

Alberto Moreiras

Introduction

The “Thinking Politically” Conference, held in Durham, North Carolina, on October 24–26, 2003, was the inaugural event of the Duke University Institute for Critical Theory. Fredric Jameson, the institute’s director, invited colleagues and outside guests to discuss “the problem of whether interpretive strategies of broadly defined ‘classical’ texts provide the coordinates for a reconceptualization of the sites, stakes, and agencies of the political that could rescue it from seemingly irreversible obsolescence.”¹ Jameson’s call referred simultaneously to the waning of the political, “erased by the logic of the market,” and to the insistent calls for its restoration. But Jameson noted that “most of this discourse devolves into ethical, theological, and civic republican motifs. . . . For the Left, the present conceivability of any strategic orientation to state power has arguably imparted an abstract character to its various affirmations of ‘the political’ as an agenda in its own right.” Jameson urged conference participants to reflect on key texts of political thinking in the modern European tradition, at the same time engaging “the problematic status today of the semantics of decision, commitment, and denunciation” and

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addressing “the question of what constitutes the specifically political dimension of texts in this tradition, and whether this can ever be distinguished from mere partisan ideology, however stirring.”²

Here I will briefly focus on a theme that was arguably at the very basis of Jameson’s questions and that became a substantial subject of debate at the conference: the vexed notion of the autonomy of the political, so often denied by Left thinking. Could any possible primacy of politics over history (including economic history) be considered absolute or relative? If relative, then politics would still be subordinate to history in the last instance. If absolute, then politics would be the norm of action. But an absolutely primary politics would have to rely on the total immanence of its own conditions and would in fact be normless: that is, it would provide something like a normless norm for action. A politics without a norm—that is, a politics that would itself be the normative standard, without recourse to alterity or to a heterogeneous grounding—can only be a politics of force, and it would have become an ontology (as in the Nietzschean case).

Or is it possible that a norm for politics can be found outside history itself, and thus also outside force? That norm would not yet be an ontology, but it would register at some infraontological level, perhaps at the level of desire: a normative affect regulating something like what Bruno Bosteels calls in his essay for this issue, quoting Alain Badiou, the “communist invariant,” or, from an altogether different tradition, what Jacques Derrida would call the undeconstructibility of the call for justice. Would it be necessary to conclude that every possible understanding of the political as a primary motivator for human action that would not immediately reduce politics to force would still have to be automatically partisan? Can politics be thought without partisanship? Is partisanship an unconditional, irreducible determinant of any theory of the political?

The Spanish philosopher María Zambrano stated in her 1958 book *Persona y democracia* that a democratic politics is bound to a very precise determination: the abandonment of “sacrificial history.” If the abandonment of the sacrificial structuration of history defines democratic politics, by the same token the practice of democracy defines an antisacrificial perspective on action. A democratic politics, regardless of what politics could be in itself, is always bent on the suppression of the divide between, on the one hand, what Zambrano called “idols” and, on the other, “victims.”³ This cuts across other divisions of the political field, such as the Schmittian friend/enemy division, or the division of the social between the part of the whole and the part of no-part recently proposed by Jacques Rancière.⁴

If politics is exhaustively contained in the friend/enemy division, then politics is defined by power: politics seeks power—its acquisition or its continued possession—as the power of one group over other groups, and it is therefore always already partisan politics. If politics marks the fundamental act of appearance of a claim to existence by the part of no-part, that is, of those who are negated by the ideological articulation of social totality, then politics is defined by recognition: the part of no-part wants to be recognized as such by the social totality, or it wants to be recognized as the social totality (the proletariat as universal class, or the people as general will). If politics is understood as the practice of abandoning the sacrificial structuration of history, then politics appears as specifically democratic politics. Through any of those determinations there emerges the thought that the only possible nonpartisan understanding of the political is precisely the understanding of the political as always already partisan.

We can imagine a complex interaction between demands for power, for recognition, and for the end of sacrifice in any concrete situation. At their limit, however, the three definitions are incompatible, and in their mutual excess, they organize something like an aporia of the political. Politics would finally be the infinite negotiation between those three demands: for power, for recognition, and for an end to social sacrifice. But if this is true, then only democracy can organize, even if aporetically, the simultaneous pursuit of the three demands, as no other system can countenance the end of the sacrificial structuration of history. Democracy can, however, authorize unconditional demands for power and recognition. Not any demands for power and recognition, of course—just some: the absolute power of the people, for instance; or the total recognition of the proletariat as class, which is the political abolition of class; or the total recognition of gender, which is the political abolition of gender. Only in the horizon of democracy is it possible to think of the total subsumption of power, recognition, and the end of sacrifice. But this would be the end of the political, and thus necessarily also the end of democracy, and the end of the end of sacrifice.

The essays that follow openly thematize the political *within* the democratic horizon. They represent a contribution to a Left thinking of the political that, while refusing its total subsumption into economic history, still remains thoughtful as to its limitations and constraints. They resist the ontological horizon, even in the fallen sense of political culturalism that pervades so many of the contemporary academic discussions. Their differences, however, must for the moment remain unspecified: simply to be read.

Notes

- 1 The conference included papers by Warren Montag on Spinoza, Anne Garréta on Carl Schmitt, Fredric Jameson on Rousseau, Srinivas Aravamudan on Hobbes, Stathis Kouvélakis on Marx, Ken Surin on Balibar, Alberto Moreiras on Donoso Cortés, and Malcolm Bull on John C. Calhoun. A keynote address by Gopal Balakrishnan concentrated on Machiavelli. Grant Farred, *SAQ*'s general editor, invited me to prepare this special issue on the basis of the conference papers, to which a number of essays were to be added that no longer concentrated, as those papers did, on "classical" texts on the political. For various reasons some of the conference papers (Balakrishnan, Surin, Moreiras) have not been included in the present collection. But Stella Sandford was invited to write on the status of sex in Greek political thinking, Peter Hallward on transformational politics, Teresa Vilarós on the Cold War, and Bruno Bosteels on the "communist invariant."
- 2 Fredric Jameson, "Thinking Politically" conference introduction. See the complete text at www.duke.edu/literature/institute/thinkingpolitically.htm (accessed February 21, 2005).
- 3 María Zambrano, *Persona y democracia: La historia sacrificial* (1958; reprint, Barcelona: Anthropos, 1988), 42.
- 4 Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 13–14.