FURNISHING POSITIONS 01

AFFINITY | DISAGREEMENT

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AFFINITY | ANTAGONISM

KANISHKA GOONEWARDENA

Space is political. Though this may seem self-evident, it is still useful to ask what we mean by politics today, especially in a world so recently diagnosed by some as "post-political." Let's also recall that this post-political sentiment spans virtually the entire spectrum of influential opinion at the turn of the millennium, from Right to Left. Iconic at one end is Francis Fukuyama's "end of history" thesis, the claim that the world-history of political antagonism finally came to a conclusion with the defeat of communism by capitalism, as liberal democracy proved to be the last and best of all human worlds.[1] A corresponding view is discernible at the other end as well, on the political Left, which found expression in those radical thinkers who revived some old Orwellian motifs (or those of Kafka, Weber, Huxley) to suggest that a certain regime of policing[2] or governmentality[3] has eclipsed what used to be called politics—which for Marx had meant not managing, but changing, the world.

1989 (Fukuyama) and 1984 (Orwell): these are the two death sentences for history and politics that have been appealed in the court of history by a new sequence of events dating from 2011: the so-called Arab Spring, the Occupy movement, and other un-programmed uprisings in both central and peripheral spaces of the world. Indeed, Alain Badiou's recent booklet on these "riots" bears a suggestive name: *The Rebirth of History*.[4] Striking in this series of mobilizations is the real, imaginary, and symbolic centrality of space to politics—especially the urban space of squares, streets, and neighbourhoods. But this particular fusion of space and politics has also raised some questions concerning the very nature of these rebellions and their possible, unfinished consequences. Were they primarily struggles about urban space, or something else that remains to be named? And how are the necessary lines of political demarcation—between us and them, friend and enemy, oppressed and oppressor—to be drawn through this emergent socio-spatial force field, in which the heart of history is again beating?

The stakes of these questions may be gauged by the haste with which Western mainstream media rushed to represent the Arab Spring as a movement for democracy, while crediting as its catalytic agent not so much the assembled masses of Tahrir Square or Gezi Park, but the new social media developed in the US. In short, the story goes, they (the Arabs) want to be like us (the West). So President Obama, after a few days of hesitation while Mubarak's fate hung in the balance, had no trouble in abruptly declaring his principled solidarity with the rioters in Cairo. An affinity was apparently forged between the West and the Rest that wishes to be the West, on the holy ground of democracy (Tahrir Square) and free speech (Facebook and Twitter): a classic consensus of the so-called international community, symptomatically silent on the actual causes and sentiments of the riots. That this dominant, if not hegemonic, Western representation of the Arab Spring leaves something to be desired for critical consciousness gives us a glimpse of the dangers lurking under the sign of democracy, itself a key weapon today (along with human rights) in the ideological arsenal of imperialism and colonization.

In Western thought, democracy has been umbilically linked to the city, in a grand narrative of progress that proceeds from Athens via John Locke and the American Founding Fathers to the fall of the Berlin Wall. Yet it is telling that the status of the French Revolution in this account was drastically downgraded following the events of May '68. From that point on, the Terror attached to 1789 became the ascribed sign of every modern attempt at radical equality—whether anarchist, communist, or anti-colonial. The very selectivity of the standard story of democracy proves that not everyone agrees on what it means; and history suggests that rational dialogue in the urban public sphere, as Jürgen Habermas once imagined it, is unlikely to settle the question: *whose* democracy? For the Italian philologist Luciano Canfora, democracy means the "ascendency of the *demos*": the rule of the dispossessed.[5] Democracy is not for him a "form of government," certainly not the one that Lenin famously saw as the ideal political shell for the economic kernel of capitalism; it refers on the contrary to the historical struggle for the actualization of equality. The rule of the 1% with which democracy is often confused has in fact another name: oligarchy, or, the dictatorship of the rich.

If the city has anything to do with democracy understood in terms of equality, it surely hangs on the question: *whose* city? The egalitarian city of the *demos*, or the actually existing city of capital and state? A common way of sidestepping this question is to speak of the city as such in the language of good and evil, so as to avoid dealing directly with the basic social antagonisms that have historically defined it. The bourgeoisie in particular have been most enthusiastic about the promise of the city, whose urban worldview is well expressed in the popular feudal-era slogan: "The city air liberates [*Die Stadtluft macht frei*]." As Guy Debord reminds us, however, the actual history of the city—and democracy—is more complex. For "if the history of the city is a history of freedom, it is also a history of tyranny" because "the city has served as the historical battleground for the struggle for freedom without yet having been able to win it."[6] From this dialectical perspective, the city, or more precisely the process of urbanization as Raymond Williams explicated in his forceful work,[7] appears not so much as the theatre of emancipation, but more as the locus of what Marx called "original accumulation." The city air liberates, to be sure, but usually the rulers of the world.[8]

The French Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre was well aware of such asymmetrical confrontations involving the affinities and antagonisms of the urban when he asked: "Is it conceivable that the exercise of hegemony might leave space untouched?"[9] He answered in the negative, arguing against the view of space as a mere container of social relations, and demonstrating in particular the centrality of the production of space for the survival of capital and state. In his socio-spatial dialectic, Lefebvre conceived of the totality of society as a mediated articulation of three levels of social reality: the "global," or the most general and abstracted level of the logics of capital and state; the most immediate or lived level of the "everyday"; and the vital in-between level of spatial production or the "urban," which mediates between the first two. It is only within this theory of totality—Lefebvre's most audacious and significant contribution to critical theory—that his better-known call for the "Right to the City" makes radical political sense, not simply as a call to occupy space, but as a demand for another possible world. Ripped apart from Lefebvre's holistic and radical standpoint, however, the Right to the City becomes a vacant slogan, one which has been duly appropriated by the proxies of the 1%: the World Bank, the UN and so on. As with democracy, here another question suggests itself: *whose* right to the city? In a world where actually existing rights above all mean property rights—the seamless integration of which with human rights is the key historical achievement of the West—Marx is again correct when he states: "between equal rights force decides."[10]

Which affinities and antagonisms can then be considered as decisive for a revolutionary transformation of both space and society? The shared theoretical and political ground between Jacques Rancière and Badiou seems to overlap with Canfora's re-definition of democracy against the backdrop of 2011. Here urban space, in spite of having been already colonized by the ideology of liberalism, figured a dual historico-political role, as both terrain and object of the struggle for—and the desire called—equality. The socio-spatial contestations of the Arab Spring and Occupy (among others), to the extent they can be called historical events, involve the coming into history of those who did not previously count and therefore did not exist in the prevailing state of affairs. Rather than a vote for bourgeois democracy, Badiou sees in them a possible dictatorship of the *inexistent*.[11]

NOTES

1. Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History," *The National Interest* (Summer 1989): 3-18; for a comprehensive review of the idea of "the end of history," see Perry Anderson, "The Ends of History," in *A Zone of Engagement* (London: Verso, 1992), 279-375.
2. Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999 [1995]).
3. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978-1979*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave, 2008 [2004]).
4. Alain Badiou, *The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprisings*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2011).
5. Luciano Canfora, *Democracy in Europe: A History of an Ideology*, trans. Simon Jones (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006 [2004]).
6. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Ken Knabb (2004 [1967]), http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/debord.
7. Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973).
8. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: NLB/Penguin, 1976 [1867]), 873-940.
9. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. David Nicholson-Smith (Oxford, Blackwell, 1991 [1974]), 10.
10. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 334.
11. See Badiou, *The Rebirth of History*. To avoid likely misunderstandings concerning the disputed term "dictatorship," I could do worse than to quote briefly from the Situationists' thoughts on the Paris Commune: "Engels's remark, 'Look at the Paris Commune—*that* was the dictatorship of the proletariat,' should be taken seriously in order to reveal what the dictatorship of the proletariat is not (the various forms of state dictatorship over the proletariat in the name of the proletariat)." Guy Debord, Attila Kotányi and Raoul Vaneigem, *Theses on the Paris Commune*, trans. Ken Knabb (2006 [1962]), http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/Pariscommune.htm.

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ISSUES:
01, AFFINITY | DISAGREEMENT, 15/09/2014
02, REPRESENTATION | PRESENTATION, 29/09/2014
03, MATERIALITY | IMMATERIALITY, 13/10/2014
04, PEOPLE | THINGS, 27/10/2014
05, PRIVACY | PUBLICITY, 10/11/2014
06, CITY | URBANIZATION, 24/11/2014

ABBAS AKHAVAN's practice ranges from site-specific ephemeral installations to drawing, video, and performance. The domestic sphere, as a forked space between hospitality and hostility, has been an ongoing area of research in Akhavan's work. More recent works have shifted focus, wandering onto spaces just outside the home: the balcony, the garden, the backyard, and other domesticated landscapes. Akhavan is the recipient of the Berliner Kunstpreis (2012) and the Abraaj Group Art Prize (2014).

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ARTIST PROJECT (reverse):
ABBAS AKHAVAN, *Correspondences*, 2008/2014