

Rethinking the divide: beyond the politics of demand versus the politics of the act debate

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as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Politics
In September 2010

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Abstract

The politics of the act is an important part of radical politics as it seeks to disrupt and challenge the status quo. I define the politics of the act as a mode of politics that involves a withdrawal from the state, mobilises around non-hierarchical organising structures and is animated by an imperative of enactment. This can be contrasted with a politics of demand, which is state-oriented, hierarchical in nature and looks to educate the movement for enactment. While Marxists have tended to privilege the politics of demand as the route to radical change, anarchists have favoured the politics of the act, thus creating a clear opposition between these two different ways of acting politically. In this thesis I will argue that this dichotomy between a politics of demand and a politics of the act is overemphasized, and using Deleuze I will show that a politics of the act is the ontological and creative basis through which the politics of demand comes into being, and the politics of demand is enacted by capturing certain flows of creativity into recognisable ‘moments’ that allows them to be made visible and understood at a societal level. Thus, these modes of politics, although they have meaningful differences, are not distinct from each other but rather flow into each other.

In IR, conceptualisations of social movements practising a politics of demand have overshadowed the politics of the act, although anarchists have recognised its importance. This thesis will build on this work by drawing on Deleuzian concepts to deepen our understanding of the politics of the act both conceptually and empirically and contributing to the development of a postanarchist politics. It will examine six case studies of activities that are valorised as exemplifying the politics of the act: withdrawal from the state by Food Not Bombs and Social Centres; horizontal organising structures of Critical Mass and Indy Media Centres; and an imperative of enactment through guerrilla gardening and the Clown Army. This thesis challenges those conceptualisations of politics that privilege either the politics of demand or the politics of the act, and demonstrates that both are needed in any conceptualisation of radical politics. It concludes by offering a way of conceptualising both modes of politics through a ‘politics of the molecular’.

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