

# Insurgent Subjectivities and the Political Empowerment of the Streets. *Notes on the Brazilian Protests*

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Who would have thought that the Latin American spring would blossom in Brazil? In the past 10 years the country has created a “new middle class” by bringing 40 million people to unprecedented levels of income and consumption, and creating 19 million jobs in the midst of one of the worst global financial crises. Why then do millions of young people feel so politically unrepresented that they have taken to the streets in such numbers?

In a preliminary account of Brazilian political revolts, still in June 2013, commentators have proffered many partial answers, some of universal import, others specific to Brazil. The low level of confidence in representative institutions which are seen as corrupt and undemocratic is one; the government’s willingness to back various mega sporting events alongside its broken promises on the social state agenda (including health, education and public transport) is another; and, finally, the depolitization of a part of the Brazilian middle and upper-middle class youth. These are people who have reaped the benefits of capitalist growth without experiencing its side-effects of extreme inequality, poverty and despair. They have accepted the right-wing, anti-state ideology and have turned it into the anti-political ‘no party’ slogans constantly heard in the protests. The ejection in the protests of flags or shirts indicating ‘any’ political association was a direct attack on the left-wing parties and social movements who started the campaign. At that point, there was a hegemonic struggle for political power. The right had been trying to unite different parts of the population against Dilma’s administration, and used the protests to this end.

However, even at the beginning of the revolts, still in June 2013, it would be too reductionist to interpret the multitude in the streets as part of a right-wing or neoliberal conspiracy. The multiplicity of protests was not a prelude to a right-

wing coup, something from which Brazil has repeatedly suffered. The activists of the social movements, as well as the extremist anti-Dilma right-wing groups, were only a minority. The majority of protesters were people who have never before taken part in political activism or demonstrations. At that time, the protests acted as a catalyst for a dispersed, even ideologically contradictory, feeling of indignation.

The first wave of Brazilian protests in June 2013 gave the false impression it would be mainly described as a leaderless engagement, without a goal, lacking substance, dispersed and non-focused. Some intellectuals even argued that the protests should be perceived as weak collective, socially disintegrated Internet networks. These diagnoses proved to be wrong. It has been shown that the protests have an agenda, leadership, goals and strategies, gathered through a strong sense of acting together politically. Indeed, they seem to present a fresh dynamic, which cannot be simplistically grasped by conventional forms of political organisation, such as trade unions, political parties, or systematised movements. They appear to be part of a cycle of occupations all over the world since 2011. Diverse grievances, antagonistic hopes and conflicting narratives ground the protests, which are also part of the new age of resistance.

This necessitates an opening up of our political grammar to grapple with this new understanding of the political. It has challenged the classical dynamic between political action (constituent power) as a process of politicisation, and law (the constitution) as a result of state institutional building. These protests are part of a sort of global collective imaginary of resistance, which has been gradually bringing to the fore new ways of re-signifying political action, representation and their own political subjects.

The protests in Brazil express, in a specific and rich manner, the emerging cleavage between the standard conception of politics and the new politics of resistance. This gap had been bridged in the past by lethargic and technocratic formal politics or by identity politics. In my understanding, we are now facing the opening of a new composition for thinking and acting politically, in which protest, resistance and rebellion can no longer be considered the bitter and ineffectual foil of institutional designs and state politics, but rather as a taste or gesture towards what is essential but missing in formal politics: the determination of those who fight for justice.

I will briefly indicate two dimensions towards which I think the current

Brazilian protest gestured, intensifying a new political significance. The processes of framing subjectivation and engaging in political action are bound together. This process brings to the fore two new imaginaries of the political: shaping new insurgent subjectivities as well as expanding the ways of understanding and conceiving political action, its space, temporality and struggle.

### New political insurgent subjectivities bloom in Brazil

The first dimension of the new political significance takes place by shaping new political subjectivities that rely on the facticity of political experience itself. Neither the abstract subject of law nor the communitarian skeleton of fixed identities can fulfil the representational gap left by state politics. As truly political events, these protests demand comprehension of how people, by common political engagement, transform themselves. It leads us to inquire about the kind of political *anthropos* being shaped by Brazilian insurgencies. A vivid process of political subjectivisation, at several levels of political action, is clearly taking place on the streets. In the later events of October the demonstrations produced a variety of political protagonists. A meaningful illustration can exemplify what I call «new insurgent subjectivities». Acknowledged as the more extreme, violent and polemic insurgent subjectivity, it represents the Brazilian black bloc, violently fighting and exposing state violence. Covered completely in black and masked, the black bloc identifies itself as a *tactic* of action. Originally constituted from low-class youth, exposed to marginalisation, social death and political invisibility, it now includes a variety of groups and tendencies. Their flag stands for a general violent approach against capitalism and imperialism. The black bloc tactic is highly politicised and sensitive to social injustice. The central strategy is to fight violently against state violence. In the riots they stand at the front line, facing the extreme violence of military police. Most of the time the black bloc reacts violently against police violence, prioritising targets such as private banks or high street stores which are known as frequent violators of labour law protection. They set light to rubbish bins to prevent the policy of hitting and illegally arresting protesters. Recently, they actively supported and protected demonstrators and striking state and municipal elementary school teachers from a policy of violence.

*Factual political engagement* frames political subjectivisation. These insurgent subjectivities experienced in Rio de Janeiro's uprisings seem to be shaped, rather, *by the order of what occurs*, by experience that is neither structural, nor axiomatic nor legal. In these processes of subjectivisation the criteria for the formation of new political identities must not be claimed from the pure domain of cultural essences or concepts. Alternatively, they have shown themselves to be part of the process of subjectivisation produced from an ontology that operates in symmetry with concrete political action; a permanent political, ontological dimension that *realises itself in action*. Subjectivisation and political action happen together. In other words, what seems to put people in common with one another in the Brazilian uprisings is precisely acting together, as a form of political life, as an entity fulfilled by engaging in concrete political demands. The current process of political subjectivity, together with Brazil's protests, reveals both the novelty of political action and an expansion in political emancipation.

A fearless struggle: the political empowerment of the streets and the political time of the now

The struggle is clearly epistemological, in the sense there is a constant attempt to define its content. As Žižek pointed out, there are at least the combination of two dimensions, one economic (from corruption to inefficiency of capitalism itself) and another that is ideological-political (the crisis of conventional democracy). But there is also a profound ontological dimension to the struggle, re-signifying the temporality and web of meaning of political action. The struggles are changing and aggregating diverse significances of political action. Even if started with a specific demand for justice, and linked today to a rich political agenda (a political agenda of the wealthy?), the demonstrations have led to a profound redefinition of political action itself. Whilst taking into account the limitless forms and approaches of the struggles, expressed through several demonstrations, three new levels of political empowerment call for our attention. The protests have politically re-empowered the space of the streets, have assumed a new dimension to the struggles – fearlessly facing an extremely violent military policy – and have re-signified the time of political action.

A new powerful protagonist has appeared in the political arena. The capture

of the streets underlines the return of the collective capacity to act and to create new political meanings. The streets have proved to be re-signified as new public spaces. The demonstrations have once more politicised and democratised the streets. These have emerged as one of the few places where democracy can be re-invented. The streets can be described as a sign of resistance, beyond mass media control as well as economic and capitalistic global ascendancy.

The political dimensions of *time/space/struggle* taken together can easily be perceived through the political action of these insurgent subjectivities cast outside of the accepted categories, the excluded and outlawed, the many political and social invisible Brazilians who live in an indiscernible zone between facticity and normative representation. They have personified a paradoxical emancipation from classic representational politics, and have literally turned the streets into a political arena. The insurgent subjectivities embody the fearless symbolic constituent power standing before the violently constituted state. The Brazilian protests give new meaning to the internal tension between the extraordinary of political action and the stability of representative politics<sup>1</sup>. Such is the juridical-political ambivalence that is deeply threatened by the current riots, situated as it is between legitimated politics and politics of factual life (emancipation). In the latest protests throughout October, the crisis of the validity of representational politics and its internal operative of violence were vividly exposed. The violence of Rio de Janeiro's military police reached a level only seen in the state violence of Brazil's 1964 dictatorship.

With each level of exercising direct political narrative on the streets is carried the potential to provide a political voice for those who rightly exceed the law; for those who resist subsumption and normativisation. These narratives and actions comprehend the potentiality of revolutionary zeal for the new and embrace a political potentiality of empowerment. The Brazilian demonstrations seem to restore an urgent, un-representative, political time of the here and now. The constant vocation (*Kairos*) for the political event and its political actors, at any moment in time (the promise of politics in Arendt's terminology), gives to political action a continuous foundation and leads it beyond the traditional relationship between political subject and representative democracy.

1 A. Negri – M. Hardt, *Common Wealth*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2009; H. Arendt, *On Revolution*, Penguin Books, New York 1990.

Politically acting together embraces a new political utopia: faith; a faith of the transformative power of common political action. What paralyzes political action is precisely the very trust that is exclusively placed in the rational progress of law and politics. The only hope left in the modern model of political utopia and normative law is the one promoted by the accomplishment of reason's levels through its embodiment in State institutions. The political event, protests, riots, uprisings, can come at any moment; it results in a *permanent call to act here and now* «to perform a political existence» (Douzinas)<sup>2</sup>. Political action can no longer be reduced to the vocabulary of representative democracy. For the many long-term marginalised Brazilians crying for justice, political action cannot be limited to a motionless and perpetually rationalising politics trapped in a circle of patiently awaiting a reasonable, progressive institutional process of achieving rights through the usual means of “celebrated” representational politics. For many kinds of defeated individuals, the invisibles, the no-subjects, the urgency of injustice is a time out of joint; it is a time out of right's joint. As argued by Rancière, the political is possible only where the natural order of domination is interrupted by the visibility of one part of those without part<sup>3</sup>.

Openness towards the unpredictability of politically acting together empowers the creativity of political action. Historical time as an incessant emergence of the new implies permanent creation. By re-situating history in the bare experience of life<sup>4</sup>, the permanent possibility of history's gaps offers a new glimpse of hope, locating the power to believe at the heart of political action. «There is no such thing as “the right time” of political action. Each moment shows the ‘revolutionary energy’ of the new» (Benjamin)<sup>5</sup>. Hope, a powerful element of action, is one of the strongest categories of political emancipation. By arguing this I mean to take the subject out of the zone of inequality towards

2 C. Douzinas, *Philosophy and Resistance in the Crisis: Greece and the future of Europe*, Polity, Cambridge 2013.

3 J. Rancière, *La Mésentente*, Galilée, Paris 1995, p. 31. Cfr: R. Mate, *Tratado de la injusticia*, Anthropos, Barcelona 2011, p. 75.

4 Similarly, for Arendt, on the other hand, action as the experience of the extraordinary, the narrative of *lexis* as the advent of the new opens up the possibility of the novelty, which is for her the political category *per excellence*. H. Arendt, *Between past and Future*, Penguin Books, New York 1993, p. 61.

5 S. Mosès, *Angel of History – Rosenzweig, Benjamin, Scholem*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2009, p. 109.

the zone of equality. Benjamin, in his seminal work *On The Concept of History*, states: «there is not a moment that would not carry with it its revolutionary chance»<sup>6</sup>. For him, the central question is how to identify the manifestation of those moments in historical and political context. So, the major task that is left to us nowadays is to identify in our present time the concrete political acts that are able to interrupt the history of oppression in the here and now. This task demands a different history of the victims, one in which the political subjects empower themselves, in which they give themselves a political voice. I imagine the Brazilian protesters are empowering themselves in a time, in a space and in a struggle of resistance. And that is what matters.

6 A. Hirvonen, *The Politics of Revolt: On Benjamin and Critique of Law*, in «Law and Critique» n. 22 / 2011, pp. 101-118.