is the essence of politics according to Rancière. Therefore, both for Foucault and Rancière, politics is very similar to resistance to power; in order to practice politics it is necessary to have potential lack of acceptance, disobedience to the obviousness of the power regime. It is worth noting Foucault's words written in his notes to the 1977–1978 lectures: "The analysis of governmentality […] implies that 'everything is political' […]. Politics is nothing more and nothing less than that which is born with resistance to governmentality, the first revolt, the first confrontation" (Foucault 2007: 217). Only in light of irreducible conflict between power and resistance, police and the people, do we have a political situation. This thesis attests to something more than mere affinity between the ideas of the two philosophers; it actually looks as if Foucault's reflections on the nature of power and resistance were an important point of reference and inspiration for the author of *Hatred of Democracy*.

elements link up and the roots of the divisions which authorities apply are exposed. It is therefore neither a place where social contract or consensus are constituted, nor simply struggle and conflict, even in the sense given to it by Chantall Mouffe (2005). Rather, it assumes the mere possibility of conflict and allows the political attributes of a situation to emerge as a confrontation of two opposing forces.

So, we should not understand the political as an attribute of some or other political entity—by entering it into some external ontic register: ethnic, religious, or ethical. This, as we know from Nietzsche or Carl Schmitt, is but one of many political (metaphysical) strategies used to suck politics out of the public sphere. It is simply an open space where, "by accident," various relations combine to produce political positivity, subjects and objects. It is a perspective from which we can begin to see the configuration of the political and non-political or, to use Foucault's words, the relation between power and knowledge which produces still more discursive truth regimes. To return to Rancière's conceptualization, it is a system of "distribution of the sensible" (2006b: 12), a set of transcendental forms defining the conditions of interrelatedness of the visible and the expressed and the invisible, redundant and mute within a given order. The political is a configuration of potential political experience, confrontation of police hierarchy and emancipation of the forces of *demos*.

By no means is politics a form of organization. Its only principle is disorder, dissens, deterritorialization. We must therefore agree with Todd May who traced the sources of Rancière's democratic ideas to a specific form of anarchism:

> [Rancière] rejects even the possibility of institutionalizing democratic politics […]. Democratic politics, for him, is a rare event, one that does not lead to a final state of justice but perhaps only to better conditions in a police order. Democratic politics, as we have seen, lies in the expression of equality rather than in the end-state it achieves (May 2008: 99).

Perhaps politics as action is by its very nature anarchic—for Rancière, since it rejects natural divisions, it is something more than just the demolition of existing governance structures. If the element of politics is democracy, the incessant defence and construction of the experience of equality as such, then potential anarchism is democracy's real calling. Therefore, as already mentioned, the French philosopher does not identify it either with social form or type of political system. It is a property rather than an entity, a process rather than a state. This is what Jacques Rancière's "potential anarchism" is all about. Democracy is the establishing of politics.

Only from the perspective of political action, itself already a form of transgression of the perceivable regime, may we see its structure and understand the "politicalness" of the situation. There can be no symmetrical reversal of this cognitive process, however—from the perspective of the logic of governance political means a state, a resource, a specific property of being. Accumulated by some beings and lost by other beings, the political is reduced to an individual attribute.

Conclusion—the Revolt of the "Postpolitical People"

The question we may ask in the context of the British riots from the political point of view is not: were these riots political? It is: what led to this particular configuration of

political and non-political, what power relations and the ensuing truth regimes define the origins of these events and hence also the question of what type of subjects can we discern within this particular political configuration?

It clearly follows from the foregoing discussion that the political subject in western liberal democracies is entangled in the dialectic of individual "freedom" or agency, understood as the personal potential to oppose the authorities and the "law" which are perceived to be external regulators of the market or society. Liberal democracy assumes that good governance can only be achieved by minimizing the transcendent governing apparatus itself so that the "police," the sum total of hierarchic state regulations, became an imminent element of the system, positive postulates of freedom and equality were forged into individual, consumer, and mutually restricting choices. So, by reducing the political to monadic properties, the rational actor (the model propagated by the neoliberal Chicago school; comp. Foucault 2008: 215–265), western democracies basically lost sight of it and no longer raised "political questions" because such questions now manifested themselves as questions of managing the choices of millions of consumers, *idiotes* remaining literally "outside" the polis—a group of individuals in a postmodern world brought to a standstill by history. Nietzsche used to say that only animals live without history (Nietzsche 2003: 64–65). In this context, it is also worth bearing in mind the words of Aristotle: "One who is incapable of participating or who is in need of nothing through being self sufficient is no part of a city, and so is either a beast or a god" (1984: 37).

Posthistoric liberal democracy is rooted in the realization of dreams of a "self-governing" world. Ignoring any feedback between the community's political potential and the process of police governance, the liberals locate the ideal of realization of the state's tasks within society. Hence the state is coming to an end, dissolving in the element of social multiplicity. It is working, but at "low gear," as a pure, contentless form. Society is reduced to the market personified by the "middle class" (Rancière 2010: 31–32), the ideal community of *homo economicus*, producers and consumers.

Transformation of the political people into a class of consumers is never final, however. Time and again, it escapes control when the mechanism ensuring swift and cheap satisfaction of consumer needs stops working properly. From the point of view of police logic, the people has two faces: one of them is the previously mentioned middle class phenomenon, the other is its negative side, *demos*, as those who have no voice of their own but are clamouring for one. They have no voice because in depoliticized consumer society only those who buy and consume have a voice; political agency is replaced by participation in the market game, the political nature of actions of members of the community is reduced to private individual interests. Sheep herded by their police shepherds on timeless pastures live their mundane consumer lives as long as they have not dropped out of the consumer flock. When they do, their consumer community crumbles and they stand vis-à-vis the law as riff-raff, a mass of redundant people who do not fit into the equation of the necessary and orderly.

In this context, should we not redefine mainstream opinions concerning the recent social riots in Great Britain? Perhaps only in the light of these events can we see most

clearly the apolitical structure of our present capitalist parliamentary democracies and the direction in which they are heading? If political community has been reduced to an administrative sub-politics of management of prosperity, subordinated to the economic paradigm (Beck 2004: 183–236), and the political superstructure has become part of the spectacle of apolitical reproduction (a constitutive conflict within the framework of ontological politicality) of the governing class, then the outburst of aggression and chaos on British streets is the ultimate manifestation of "contentless politics," a form or revolt conducted with the only means available to the citizen-consumer who has no real choice or chance of participation in what the Greeks called *politeia*, the real and active aspect of politics (Agamben 2011: 3; Hansen 2006: 110). In an article published in "New Left Review" in 2011, the German sociologist Wolfgang Streeck wrote:

> Where democracy as we know it is effectively suspended, as it already is in countries like Greece, Ireland and Portugal, street riots and popular insurrection may be the last remaining mode of political expression for those devoid of market power (Streeck 2011: 28).

Therefore, we should view the Tottenham riots as the political voice of the people which is the negative of politics, Agamben's naked life, *nuda vita*. If Agamben says that naked life is the "biopolitical foundation of modernity" then, elaborating this idea further, we may say that the recent events on the streets of London, which were a confrontation between a completely apolitical people and equally apolitical authority, were a postpolitical form of the political. But if we are now post-political, can we still talk of democracy?

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Biographical Note: Bartłomiej Błesznowski—historian of ideas and sociologist of knowledge, Ph.D. candidate and researcher in the Institute of Applied Social Sciences University of Warsaw, laureate of Florian Znaniecki Prize (Polish Sociological Association). In his research deals with issues of power and politics in contemporary society, combining social science with philosophy. He is the author of *Batalia o człowieka. Genealogia władzy Michela Foucaulta jako próba wyzwolenia podmiotu* [Battle for Man. Michel Foucault's Genealogy of Power as Attempted Liberation of Entity] (Warszawa 2009).

E-mail: blesznowski@gmail.com