

## A Provocation on Social Kinetics

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In this era of extreme austerity, crisis and social uprisings it becomes more and more evident that the neoliberal order has reached a tipping point in its inevitable churn of growth, consumption and profit. Cracks are now manifesting themselves, and it is precisely at this point that radical scholarship can draw attention to the interplay of state oppression, hierarchies and capital. Indeed in the last years there have been a growing number of conferences, special issues, books and workshops directly addressing the milieu of social uprisings around the globe. I have participated in some of these events; in the beginning, with a sense of enthusiasm that as academics and activists we were at last able to discuss both parts of our identity without prioritising that of the “serious academic” in search of objectivity and reliability. Even though this new radical space opened up within the academy, I sometimes felt unease with the ways academics were trying to categorise (and in some cases quantify in colourful graphs and tables) the lived realities of revolutionary uprisings on the streets and squares of our cities.

I am not of course proposing that we should turn a blind eye to the measurable impacts and effects of “crisis” on our everyday social realities. On the contrary, I am suggesting that it is more urgent and timely to start addressing these realities within the academy. Yet, my main anxiety is the prevailing gap between theory and praxis, which ends up producing teleological accounts of social change. In particular, one of the prevailing approaches to this new era of social change is to resurrect theories from the past, apply them to the present situation in order to create an account for the future. I might be addressing the limits of my own discipline here, since this is the main training for sociologists but I am sure that similar teleological accounts of social change can be found in different disciplines. At this point a critical commentator might wonder why I am critiquing this model of knowledge production. The obvious answer would be that finally radical scholarship seeks to account for the growing, ineffable rise of conscious, politically aware citizens around the world that are protesting against inequality, injustice and oppression. Yet, the neoliberal order has impacted on such scholarship, as writings have sometimes sought to enumerate the methods of “success” or “failure” of such movements. The less obvious answer would be that these examples of (so-called) radical scholarship fail to do exactly what they are claiming to be doing: engaging with the milieu of social uprisings. On the contrary they end up reproducing bourgeoisie models and terms for the self-congratulating audience of academic conferences and events.

This model of knowledge production based on methods of “success” and “failure” also unravels the tendency to become disciplined by our own disciplines. Foucault is talking about discipline and punishment through the example of the school and specifically refers to the way disciplines are constructed and furthered by the repertoires of docility. In his words, “disciplinary power appears to have the function not so much of deduction as of synthesis, not so much of exploitation of the product as of coercive link with the apparatus of production” (Foucault, 1997: 153). If we apply Foucault’s argument to our academic disciplines, there is an obvious link between the ways academics are being schooled and the disciplined methods of producing our work. In this light, it seems like a paradox that academic studies are taking forward the notion of resistance but nevertheless adhering to the forms, methods and paradigms that already constitute “a discipline”. An obvious example here is the recent Research

Excellence Framework (REF) exercise in UK academic institutions and the external departmental assessment in Greece in which the “success” or “failure” of academic research is measured according to fixed corporatist institutional “standards” rather than its effects on real-world issues. In other words, the tendency within the academy to measure the “success” and “failure” of social movements (and other real life issues which cannot possibly be measured in such simplistic terms) signifies the omnipresence of the neoliberal university and its disciplinary power.<sup>1</sup>

This opens up a bigger question related to the role of public intellectuals (and academics) in the milieu of crisis and rapid social change. Especially in the case of Greece there seems to be a very insidious link between the ideological mediations of crisis and the key spokespersons of this new doctrine. This comes as no surprise as the tendency of the mainstream public intellectuals is to maintain the status quo from which they gained their fame and support. This is not of course a new claim, as historically almost every oppressive regime had its own intellectuals (propagandists) who publicly advocated the norms and standards of the regime. Yet, it is precisely at this turning point that truly radical and unconventional “voices” emerge from the margins of social production. Echoing bell hooks (1990) I agree that the margins should be a space for radical openness. A space in which we can “dream dangerously” (Žižek, 2012), or as the Zapatistas would put it, a space where many worlds fit. In this milieu of crisis then, as citizens, academics, and activists we face the pressing need to take sides and leave aside the mask of neutrality and/or objectivity. If we could ever claim objectivity in our postmodern realities where there is a growing understanding of subjective positioning and thus the need for ethical research and self-reflexivity.

My first proposition here is to move beyond banal claims of objectivity and rather engage with the emergent, contested social realities that resist single readings and fixed definitions. In this suggestion lies the need to abandon the abstract towers of theories and not only look down on the everyday realities but become part of them. In other words, radical scholarship concerned with the milieu of social uprisings has to resist the borders between logos and praxis by challenging the hegemony of theoretical discourse, and instead, locate it in the realm of revolutionary action. To put it differently, scholarship ought not to speak of or for a multitude but to speak from within. This is hardly a new proposal, having rich antecedents in some anarchist

scholarship, radical feminist scholarship and race & ethnicity studies. Yet the logic of thinking alongside and working towards action needs bold, energetic propositions.

In this case it is not a resurrection of a past theory that dictates the methods and tools we use in order to grasp the social milieu, but rather the subversive force of the current milieu should inform and redefine the ways we use to address social change. This approach is what I call theory in action, in which a new dynamic between ways of knowing and ways of being is emerging. Or as Paul Routledge puts it:

“ultimately an activist academia prioritises grounded, embodied political action, the role of theory being to contribute to, be informed by, and be grounded in such action, in order to create and nurture mutual solidarity and collective action” (2009: 90-91).

Graeber (2002) pushes the argument a step further when he claims that it is through such forms of activist engagement, [that] academics can help foster “prefigurative action” by embodying visions of transformation as if they are already achieved, thereby calling them into being. Thus, it is through a theory in action approach and the creation of new categories of meaning that academia can be made relevant to the “everyday concerns of communities beyond the academy” (Routledge, 2009: 83). As I argue elsewhere, this demands a re-working of disciplinary affiliations, the development of new networks of solidarity and different terms if we are to develop productive academic responses to the era of austerity (Tsilimpounidi, 2014). It is in this light that I want to place my short provocation on social kinetics.

## SOCIAL MOVEMENT VERSUS SOCIAL STASIS

I am aware that the volume presents a collection of thoughts on social movements. Yet, in light of the above claim that we should be rethinking categories of meaning in relation to social change, I am proposing that we augment our understanding to not merely “movement”, but “stillness” – or *stasis*.<sup>2</sup> I propose this in several ways, but the initial, visual meaning is generated from the tendency of protesters to gather symbolically together in occupations of public space. There is a deeper point to make regarding the contemporary manifestations of protest-movement: in which mass demonstrations tend to have as their function the (largely still) gatherings in

front of monuments or parliaments. In prior struggles, there was a greater function of visibility, gaining support and mobilising publics in the pre-gathering marches which indeed constituted a growing movement of people towards a predetermined goal. In contemporary struggles, there is more or less immediate gathering at the point of contestation (for example the square), and the movement occurs as a result of police attack or dispersal techniques. As such, stasis becomes a productive counterpoint through which we might understand the social kinetics of uprisings. Mustafa Dikeç (2013) illustrated this notion in his compelling piece on the Turkish uprisings relating the movement of protesters to the imbrication of the disruptive stillness in space.

This reading is in accordance with the theory in action approach as I believe it contains a more accurate sensibility of the “being” and “doing” of what we hitherto have accounted for as ‘movement’. In other words, the uprisings, from Tahrir Square, to Gezi Park to Rio de Janeiro and Syntagma Square to name a few, have demonstrated the paucity of social movement theory to fully attend to the main issues, namely the issue of representation, which is why social movement theory needs further interrogation. The main claim tends to prioritise the need for clear articulation of demands, along with a set of recognisable structures – such as hierarchical structures of representation.

This is in direct conflict with the contemporary uprisings that have been complex, multivalent and often contradictory in their manifestations. The very presence of bodies in public spaces (despite the potential for conflicting agendas) forces a recognition that representative democracy is not applicable. The driving insistence of progression that is inherent in the “movement” model is closely allied with the neoliberal paradigm. Instead, as Athena Athanasiou suggests:

“the very practice of stasis creates both a space for reflection and a space for revolt, but also an affective comportment of standing and standpoint. It is such a corporeal and affective disposition of stasis that derails, if only temporarily, normative presuppositions about what may come into being as publicly intelligible and sensible in existing polities” (Butler & Athanasiou, 2013: 151).

In this sense, stasis does not presuppose stillness, as such, but also implies there is a productive potential to the disruption that happens when the flows of progress, capital, and trade are stopped. If capitalism is all about the circulation and mobility,

then a truly subversive and revolutionary act is to disrupt, to pause, or to dismantle the pre-existing pathways that have led to dogmatic obeisance to capitalism's rules. A strike, for example, is considered 'successful' when it puts a stop to the inevitable functioning of the factory, the municipality or the transport system. The point is not to generate a "way out" but to force political attention (from those in power and the public) onto the issue. This forced attention does not gain political urgency from being spectacular, but from its stasis. Rather, stasis is about taking a stance: it suggests the corporeal, affective and ideological positioning of the self (*stasi zois*). And it is in this light that a "stasis" as an act of self-reflection and of positionality is needed in academia as well, especially in these moments of rapid social change. After all "our inability to imagine alternatives, or to imagine that alternatives can work, may tell us more about the power of the present system than about the alternatives themselves" (Ferrell, 2009: 76). Or, as Graeber puts it, the "revolution over common sense is more strategically important than ever before" (2012: 167).

## NOTES

1. Many thanks to the reviewer for pushing my thinking in this regard.
2. The initial breeding ground for this working up of stasis occurred in the Inside/Outside Europe Network workshop in Winchester in June 2013. I am grateful to Marilena Zaroulia, Philip Hager, Marissia Fragkou, Aylwyn Walsh and Mustafa Dikeç along with network members for the stimulating discussion.

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