

Subjectivity Rosa

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Jack Bratich

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Over the past two years, various actors have ruminated over the perceived loss of the “movement” (specifically referring to the counter globalization movement, but also referring to a sense of momentum, coordinated actions, targeted purpose, and most importantly a sense of effectivity).

Like a drug, Seattle99 was a vehicle that became confused with its effects. The enthusiasm and infectious power of that moment became a lost object of desire, a model whose failure to reappear seemed to diminish possibilities (for more on this see my previous article “Becoming-Seattle” in *Fifth Estate* #374, Winter 2007).

This waning of capacity might have come to an end now that another election has cyclically intervened to rearrange elements of the “movement” (anarchist and otherwise). But as we undergo the recomposition of the collective activist body, we would be wise to pay attention to the subtle, if not hidden, dimensions of this body. Here I want to sketch out three qualities of this Subjectivity Rosa: First, how will dissent be handled by the new regime? The persistent shadow of dissent will inevitably re-emerge despite all of the official claims to a unified front, a national “We.” Second, what does Obama’s campaign demonstrate regarding the persistence and mutation of spectacular politics? Here we can meditate on the proliferation of his face via bottom-up, networked means. Finally, how might the loss of euphoria and easy political targets produce conditions for an emergent politics, one in which dysphoria can be a catalyst?

THE SHADOW OF THE BODY POLITIC: DISSENT IN TIMES OF MAJORITARIAN EUPHORIA

For some anarchists, the Obama election represented a channel for revolutionary spirit, if not action. Rather than dismiss all of these identifications as a sell-out, it might be important to note the appeal and open a small door for anarchists to use the historical enthusiasm towards nonmediated ends. Nevertheless, I’m partial to the term coined by my friend, Malay Kanuga: Obamarchy. This refers firstly to those self-identified anarchists who, with the regularity of salmon, return to party politics every four years. It also refers to the actual new regime, which just as likely might be closer to monarchy. What does Obamarchy portend for activist potentials?

One doesn’t have to be invested in electoral politics and its outcomes to pay attention to the conditions for radical activity that get produced under new regimes. Obamarchy heralds a situation that might make the Clinton era seem like the golden age of dissent. The day after the election, progressive bloggers lambasted Ralph Nader for his wait-and-see assessment of Obama as potential Uncle Tom. Sure, the outpouring of animosity and bile against Nader was a recovery from the felt liberal losses over the previous eight years. But rather than be magnanimous in victory, these resentful Leftists took the opportunity to attack what might be the last vestige of third party politics rooted in anything resembling serious reform. “Don’t get in the way of this Juggernaut!”: Nader’s sober assessment was treated as if almost unpatriotic—a value that will likely garner a progressive flavor in the years to come.

While mainstream pundits focus on Obamarchy's foreign affairs and economic challenges, it behooves us to be attuned to clues about the fate of domestic dissent. What will be Obamarchy's Waco? Will Obamarchy bring us back to 1995, with a heightened attention to domestic terrorism and political extremism, but now with enhanced post-9/11 fear mongering and integrated security apparatus? What content will fill the positions of dissent this go around?

The US already has measures in place, most noticeably in terrorism enhancement sentencing for eco-activist property crimes and for convention protests. In other words, where there is no terrorism, the State will have to invent it. As a number of analysts (including Greg Elmer and Andy Opel in their recent book, *Preempting Dissent: The Politics of an Inevitable Future*) have noted, decentralized, networked activism has prompted a pre-emptive logic of dissent-management.

Unfortunately, the language of dissent is already being forged in the kiln of right-wing ideologues. But why leave critiques of Obama (spectacular displays of affective authority, cult of personality, martial gravitas, statist mix of community organizing and branding) to the loyal opposition? This overlap certainly need not be one of those preventive mechanisms against anarchist critiques. In other words, it means not putting Obamarchy's "feet to the fire" regarding policies, but fighting to preserve minority spaces and positions in a wave of majoritarian affect. Majoritarian affect can be considered an aspect of the "Dark Side of the Multitude", which involves the engineering of sentiment via representational mechanisms and depends on an exclusion of troublesome elements.

Self-defense against majoritarian fervor protects spaces for positive experimentation. Let us not forget that it was during the Clinton years that the counter globalization movement was composed. This is not just because of its target (globalization), but because there was no easy face at which to discharge our politicized affects (rage, fear, envy), like with Reagan/ Bush. While the nightmare of Bush II might be over (though residual institutions are unlikely to go anywhere under a new administrator), the easy radical alliances are over as well. The past eight years, rather than consolidating, might have acted as the actual subversion of a movement. Not just because of 9/11, but due to having a predetermined target of ire and action (be it the Iraq invasion or the 2004 election). The work of constructing a common enemy fades when an easy face presents itself. Now that the "Left" is once again fractioned (with greater affective loyalty to this administration than to Clinton's), the work of anarchists and other activists can begin anew. Once again, it is time to perform the tasks of clarifying alliances amidst political "frenemies."

BOTTOM-UP SPECTACLES: GENETICALLY MODIFIED GRASSROOTS ORGANIZATIONS

With Obamarchy we witness the revival of the face in politics. It appeared that the oppositional semiotic power of political faces vanished in 2004, when all of the anti-Bush face-work (the t-shirts, the stickers, the protest signs) did not accomplish its goal. With Obamarchy, we see once again a reversal of fortunes. With the proliferation of Obama faces, symbolic power (synthesis) won over diabolic power (difference and negation).

The Messianic faciality of Obama (the posters, the logos, the t-shirts) complicates an analysis of cultural appropriation. Shepard Fairey, designer of the Obama Hope image, specifically drew upon the well-worn image of Che Guevara for his inspiration (which of course threw the rightists into apoplexy). Decade-long lamentations over the commodification of Che Guevara's face now face a new wrinkle: the non-ironic reappropriation of the pop culture icon by a grassroots artist-turned-marketer to promote a politician. It was as if all those Guevarist t-shirts and posters did not end their life in commoditized co-optation, but sprouted anew as the semiotic conditions for emergent Obamania.

More important than whether or not the movement was captured by imagery is the question of the nature of grassroots movements. What can be considered a grassroots movement when the desires and wills have already been compromised?

It is more than incorporation it is a reinjection of imagery into the genesis of action itself. Rather than call it grassroots or astroturf, we are better off asking whether it is possible to tell the difference anymore. It might be

more useful to think of these sorts of campaigns as genetically modified activism, or GMGOs (genetically modified grassroots organizations) which at least begs the question: “what isn’t modified at its root?”

We could also note that this event poses a wrinkle in the way the spectacle operates. Guy Debord’s notion of spectacle, of course, is more than a collection of images or representations. However, it is highly dependent on a presumed deactivated agent (the spectator who only lives through images). Politics that criticizes the social because of its spectacular nature ends by claiming that agents become spectators and therefore the response (a la culture jamming) is to “become producers.”

Yet as the recent mobilization of face imagery demonstrates, images spark action not just passivity. Contemporary media power and capitalist culture has little use for passive spectators: it demands a kind of interactivity (cell phones, social media, blogging, commentary and judgment). We have moved from Boob Tube to YouTube. This does not end the spectacle, but transforms it—we can rethink activism around notions like interpassivity or inter-reactivity.

Shifting senses does not get us out of the problem either. Take the recent ear fetish by Western activists, regarding the Zapatista-inspired Other campaign. While “beginning by listening” is an admirable quality (it’s a key technique in couples therapy), it is by no means a radical gesture. Frank Luntz, right wing pollster and corporate consultant, talks the same language when he develops his public relations strategies via focus groups. Listen to what people say, find their hot button issues/words, and then deliver a program that captures those values. It’s a technique that can be traced at least back to Edward Bernays’ innovations in PR by introducing feedback into message design. Feedback and interaction, at least since the 1950s, has been incorporated into cybernetic systems of communication and control, and thus should not be reified as radical tactics, as has been well analyzed recently in Mark Andrejevic’s book *iSpy*. Fortunately, we have at least one important guide to rethinking the spectacle, and it’s by the author of that famous treatise. Guy Debord wrote a cryptic followup to *Society of the Spectacle* (cryptic in its content as well as being a book hidden in the shadow of his more visible *SoS*). Titled *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* in the English translation, the original French was called *Treatise on Secrets*. The work addresses a number of issues more germane today than they were 20 years ago when he wrote it: State production of terrorism as unspecified enemy, generalized secrecy, organized insecurity, preventive civil war, neutralization of dissent and covert operations that turn “secret agents into revolutionaries and revolutionaries into secret agents.” Strategic manuals like this one become more or less useful depending on their contexts, and it would be worth revisiting it in light of the contemporary spectacular transformations of secrecy (as well as hidden transformations of the spectacle). Unless we assess the specific recompositions of the spectacle, we risk sounding like Americans bellowing about Victorian-style sexual repression on the street while surrounded by billboards of obscenity.

HIDDEN CONDITIONS OF EMERGENCE: DYSPHORIA AND ACTION

In my previous *FE* article I analyzed the melancholic attachment to Seattle. It was described as a kind of sad passion whose debilitating effects could be overcome with a reorientation of affect, strategy and memory (to the countercultural preconditions of Seattle). Joyful, affirmative encounters seemed a necessary remedy. As it turns out, it was, but not necessarily for anarchists! While in Europe there still seemed to be a vestige of joy around demonstrations, the US seemed less optimistic (or more realistic) about street protests’ significance and effectiveness. This was best encapsulated in Bush’s dismissal of millions of anti-war demonstrators as a “focus group.”

More significantly, affective states were produced and enhanced via Obamania: accelerated fluctuations from hope to fear (during the last few weeks of the campaign) culminating in a mix of euphoria and tearful release. “Yes We Can” became a pre-emptive affirmation, a way to mobilize and then anchor that mobilization with a win. Indeed, the slogan refers not primarily to race relations (though some now rewrite it that way), but to 2004, when so much effort went into ousting the Bush regime, resulting in “No, We Couldn’t.” In short, the Obama campaign not only was able to incorporate community organizing, it understood affective mobilization better than radicals (in this case, a democratized messianism: “We are the ones We’ve been Waiting For”).

If the post-’04 activist mood was marked by depressive incapacity, this one might just be euphoric incapacity. On the one hand, the elation of being able to elect one party over another (voting as a simulation of action). On the

other, a disabling anxiety, if not dysphoria, over economic volatility. What happens when these sentiments occur simultaneously? This split affect results in a transference to authority, representation, leadership, and mediation. One doesn't necessarily act, but hopes and believes that someone will.

If two years ago I wrote about a situation defined by dysphoric incapacity vs. euphoric capacity, perhaps now we have the reverse situation. What would dysphoric capacity look like? An anecdote might help. On election night I watched the results at Bluestockings, a radical bookstore in Manhattan. About a half hour after the networks called the election, one of the volunteers at the store, an African American woman in her mid-60s, walked in to find about 20 other volunteers and friends in a chatty but subdued state. Compared to the honking and yelling on the streets (I personally endured a deluge of coerced hipster high-fives on my short walk home), the place was relatively quiet. The woman backed out of the store, saying that we all seemed depressed and that this was a momentous occasion for her.

What she diagnosed as depression I would call a reflective or pensive state. Indeed, without knowing all of the reasons for the diminished affect in the store, I surmise part of it was recognizing the change in what it means to be an activist and anarchist in the coming years. The transition is not just a time for leaders to select their elite circles, but a time for recomposing activist strategies. How do we think about conditions in an interregnum, an in-between state? How do we make visible these normally occulted conditions of the emergent? Questions that come from rumination rather than depression.

And this is precisely one of the aspects of dysphoria: excessive rumination or brooding. But rather than chalk up the state to a "mood disorder" that leads to paralysis and self-destruction, some analysts note its role in creativity (e.g. in the obituaries of author David Foster Wallace). The collection *Live Through This: On Creativity & Self-Destruction* bravely explores these winding paths when it comes to gender and politics. A hypersensitivity to surroundings, a propensity for reflection, and having a means of expression: dysphoria can create the conditions for innovation. What is key here regarding political innovation is the ability to find an outlet, a vehicle for action and expression rather than endless analysis and self-contained discussion. Neither the spiral of rumination into black holes nor the reified elation of action into self-delusion (a la street thrills). Dysphoric capacity involves a delicate combination of reflection and action.

And here is where anarchists find themselves. An emergent body, whose tradition of action prevents paralyzing dysphoria. Instead, it balances its greatest strengths: analysis and action. The role of anarchists in many ways is a familiar one: to dispel delusions. It recomposes not by banishing shadows but with an embrace of the sub-rosa, a reinvigoration of the hidden dimension of its collective body. A non-State body with its networked composition, ancient refusals, and attentiveness to difference as well as its alliances. It returns to the cycle of countercultural work, everyday life, and political analysis: the traditional powers of anarchism to establish and spread the conditions of everyday autonomy. This work also faces a context where economic collapse looms. The body is developing the means of living in ashes as well as being ready to address hierarchies emerging from the ashes of the nation-state. The material conditions of the 1930s (but without a strong popular movement) meets the political conditions of the 1990s (the soft control of dissent, the techniques of minority management). This historical moment, especially with its proliferation of experiments among the ruins, demands an extra attentiveness towards preserving minoritarian affects and dissensus. Anarchists once again become the unconscious of the Left, haunting its unity while making its own positive structures—just off to the side, in the shadows of collapse.

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