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Politics after indignation

By Daniel Innerarity

Translated by Sandra Kingery

"There is failure when there is action."

Jean Paul Sartre. Notebooks for an Ethics. 435.

Politics has been held in great esteem and subjected to utter scorn. We have judged it a task to be carried out by a small minority, then by everyone, and finally by no one. It has been considered the solution, and now it seems to be the problem. Esteemed at certain moments in history as the most noble pursuit, even overvalued as if it were a means to salvation, feared as a consolidation of power, and accepted at times as a profession that at least strives for respectability, it is currently tolerated as irrelevant or even openly disparaged as the cause of our worst ills.

Politics probably never deserved to be held in such high regard, and it may be that the disdain to which it is currently subjected reveals society's lack of sincerity with itself. In any case, there is no question that there is room for improvement in politics as it is currently practiced. The aversion towards politics today is compatible with the fact that more is now demanded of it than we ever previously expected of it. This is revealed both in the way citizens scrutinize power structures and by contemporary protest movements. Groups such as the Spanish Indignados ("Indignant Ones") contradict

those who used to believe that an aversion toward politics was a sign of indifference.

This situation raises any number of questions about the role politics can play in the world today and about the quality of our democracies. In the first place, it is important not to misinterpret the meaning of our dissatisfaction. Should we view the current protests as revolutionary, or are they actually less significant insurrections? How are conflict and protest expressed in contemporary society? Does a lack of trust strengthen or undermine democracy? Is mediation unnecessary and representation impossible now that public spaces have been transformed by globalization and the new technologies of communication? In short, is this a time of crisis or exhaustion or could it be an opportunity to transform our democracies?

1. From Revolution to Indignation

When a system makes revolution unattainable or unnecessary, that system is necessarily stabilized. This does not mean protest is made impossible; just the opposite, in fact. Only senseless regimes fail to understand that protests afford them stability. What happens is that protests stop being revolutionary and become expressive. That is why it makes no sense to criticize the current Indignados in Spain or similar movements elsewhere for not having a concrete plan of action or for not offering specific alternatives. Their role is to express dissatisfaction, to call attention to something, not to compete with the political parties' electoral platforms. In the imperfect democracies that currently exist, the proliferation of protest

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movements is not a sign of democratic weakness. Instead, it signals an increase in the level of demands that the people are making of those who govern them.

We can see this in the competition the Indignados have unleashed for the most ingenious slogan. This supplants a debate that would have previously focused on determining the most appropriate action for sabotaging or subverting. It is essential to understand this fact in order to respond appropriately. An expressive protest does not necessitate the intervention of the authorities to restore public order, but it does require thought in order to properly interpret what the movement signifies or reveals. Conflict has become a mode of expression; its purpose is to communicate and comprehend. We have not entered a new phase of the great revolutions that characterized the transformation of democratic societies; rather, we are facing a phenomenon linked to the spectacularization of our public life.

The term "post-democratic" was recently coined to denote a state of stability in contemporary democracies. For the most optimistic among us, this implied a celebration of the definitive establishment of democracy; for the pessimists, it suggested a period characterized by mediocrity and decline. The two perspectives, rather than being contradictory, may simply be different ways of looking at the same reality that, while strengthened, is also trivialized. Analyses by Crouch, Rancière, Zolo, and Guéhenno have traced every detail of this debate. At the most fundamental level, are we faced with a situation where change is no longer possible? Or could it be that change can only be made from within the system we mean to transform?

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In order to resolve this enigma, we must understand how dissatisfaction is handled in contemporary society. We must take note of some events that could be called "post-revolutionary" insofar as they are expressive insurrections rather than destabilizing revolutions. A Spanish Indignado is not a revolutionary, just as stirring something up does not necessarily imply an ability to transform. There are no revolutions for the same reasons there is no true political antagonism: there are differences and changes, of course, but political time has stopped being regulated by uprisings. Political confrontation is not a collision between competing models. There is no revolutionary contrast to be found in the rivalry between parties, where time is flat and the competing roles are played by a government that resists change and an opposition that awaits it (the best reason for a change of government is to clean house, not to reap the benefits of the opposition's alternative plan). Everyone who is not a part of the government represents "change," which is not a value of the left or the right but of opposition.

The language of change, along with everything it presupposes about historic time and political intervention, is faulty. In progressive discourse, revolution has been substituted by modernization, adaptation, and innovation; the idea of reform generally belongs to the right; and on the extreme left, there are critical gestures, but no critical theory of society (much less a plan of action). A good deal of what is said and done is nothing but a simple display of melancholy or of "heroism against the market" (Grunberg and Laïdi 2007, 9).

There is no revolutionary distinction outside of the political system either, in the external forces that the protest or Indignado movements may represent. The current ideological disillusionment is

revealed in the fact that neither the extreme left nor the extreme right is particularly interested in intervening through the normal means of representation. Both conservative individualism and radical leftism conceive of themselves as "parapolitical" or as "anti-establishment movements." In the ideology of both, pirates take on the status of role models in the fight against the rigidity of the state or against the neoliberal order. For different and even conflicting reasons, piracy is considered the most appropriate response to the economic and cultural development of capitalism.

Some call for a civil society and others, on the post-communist left, for the multitude (Hardt and Negri 2000). Both concepts are very liquid and not very political. This is no longer the age of the right and left as institutions, but the age of the Tea Party and social movements. The right prefers the market to the state, and the left—rather than the traditional struggles (labor union, social, institutional, or armed)—substitutes other fighting responses such as exile, defection, or nomadization. As Deleuze and Guattari have suggested, the nomad, more than the proletarian, signifies resistance par excellence (1987). On the left, the most innovative strategies reflect the decline of revolutionary ideals. The most we can hope for is "détournement," the satiric parody that is posed by contemporary art, making use of a term coined by the Situationists; it is quite simply an attempt at sabotage, derailment, distortion, or subversion. According to Deleuze, it implies interruptions or mini-insurrections; nothing, of course, that recalls the ancient goal of seizing power. The most ambitious proposal is to benefit from gaps or from areas not controlled by the state. Naomi Klein (2000), one of the principal advocates of the anti-globalization movement, calls for "culture

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jamming" as a form of resistance. This is an interference that attempts to transform brand advertising without altering its communication codes in order to spark a reevaluation of the values those brands transmit. It is easy to note the contradiction of this alterglobalization since employing piracy clearly reveals a failure to believe that "another world is possible."

Whenever we see these attempted aggravations, there are those who interpret them as a revelation of some type of truly political action, in contrast with a political system or class, both considered depersonalized realities. Following the lead of Guy Debord and Giorgio Agamben, Zizek recently documented this expectation in his book Living in the End of Times (2010). It is an evocation of an entirely different world order that fails to give us the slightest indication of what it might involve, what social agent could provoke a change of such magnitude, and the most appropriate course of action. This pop-Leninism corresponds to the hope that the change toward a new world order will arise from the self-destructive processes of the existing order. This millenarianism does not include a single factual, critical description of contemporary society. When we wield almost nothing of diagnostic value, it is clear that we cannot do anything, beyond awaiting the apocalypse.

All of this is symptomatic of a time when we have stripped politics of its active nature that could have produced a change toward something better. And it takes place within a context where cultural, social, and technological changes are unstoppable constants, but we have lost hope in change of a political nature. Of all the social fiels, politics gives the greatest impression of paralysis; it has stopped being an agent of shaping change and become a place where

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deadlock is administered. This situation is judged differently by liberals who lament the slow pace of reform and leftists who complain about the lack of alternatives.

Indignation, generic commitment, utopian alterglobalization, or expressive insurrectionism should not be understood, in my opinion, as the harbinger of radical change but as the symptom that none of this is feasible outside of the realm of unexceptional democratic normality and modest reformism. The problem with large critical gestures is not that something different is proposed, but that things tend to remain unchanged when the desired modifications are outside of the dominion of politics.

2. A Democratic Tension

Charles Taylor has stated that democracy is a tension between institutions and the public. In addition to the type of politics we could call "official," there is a whole sublayer of processes that condition institutional realities. Among other benefits, the tensions that result from this coexistence help ensure that the political system is enriched, corrected, or more forward-looking. We cannot depend solely on the skill sets of professional politicians to achieve political progress. A good deal of the progress that has already been accomplished by politics was triggered by external forces: it is probably true that most social advances were not dreamed up by politicians; these results were achieved because of very concrete social pressures. The political system requires a certain degree of social energy as well as resources it does not independently possess to perform its tasks. These requirements sometimes inconvenience

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or even subvert the established order but inevitably influence its exercise of power.

That being said, the assumption that "the public" is necessarily better than institutions is a large one; the public also includes regressive movements, pressures and lobbies, irrational emotions, illegitimate or insufficient representation. "The public" can be worse than institutions, and may even be reactionary. We should not forget that the world of social movements is as plural as society itself and that social initiatives can be expected to provide one thing and its opposite, advances and retreats, right-leaning and left-leaning movements. Many who invoke society's participation are thinking only of that wich suit their needs, but society, naturally enough, affords participants with a wide range of perspectives. There are those on both sides of the political spectrum who hope to step outside of the framework of representative democracy: the meaning that the social movements of the 1960s hold in left-wing imagery is matched by the neoliberals' demands for civil society in the 1990s. This concurrence should at least give us pause.

Democracy is a regime that accepts not only that tension, but other tensions as well, because we assume that no person or group is always right. What saves us from the damages produced by bad decisions is that they are balanced out by other agents, limitations, and procedures: there is government, but fortunately there is also opposition; opinion polls help us know what people want at present, but the political leadership can also focus on less popular criteria. There are things about which one should consult and others about which consultation is forbidden; the administration protects us from politicians who are too original, while the daring decisions made by

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those very politicians compensate the bureaucracy's lack of imagination. Experts limit the frivolity of certain politicians, and those same politicians help us escape the tyranny of the experts. Without the rules of the game, we would be in no position to discuss different goals, but it is not uncommon for the discussion to lead to a demand for a revision of some of those same rules. The dualism between institutions and the public is one of those balances that should be taken into account, like the balance between representation and participation or between obedience and protest.

But what if the greatest threat to our democracies was not so much the strength of institutions as their weakness in the face of the capriciousness of public opinion? What does political regulation of the marketplace mean except obstructing the inevitable chain of events stemming from investors' free decisions? The problem we face is the populism that, with its laks of balance and responsibility, impedes the creation of the public good. Our democracies' fragility stems not from the distance between the elites and the people but from what we could call their excessive closeness, the instability of a politics that is vulnerable to existing pressures at any given point in time, paying attention only to temporary changes of opinion (Bardhan 1999, 95-96; Calhoun 1988).

In a democratic society, politics is at the service of the will of the people, of course, but that will is just as complex, as in need of interpretation as is the reality of "the people" to which we are constantly making reference. Like everything that is considered self-evident, bringing up "the people" almost always serves to block discussion. But as soon as we go a little deeper, the disagreements begin. Are "the people" the ones reflected in polls and surveys, the

ones the representatives represent, a reality pervaded by globalization, or an autarkic unit safe from all interference? They are probably all those things; democratic procedures are nothing but ways of verifying whom or what we are talking about in every case. "The people," from the outset, is a fuzzy reality, something that needs to be elaborated; that is the purpose of representation, public discussion, and the institutional procedures that define boundaries or modify and transform them into democratic decisions.

Institutions protect us against the demagogic appeal to "the people." They represent them and pull together their constituent plurality and the complexity of their demands. Because of political representation, the people's will is operative and integrative of the times that constitute it. This is important to remember, especially when commonplaces suggest the opposite and when there is such fascination with popular "spontaneity" that we are made to assume that those who protest are always in the right and those who promote participation necessarily strengthen democracy.

3. The Utopia of Disintermediation

The current fascination with social networks, participation, and proximity reveals that the only utopia that continues to be in force is that of disintermediation. A lack of confidence in mediation leads us to automatically presume that things are true when they are transparent, that representation always falsifies, and that every secret is illegitimate. There is nothing worse than an intermediary. That is why we immediately feel closer to someone who leaks information than to a journalist, to an amateur than a professional, to

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NGOs than to governments. For this reason, our greatest scorn is aimed at those who imply the greatest degree of mediation: as the opinion polls remind us, our problem is . . . the political class.

What has led to this way of thinking? First off, technology is having a profound impact on relationships between people, the configuration of public spaces, and our relationship with the institutions of authority. The new information and communication technologies led to the beginning of the current democratizing wave by allowing for a disintermediation that previous technologies did not support. The new modes of disintermediation that new technologies have only recently made possible cannot help but modify our way of understanding and practicing politics.

These new information and communication technologies allow us to live in a type of "consecration of the amateur," a society of non-professionals, that has produced a true democratization of skills (Flichy 2010). The new image of a citizen is that of an amateur who informs him- or herself, expresses opinions freely, and develops new forms of commitment without needing authorization or instruction. These new skills make citizens as suspicious of experts as of their representatives. Experts no longer state irrefutable facts or use their knowledge to put an end to all controversy. In a knowledge-based society, people possess greater cognitive abilities. New organizations and interest groups arise that help weaken the authority of the experts. The knowledge that was once possessed esoteric is now publically debated, controlled, and regulated.

Collective intelligence challenges the experts since it has, right from the start, enabled anyone to make use of any available knowledge.

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In a knowledge-based society, there is an upsurge in the average amount of knowledge, the free circulation of facts, the ability to communicate one's opinions. For this reason, the new transmission of knowledge and expertise has great democratizing potential. Democracy arose in specific opposition to the monopoly of power and in favor of a universalization of the ability to govern. This new democratization now rests on the fact that technological capabilities allow anyone to acquire skills in vigilance, control, and judgment at any time.

That being said, the elimination of mediation is an ambiguous reality: the desire to ban it is fueled by democratic dreams of free spontaneity, more transparent markets, and the unlimited accessibility of information. It is the dream that opinion polls can make political wishes perfectly apparent, making it possible to govern based solely on polling numbers. But a ban on mediation could also produce the nightmare of a public space lacking the balance provided by limits, procedures, or representation. All three factors protect democracy from its possible irrationality because limits also guarantee our rights, procedures challenge arbitrary responses, and representation offsets populism. Of course, transparency and proximity are political values, but one might also value democratic discretion or democratic impartiality. This reveals a fact of which classic writers were already well aware: in politics, any value without a counterweight becomes a potential threat.

It is not coincidental that this dynamic of disintermediation is made manifest in diverse social environments and with different effects: if it has been used to justify deregulation in the economy, in politics it has promoted forms of direct and participatory democracy.

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Disintermediation was originally connected to economic neoliberalism; it has now spread to other domains. The affinity found between neoliberalism and the radical left is always a surprise.

In essence, the same logic and reasoning used in favor of representation also supports the regulation of the marketplace: there is no self-regulating, transparent market nor is there a group of people that is clearly capable of self-determination. In order to be effective and to be accepted as legitimate, both the market and the people require procedures, rules, and representation. So what if our great challenge were precisely to construct mediations that, while less rigid, were still mediations? These new mediations, applied to the economy, politics, or the culture, would make the greatest possible amount of freedom compatible with a structure that protects rights and eliminates undesirable side-effects.

In this respect, it is not very useful to envision a real-time politics that suppresses institutional mediation, rhetorical circumlocutions, and the protocols of agreement. An ideology of immediacy proposes returning to the people the power that is unjustly retained by their representatives. It is presumed that democratic representation must be a falsification, or at least a deformation, of the pure will of the people, the fragmentation of their original unity into the atomism of various interests.

Being skeptical of the blessings enjoyed by direct democracy does not mean that we are joining forces with those who fight against the "masses" and their unfortunate reactions. In reality, there is no such thing as "the people" as a metaphysical unit or as the authentic and incorruptible essence of the nation. Neither are they, as twenty-first

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century cultural criticism has disdainfully portrayed them, amorphous "plebs" or a totality of the "consumer hordes."   Representative institutions are not an abstraction of the people's concrete wishes, but rather the opposite: institutionalized democracy is what transforms the abstraction of the "people" into a visible form that is concrete and operative. Its wishes can be verified.

Striving for a more truthful political system and more institutional specificity only leads to a strengthening of the illusion that we live in a world that is retransmitted live, entirely subservient to the present moment. The invocation of a politics that reproduces true social reality brings to bear all the functions of a mythical reality that can always be called upon to justify anything. The demand that people act in the immediacy of the moment ends up delegitimizing as inauthentic the delicate artifices that societies devise in order to be able to work together.

That is why the creation of the will of the people sometimes fails (we are currently seeing this in the stuttering evolution of the Arab revolts or in the Occupy movements of the Western world). Creating the will of the people is as decisive for democratization as indignation and protest are. Popular mobilization is needed to call attention to an intolerable state of affairs, but in order to delve more deeply into democracy, we need both representation and compromise in order to situate ourselves within a political framework.

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4. Ballot Boxes and Dreams

One of the slogans most frequently shouted by the Spanish Indignados is: "Our dreams don't fit into your ballot boxes." As with all utopian demands, this takes its cue from the comfortable prestige of the impossible, which saves us from asking whether our dreams are, at times, private delusions or nightmares for other people. I am not going to focus my attention here on the fact that the electoral slate from which we have to choose clearly admits improvement. Instead, I will attempt to emphasize a reality that defines our political condition: no one, especially in politics, gets what he or she wants. This is, incidentally, one of democracy's great achievements.

A society is democratically mature when it assimilates the fact that politics is inevitably disappointing and continues to make political demands. Politics is inseparable from a willingness to compromise, which is the ability to accept that something is good even when it does not completely satisfy one's particular goals. A person who does not have the ability to live with these types of frustrations and respect his or her limits is unsuited for politics. We have been taught that this is what makes politics irresponsible and fraudulent, but we should get used to seeing that this is what defines it.

In a democratic society, politics cannot be a means for achieving goals designed at a distance from real circumstances, beyond institutional realities, or without keeping other people in mind, including those who do not share the same goals. Any political dream is only achievable in collaboration with other people who also want to participate in its definition. Pacts and alliances reveal that we need other people and that power is always a shared reality. Democratic

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coexistence affords many possibilities but also imposes a good number of limitations. In the first place, there are limits that stem from recognizing that other groups or interested parties have as much of a right as you have to try to win.

That is why political action always implies making concessions. Those who confront any individual problem as a question of principle, those who speak constantly of doctrines or of things that cannot be conceded or of conflict, these are people who doom themselves to frustration or authoritarianism.   Politics fails when rival groups advocate positions that they consider completely incompatible and contradictory or when they refuse to admit any concessions.   All zealots believe that their opponents are beyond political persuasion. Those who are unable to understand the plausibility of the other side's arguments will never be able to think, much less act, politically.

One of the symptoms of the poor quality of our public space is the growing influence of groups and people who have not understood this reality and who practice an insistent depolitization. The fragility of our democracies in the face of populist pressure is revealed through phenomena such as the Tea Party, a true stronghold of inflexibility. I am not merely referring to the movement in the United States, but to a much more widespread tendency in our democracies. We could say without exaggeration that we all have our own Tea Party now. Political parties, churches, labor unions, and the media are overwhelmed by a series of movements that are generated around them and that try to influence their habitual practices or directly question their representativeness.

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Each of these groups endures its own particular siege against the moderates, a friendly fire that creates a solid impasse so no compromise will be brokered and no ground ceded to the enemy. In this sense, Tea Parties are strongly ideological yet disorganized power structures that live like parasites off a different ideological power structure, this one official but weakened. They demand that the official groups guarantee absolute loyalty to a number of political objectives that must be achieved without compensation to or compromise with the enemy. In this way, the idea of consensus or the value of making deals is discredited. Those who belong to the Tea Party are guardians of principle who, rather than fight their enemies, lie in wait for those who resemble them the most. They fulfill the adage that the worst enemy is always within our own ranks. We can reflect, then, on the political significance of labels such as "without hang-ups" or the proliferation of displays of "pride" that are currently used to describe many ideological renovations.

Among the most depoliticizing characteristics of these movements is their lack of a sense of responsibility, their unwillingness to come to an agreement, and their inability to engage in intelligent self-limitation. They defend an ideological nucleus (the family, the nation, the welfare state, the market, values) that they view as continually under assault, and their strongest suspicions are directed at the moderates within their own ranks. They are especially vulnerable to populism, and they carry a good deal of emotional weight. "Single issue movements" (on either extreme of the ideological spectrum and focused on various matters: the environment, women, the nation, abortion, etc.) are particularly given to bringing these extreme ideological influences to bear. These movements, since they are very

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concerned about a single issue and care almost nothing about anything else, tend to focus on whichever particular issue they consider essential without considering its viability, the urgency of its timeline, or a framework of compossibility.

The combination of institutional weakness and a number of social and technological factors has distabilized the space for demand and protest, which is as deregulated as the markets. The social networks, which have unleashed great waves of mobilization, communication, and instantaneousness, have played a decisive role in all of this, but they tend to offer a destructured world in which everyone links to whomever else they choose. Because of this, these networks are less and less social since confrontation with someone who is different tends to be substituted by indignation alongside those who are similar, an emotion that is nurtured by communicating with other people who share the same irritations.

This probably indicates that we need to reconsider politics in societies that are largely deinstitutionalized, whose conflicts do not have the structural function of previous social conflicts and where citizen demands do not find a clear outlet through labor unions or political representation. Because the world is now defined by anti-politics, not by democratic equilibrium. What we have are alternative authorities that intend not to balance the official power structures, but to neutralize them.

Politics has always disciplined our dreams; it used to define them within a political reality and translate them into programs of action. For that reason, when politics is weak, our expectations regarding the collective future explode, and we become more vulnerable to

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irrationality. What do we then do with everything we hope to achieve through politics? Should we concede that, considering the disappointing nature of social coexistence, there is no sense in formulating ideals or fighting for them? Instead, it is a question of making a distinction without which there can be no democratic coexistence. What does fit into ballot boxes are our aspirations; what comes after that—if we do not want to turn our own dreams into someone else's nightmares—is the democratic interplay that often limits and frustrates our desires, but that also enriches them with other people's contributions. If a person were able to realize all of his or her aspirations, he or she would not share our human or, especially, our political condition.

5. A Democratic Suspicion

It is a paradox that at the time when democracy has reached its greatest geographic extension, when it is most valued by the citizenry and there is no alternative model, we observe persistent symptoms of weakness and dysfunction. Polls reveal a growing disillusionment that some people interpret—mistakenly, in my option—as absolute disinterest, but this should be analyzed more precisely. We are not facing the death of politics, but we are in the midst of a transformation that forces us to conceive of it and practice it in a different way.

We should not allocate suspicion to outdated categories or relate current disappointments to the antiparliamentarism that dramatically weakened democratic governments at the beginning of the twentieth century. We are not on the verge of a democratic crisis, but entering

a new era of democratic stability. The disappointment people feel is in no way subversive; it is perfectly compatible with a respect for the democratic order. It is a mistake to think this feeling is anything other than fully democratic. We should also not forget that a lack of trust (toward absolute power) is central to the very foundation of our political institutions. Democracy has always been construed as a system of limited and revocable trust; it is a regime that institutionalizes suspicion. Is it not true that what we generally bemoan as depoliticization simply does not correspond to the type of political leadership to which we were previously accustomed, that is, an emphatic, hierarchical style of leadership that tends not to be ultrademocratic?

The current state of suspicion stems from the logical transformation of a society that is no longer heroic and whose political system has been stripped of its previous theatrical quality. A lack of trust is not the same as indifference; it is a "weak" disappointment that produces more distance than destruction (Lipovetsky 2006, 62). It is one thing for democracy not to foster too much enthusiasm and another for this disappointment to mean indifference to our form of political life. Even if we dislike our newspapers or political parties, for example, that does not mean we would let them be suppressed. The demystification of politics does not mean that we do not care about anything; it simply means that our fondness for our political system is not awash in passion or enthusiasm. It is not true that people have lost all interest in politics; we live in a society in which we feel a greater sense of political competence. We are now better educated and feel capable of passing judgment on public affairs, thus we are less tolerant of

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having that ability appropriated. Numerous studies show that the more education we have, the less confidence we feel in institutions or leaders (Dogan 2005, 14).

One of the ways in which society expresses an opinion about politics is precisely through the intensity of its participation or interest. If we respect political pluralism in all its manifestations, why not accept that there is also plurality regarding degrees of participation and public commitment? Why should everyone have to be equally involved in political issues? And who determines the desired level of commitment? When citizens express a greater or lesser interest in politics, this is a sign that requires political interpretation. A lack of interest is a respectable way of stating an opinion or making a decision and not necessarily a dearth of political commitment.

It is important not to err on this point if we want to understand the society in which we live. We are not facing a time of depoliticization, but a time of the demystification of politics. A society that is interdependent and heterarchical tends to detotalize politics. What some people hastily interpret as a lack of interest stems from the fact that we live in a society where the public space cannot absorb all the dimensions of subjectivity. Although it may be true that politics now only mobilizes passions in a superficial fashion, that does not mean that our demands on politics have disappeared. Just the opposite. The same people who are absolutely uninterested in politics do not stop expecting to reap the benefits of the political system, and they are no less vigilant in seeking the fulfillment of their demands. But their expectations are no longer inscribed in the heroic framework of a totalizing politics.

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For that reason, we can see that suspicion is not the opposite of legitimacy, but a subtle means of managing legitimacy. A lack of interest can be a completely practical response (Luhmann 1993, 191). Some even believe that a certain amount of political apathy is a good sign. Democracies can withstand a high degree of disinterest; in fact, the sudden interest of people who are generally apathetic about politics tends to indicate that something is not working as it should. A certain amount of boredom is part and parcel of democratic normality, and excitement about politics does not always bode well.

Much has been said about the way contemporary societies transfer sacredness from established religions to political projects. This picture could be completed by noting that, after the transfer of sacredness from religion to politics, we have reached an era where it is the nonconventional forms of politics, what we could call "alterpolitics," that are consecrated. It is surprising to see this evolution of social expectations; we trust that alternative forms of politics will help us achieve that which we have stopped expecting from conventional politics, reactivating pure energies that, it seems, remained intact in the domain of depoliticized society. We could call this civil society, active citizenship, social movements, or "counterdemocracy," to use the term coined by Pierre Rosanvallon (2008).

In my opinion, those who expect the same things from nonpolitics as they previously expected from politics reveal that they have not grasped the transformations that have taken place in society. We live in a society that could be called post-heroic, where heroic appeals and the mindsets of resistance have lesser repercussions. If politics

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is no longer what it once was, neither is nonpolitics.   Alternative political activities (participation, protests, social movements, etc.) no longer offer us the heroism that has faded from institutional politics. "Alterheroism" is a nostalgic refuge for those disappointed by politics in its current form, but like all forms of nostalgia, it is a remnant of the past.

6. Paradoxes of Democratic Self-determination

Democracy is a political system that intensifies our expectations; it makes us believe in things that are as inalienable and impossible as a free society that governs itself or in a society in which those who govern and are governed are identical.   This ideal of self-determination is part of democracy's useful fictional narrative, which does not mean that it is an ideal we should do without or that it reflects actual reality or that it is a literally demandable right.   It is, like so many properties by which we define democracy, a goal, a critical or normative principle, in other words, like always, something more complex than what its mere formulation might suggest.

Many of the debates that have been raised by the Indignados movement have revealed the paradoxes of popular sovereignty.   It is a tension that has plagued theories of democracy from the very beginning.   On the one hand, the ideal of a full democracy (often based on a model of direct democracy), the desire for participation, the insistence on the popular ratification of decisions and firmer mandates from voters, the demand that representatives reflect those who are represented as accurately as possible, a requirement that

representatives fulfill their promises . . . . Compared with all these goals, voting seems quite insignificant.

These aspirations are not new, and there are, in contrast, more realistic positions, like those put forth by Schumpeter (2003 [1942]) or Dahl (1971). While the details of their positions differ, both maintain that the greatest democracy to which we can aspire is a competitive oligarchy. At the same time, it is not easy to see how it can be a democracy when the bodies that participate in political decisions were either not elected or elected in very indirect ways (like judges, independent authorities, or certain international bodies). It would not be very realistic to demand that institutions and procedures of global governance uphold the same democratic standards that are required of nation states. On the other hand, experience teaches us that democracy is not always a product of democrats, but of Jacobins or rigid state machines that are defended by states of emergency and sustained by a public that hates political parties, especially those parties that are not particularly unified, in other words, parties that allow criticism and freedom of expression.

We owe the most famous formulation of democratic sovereignty, of its particular squaring of the circle, to Rousseau. This is how he synthesizes it in his Social Contract: "'The problem is to find a form of association which will defend and protect with the whole common force the person and goods of each associate, and in which each, while uniting himself with all, may still obey himself alone, and remain as free as before'" (2008 [1762], 23). This objective is contradictory, incompatible with our political condition, and particularly unattainable in complex societies. In that sense, it could recall Morgan's observation (1988, 14) that government requires

make-believe. (These fabrications support both the assumption that the king is divine as well as the idea that the people have one single voice and are represented by their representatives.)

To understand the innocence of its first formulations, we must keep in mind that representative democracy arose at a time when the concurrence of society's interests and values was imaginable. Modern democracy was first conceived prior to today's political pluralism or the great social conflicts of the contemporary era. Its original simplicity is also combined with a certain anthropological naïveté. Schumpeter called attention to this fact when he observed that eighteenth century philosophers saw the common good as an obvious beacon light, so clear that anyone could recognize it. Failure to do so could only be explained by ignorance, stupidity, or evil (2003, 250).

That led to the anti-partyism of the founders of English and American democracy (Rosenblum 2008) that then progressed into the organic democracies of the twentieth century and into contemporary populisms (in a context in which there are, coincidentally, more and more parties that reject that designation). It was assumed that everyone would conveniently choose to live under the same laws, so the parties were understood as factions, artifices that broke with the natural unity of societies, spurious divisions, or the direct result of the ambitions of politicians. Even the very idea of opposition made no sense. If the people's self-government is literal, if those who govern are the same as those who are governed, there is no right to opposition. It took some time in the history of democracy to establish the idea that the people can oppose a government that had achieved a majority of the votes.

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Today, in more complex societies, we affirm that the general will can only be the result of compromise among diverse groups. That is why Kelsen could affirm that the concept of public interest or organic solidarity that transcends the interests of group, class, or nationality is, in the last analysis, an anti-political illusion (1988, 33). How do we define the ideal of self-determination in large, complex societies with heterogeneous preferences when it seems inevitable that at least some of the people at certain periods of time will be subject to laws they do not like?

The solution to this dilemma has been the idea of representation, the institutional concentration of an experience that our rhetoric tends to conceal: the fact that democracy is a representative system means that the citizens do not govern; we are inevitably governed by others. Elections are not held every day; mandates are vague; some of the things for which we vote are less important to us than others; as voters, we give elected officials some room to maneuver; the demand for unanimity (in which everyone's desires would be realized) is impossible and blocks . . . . One of the greatest challenges of political theory is determining what conditions and what democratic justification allow this hetero-determination.

In the first place, if the citizens do not govern in complex societies—they do not govern everything or continuously or every detail—it is because to a certain extent decisions are delegated: governments should be capable of governing. If governments only did that which elections expressly authorized them to do, there would be many limitations when it came time to govern. Some of the limitations would be positive (because there would be less arbitrariness and fewer broken promises) and some negative (because new situations

arise, because a majority government would have to be configured, or because it would require the creation of pacts). In any case, "mandates are not instructions" (Przeworski, Manin, and Stokes 1999, 12), but indications that should be concretized through compromises or guidelines for confronting the unpredictable future.

Any leadership will have inevitable costs in terms of democratic authorization and the remoteness demanded by the adoption of decisions (especially the ones we often call "unpopular"). If a government does not maintain a certain distance from voters, they are sometimes unable to tell the truth. In addition, politics cannot separate itself from the current moment, which is one of the biggest burdens it suffers nowadays. We must either justify this "distance" democratically or we will be unable to muster the arguments to oppose the plebiscitary populism that enjoys strong defenders on both the right and the left.

It is not a question of choosing between inefficiency and betrayal but of ensuring governments will not distance themselves too much from the mandates of the electors or let their rigidity make them inefficient. Citizens must tolerate a degree of permissiveness in government decisions because mandates in a democracy are not absolute imperatives. The inevitable need political parties have to negotiate reduces the power of the voters. When they need to form coalition governments, when new and unexpected factors arise that demand unprecedented decisions, political parties and the government find themselves obligated to distance themselves from express mandates or to make modifications that were not expressly authorized. In these situations, would we prefer to condemn them to

inefficiency or to demand express authorization (by referendum or a new election), even though that is not always possible or desirable?

The notion of self-government is not incoherent or impractical unless it is formulated in a weak manner: a democracy is not a regime in which every action is what we all want. It is a regime in which individual decisions have some influence on the final collective decision. Democracy is the system that best reflects individual preferences, nothing more and nothing less. The democratic objective is to allow as much self-government as possible, while knowing that it is inevitable that some people will live under laws that they do not like and that have been determined by other people. What should be done to make their "submission" legitimate and acceptable? The great invention of democracy is that governments are provisional; there is the possibility that the government will be replaced and other people will take over.

So then, we allow other people to govern us because change is possible. This is the procedure that allows the realization of the ideal of self-government in complex societies. We are governed by other people, but we can be governed by different other people if that is what we want. "Democratic freedom consisted not in obeying only oneself but in obeying today someone in whose place one would be tomorrow" (Manin 1997, 28).

The solution of alternation, the precedent of which is Aristotle's formulation of governments ruling in turn, is realized, in modern democracies, through free elections. Elections are the fundamental instrument of self-government. With them, we attempt to elect those who will follow the people's mandate. Of all the instruments of

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political participation, elections are the most egalitarian (Przeworski 2010). Even though electoral participation is not perfect, it is a more important political device than any of the other participatory procedures, which often privilege the people who have the most resources to participate.

By virtue of elections, the people who are in power confront the possibility of losing it through established procedures, which means that elected officials are forced to anticipate this very threat. The possibility of electing and substituting those who govern us offers credibility to the fiction that we govern ourselves. Elections are precisely the moment of greatest uncertainty, when possibility hovers over everyone like a promise or a threat. Elections are an interruption of inertia, an established break from continuity. It is a time when the fact that politics introduces us into a world in which one has to respond and account for one's actions is made manifest. Power is not absolute because it must be defended, and the opportunities afforded by politics are only temporary. That is why no other moment concentrates as much fear and hope as elections because there is never as much at stake nor is reality so uncertain and so distinguishable from the merely possible. The democratic game, to which all participants implicitly submit, means that the person who won could have lost and may well lose in the future.

Of course elections, while very important, should not be idealized as if democracy required nothing else. But the process of holding elections is the means by which the promise of democratic self-determination is maintained and reiterated. In the end, it turns out that something this commonplace and ordinary, something that strikes us as rather insipid and that barely interests half the

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population is what best reflects the ideal of self-government and protects us from the appropriation of the us by any triumphant majority.

Our political condition allows human beings to do a great number of things that would be impossible if we lived like Gods or beasts, as Aristotle suggested, but it also poses a good number of limitations. That being said, knowing and recognizing our limits has some unexpected benefits, such as preparing us to challenge illegitimate restrictions. Being conscious of our limits is essential in order to push those limits as far as possible. In this way, we will not criticize democracy for failing to provide things we should not expect of it, and we will be protected from demagogic appeals that promise that which cannot be guaranteed. We will know what we have the right to expect and what is, conversely, futile.

Some will feel that this analysis is not hopeful enough or that it throws cold water on our best expectations about the quality of democracy. But one need not be a disheartened cynic to remember that a lack of hope is not always bad; we should be pleased if those who project only false illusions are dissatisfied and reassured if true zealots are discouraged. In general, democratic maturity involves a certain degree of disappointment, especially the disappointment that arises from the unmasking of exaggerated hope.

Political experience includes some demystification of democracy, which does not prevent us from appreciating it or defending it or abandoning the attempt to improve it. In fact, it is just the opposite: if we are blind to possible reforms, it is most likely as a result of disproportionate expectations. We must distinguish the

dissatisfactions that correspond to shortcomings that should be corrected and those that result from the limitations of the human condition and our way of organizing ourselves. Knowing when, where, and why there are no alternatives allows us to unmask the people who self-interestedly insist there are no alternatives when there can and should be.

7. The Representability of Society

There are protests that question certain decisions and others that criticize the partiality of representation, but contemporary protest movements such as the Indignados go one step further when they condemn the idea of representation in and of itself. Their underlying ideal is direct democracy without mediation. One of their slogans, "You don't represent us," is profoundly anti-political because there can be no politics without representation. These protests include many factors, many of them very admirable, but they tend to lack a political criticism of politics. Politicians are poor at doing certain things that no one does better than they do. We can replace them, and perhaps we should, but we should not let ourselves be deceived by the smokescreen that those who replace them are not, in turn, politicians.

What is at stake in this debate is whether a democratic society can avoid the limitations of representation and do without its benefits. Representation is a site of compromise and mediation where, for example, parity and territorial balance are assured; these factors are not self-regulated, but require explicit decisions. It is unrealistic to believe these complex balances can be left to the vagaries of

spontaneity. The self-regulation of the marketplace that is supported by the right and the political self-regulation that is lauded by the left suggest very similar preconceptions that coincide in holding the artificial dimension of the public space in low regard.

The will of the people is at least as fragile as the will of the individual; the whole process that leads to configuring the public space—balancing deliberation and decision, participation and delegation—is an arduous and complex process, threatened on the one hand by indecision and on the other by the thoughtlessness of its constituents. The problem of political representation is that it has to come up with a democratic synthesis from all interested parties. This synthesis must be singular, helpful in making decisions, and respectful of the plural nature of societies. Deciding without deliberation would be illegitimate; deliberating without deciding would be inefficient. A democracy is not a regime of referendums, but a system that articulates diverse criteria such as the participation of citizens, the quality of deliberations, the transparency of decisions, and the exercise of responsibilities.

Politics always ends up having to confront the responsibility of creating a democratic synthesis, which may be very provisional and amendable, but it is still a synthesis. Without it, we would not even perceive the differences we want to protect. If the public space is important in a democratic sense, it is not only because everyone has the right to assert their desires or convictions, but because they must lay them on the line at the heart of a debate in which integrative public policies are determined.

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Representation once found its enemies in pre-democratic, absolutist states, but it is now placed in question by a libertarianism that speaks in the name of social networks, civil society, the self-regulation of the markets, or direct democracy. These are different labels that all coincide in their suspicion toward mediation. From this perspective, rather than being a tool for configuring the public space, representation becomes the means of expressing desires, interests, and identities. This leads to viewing the "proximity" of representatives as an ideal. It is said that the more the representatives are like those represented, the better. But the current political crisis does not, as they tend to say, stem from the great distance that separates voters from elected officials, but from the complete opposite: crises arise when both groups are forced to define themselves. This creates a situation where "working on" definitions and demands is impossible because they are presented as non-negotiable. We must confront the difficulty of democratically legitimizing the distance between representatives and their constituents so that the coherence and organization of society is made possible.

Politics, conceived of in this way, is impossible, because politics means representation and synthesis. Individual private rights are foregrounded and understood as something entirely separate from the political arena, complete in their original form, free from any need for negotiation or compromise, radically depoliticized. Politics would then be an immediate transposition of whatever society happens to be, without being "worked on," without the added value of cooperation, as if any intervention by other people were a betrayal of principles that are immediately obvious. Any political mediation

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would be synonymous with falsifying and concealment. The problem with all of this is that without representation, society would be shattered by a surfeit of demands that all insist on their mutual incompatibility.

Representation is not a cacophonous transposition of social variability but a task of synthesizing, a process in which compromises are configured in such a way that societies can act like societies without abandoning their constituent plurality. The deliberative principle is opposed to this belief in a private, pre-political, and exogenous sphere, which ignores the degree to which preferences are a product of laws, preconceptions, and power dynamics. The conception of a social order that succumbs to the immediacy of interest groups seems not to recognize the transformative power of politics, which does not merely manage what exists but frequently modifies the point of departure. Among other things, politics allows society to acquire a certain distance from itself, a thoughtfulness that allows it to critically examine its own practices (Sunstein 2004). In the public sphere befitting a republic, the emphasis is not on the people's pre-established interests or irremediably incompatible visions of the world. Instead, communicative processes that contribute to forming and transforming the opinions, interests, and identities of the citizens are foregrounded. The goal of these processes is not to satisfy individual interests or to assure the coexistence of different conceptions of the world, but to collectively elaborate common interpretations of coexistence (Habermas 1996).

We still need to make a lot of improvements to representative democracy, but there is as of yet no candidate to replace it. What I see, at the heart of the enthusiasm for alternative forms of social

action, is an attempt to escape political logic, in other words, an attempt to escape plural action and compromise. This is the dream of a society in which the limitations of our political condition are permanently overcome. This dream of getting beyond politics is shared by many people whose company should strike us as suspect.

Representation is an authorized relationship that sometimes disappoints and that, under certain conditions, can be revoked. But we can never dispense with representation without stripping the political community of coherence and the capacity for action. We can improve representation, we can demand better reporting, greater control, new representatives, as much transparency as we need, but we should not look for solutions elsewhere or, especially, in a non-political framework. That would mean giving ground to those who think that politics cannot work, who are unintentionally allied with those who do not want politics to work.

8. Provisional Conclusion: Protests and Indignation Are Not Enough

In a society with low intensity citizenship, soaring estrangement from politics, flat debates, and non-existent discussions, any appeal to jump on the criticism bandwagon receives immediate approval. If the person writing the statement is, additionally, a former French resistance fighter and one of the drafters of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it is impossible to contradict him or attempt to modify the specifics of his position without coming across as a stooge of the system.

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Nevertheless . . . . Indignation is a necessary, but insufficient, civic virtue. With apologies to Stéphane Hessel and his Indignez-Vous!, I see things differently, and I believe the fundamental problem lies elsewhere. In the first place, rather than a lack of indignation, we suffer the complete opposite. There is indignation everywhere; simply flipping through the channels affords a vision of people who are almost all indignant (particularly on the extremely conservative stations). We find indignation among those who believe the welfare state is being whittled away, for example, but also among those who believe it is going too far. The indignant label applies to those who believe there are too many foreigners, to zealots of all types, and to those who have allowed their fear to be agitated by the people who hope to channel it.

Our societies are full of people who are "against" while there is a dearth of those who are "for" something concrete and identifiable. The problem is how to confront the fact that the negative energies of indignation, exaggeration, and victimization are what energize people. This is what Pierre Rosanvallon has called "the age of negative democracy," where those who object do not choose to do so in the manner of previous rebels or dissidents, since their attitude does not specify any desirable horizon or plan of action. In this situation, the problem is how to distinguish regressive anger from justifiable indignation and how to make use of the latter in favor of movements with transformative capabilities.

But what if the people who listen to these curses with pleasure are not the solution but part of the problem? Asking people to get indignant implies telling them they are right and that they should continue to respond as they have been doing until now, living a

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mixture of conformity and unproductive indignation. The revolutionary stance would be to effectively break with populism, with the immediacy and adulation that is the cause of our worst relapses. In addition, these populist appeals keep offering us simple explanations for complex problems. Indignation will stop being a harmless broadside that is incapable of improving the objectionable situations that provoke it when it provides some reasonable analysis about why that which is happening is happening, when it successfully identifies problems instead of being satisfied with identifying guilty parties, when it proposes some form of action.

And what if indignation is benefitting those who are satisfied with or even responsible for the state of affairs that makes us indignant? It may be that these bursts of violent protest are less transformative of reality than an on-going, sustained effort to formulate good analyses and make patient efforts at introducing improvements. One could discuss a conservative function of indignation in that it stabilizes systems just as letting one's hair down or employing escape valves do. It may end up being the most practical approach to keeping things just the way they are. We need something more in order to move toward a better world, but that something is not greater dramatic exaggeration of our dissatisfaction; it is, in the first place, a good theory that helps us understand what is happening in the world without falling into the comfortable temptation of concealing its complexity. Only at that point can programs, projects, or leaderships be formulated that will afford a type of efficient, coherent, and capable social intervention capable of attracting a majority of the people, and not merely those who are angry.

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Now that there is a trend of authors exhorting others to do something political—to become indignant or to get engaged—I would propose, in spite of almost never knowing what other people should do, an alternative slogan: Comprehend! I am using "comprehension" in both its senses. On the one hand, recognize the complexity of the world and the restrictions our political realities impose on us and, on the other hand, be understanding about those difficulties. Any criticism that does not find a starting point in both these attitudes—respect for the challenges of politics and benevolence toward those who undertake it—will not be as profound as it could be in challenging the political system's evident deficiencies with solid analysis.

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