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The Politics of Post-Territorial 'Community'

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Abstract

This paper argues that the lack of purchase of traditional territorial constructions of political community does not necessarily indicate the emergence of new post-territorial forms of political belonging. Rather, the claims made for new 'immanent' or 'emerging' forms of post-territorial political community reflect the highly individuated forms of political activity which have accompanied the break-down of domestic social and political links. This breakdown of territorial forms of belonging has facilitated the development of a variety of unmediated forms of expression of political claims, tending to privilege the individual over any communal collectivity. This discussion paper concludes by suggesting what the possibilities of a reconstitution of political community might imply.

Introduction

Today there is a widespread recognition of the limitations of being political in the way that the political was framed by the territorial political community of the state. Territorially bound, the mediation between the individual and the political community has been historically shaped by the trinity of the politics of self-interest, of political representation, and of state power. Instead, alternative framings of 'being' political or of engaging in politics have argued for a more radical post-territorial space of political possibilities, of what it means to be political, and of how we might envision political community. This paper seeks to analyse the possibilities and limitations inherent in the search for political community beyond the boundaries of the nation-state; the aspiration to engage in, construct, or recognise the existence of a post-territorial political community, usually understood as the politics of the 'human' or that of 'global civil society'.

The radical rejection of territorial political communities

The immanence of a post-territorial political community is often posed as a radical or critical alternative to the dominant ways of being political today (for example, Massey, 1994; Ó Tuathail, 1996; Soja, 1989; Appadurai, 1996; Kuehls, 1996; Shapiro and Alker, 1996). Territorial state-based politics is held to institutionalise the structuring of grand narratives of 'the nation' and to universalise particularist and narrow interests on the basis of the division of those 'inside' and those 'outside' the territorial boundaries (for example, Walker, 1993; Ashley, 1988; Campbell, 1998; Connolly, 1991; Falk, 1995; Linklater, 1998). Instead of politics being mediated through the divisive institutions of territorial communities, it is argued that the individual can engage directly in the 'politics of the human', in 'global civil society', or in the struggle against 'power' or 'Empire' (for example, Hardt and Negri, 2001; Kaldor, 2003; Keane, 2003; Walker, 1994; Baker, 2002; Deudney, 1993; Shaw, 2000).

It would seem that politics freed from territorial constraints has, of necessity, to take the form of an unmediated relationship between the individual and humanity or 'global society'. This unmediated relationship between the individual and the global then legitimises the individual's claim in an unmediated way, under the sign of ethics/morality/identity, and also makes the reception of the claim, or the impact or consequences of the claim, an unmediated one: as a claim on global society not a specific political collectivity or state. It is the lack of mediation between the individual and global society that makes the alternative global politics of ethics immediately the politics of the undifferentiated 'human', and thereby signifies a community of humanity rather than that of differentiated political subjects, a global community, by definition one that does not operate on the basis of hierarchy, power, domination, or exclusion/inclusion.

Three key traits of post-territorial politics

No instrumentality

The politics of the human would eschew the traditional ontological focus on state power or the desire to subordinate political demands to collectivities beyond the individual. As an individual act, even if made in conjunction with others, the instrumentality would be a limited one. In a sense the effectiveness of the campaign/demand/claim would be secondary to the immediate desire to 'raise awareness' or to make a 'voice' heard,

whether in advocacy on behalf of an Other or the identity/values/beliefs of the claim-making subject themselves. Operating in an unmediated global space, the relationship between the individual making a claim and the outcome would, of necessity, have to be highly contingent. An awareness of this contingency makes any action or declaration immediately important as part of the broader struggle for universal ethics/justice/awareness. The morality of an action is what is most important, providing its own justification, rather than its specified instrumental or intentional ends.

We can see this in academia in the field of International Relations – ask students which theory they prefer out of Realism and Constructivism or Critical theory and very few will go for Realism even though they (paradoxically?) believe that states pursue the self-interests of power. That is because students will tend to see their beliefs in a non-instrumental way; it is what their theories say about them that counts, not how they would use them to engage with the outside world. This privileging of the self above engagement with the outside world means that political/ethical positions are more about moral badges than any practical engagement with society.

Politics is increasingly becoming based on personal identities rather than instrumental engagement. Let me take one example, the *Guardian* newspaper's 1 April 2006 spoof that Coldplay's Chris Martin has come out in support for new Conservative leader David Cameron. This was taken seriously by Labour's media office because it rang so true – Martin's alleged switch was not based on practical policies but life style and identity. 'David really cares about the things I care about' says Martin. The reasons Martin allegedly switched from Blair to Cameron were entirely personal – Cameron travels by bicycle, dresses in casual clothes with Converse trainers, has a wind generator on his roof, his wife Samantha even allegedly asked Martin's wife where she could source some Fairtrade essential oils (at their yoga class) – 'Dave's given me the absolute assurance that he's committed to saving the planet' Martin is alleged to have said (Priol, 2006).

Actions not words

Because the actions/claims of the individual have immediate value without social mediation there is no need for intellectual or academic learning or for theorising. Theorising belongs to the old politics of collective projects, new politics operating in the global sphere relies more on spontaneity and on the emotions/feelings. This is not surprising as validation is not sought in intellectual agreement or the support of numbers but in recognition of the ethical or moral validity of the claim. Activity is therefore valued for its own sake, reinforcing the points outlined above regarding instrumentality.

Elaboration of difference

The lack of mediation with society means that being directly political in the global sphere of humanity implies a politics that does not rely on lived communities of fate, shaped by the community of place, either at home or work. It is a deculturised, de-territorialised, de-socialised, way of 'being' political. Therefore the political claims constantly need to be elaborated on the basis of identity/values/ethics not necessarily assumed by those with whom we live or work. This process of elaboration is not necessarily one of theoretical clarification (as noted above) but based on clear (publicly observable) marks of distinction or difference. This marking out or elaboration often takes the form of pins/badges or more recently of coloured plastic bracelets as clear outward signs of the individual's ethical/political commitment.

This elaboration of difference engaged in new political ways of being is not the same as social engagement. New forms of political activity are focused on individual elaborations of values/identity/ethics. This is well illustrated by the advocates of global critical politics in academia. Critical theorists focus on the need to clarify our starting assumptions, this is more important than the engagement with the subject matter. They argue that, in the past, academic involvement in international politics was generally restricted to 'problem-solving' rather than critical thinking. However, the focus of much critical theorising has been on clarifying the individual theorist's radical credentials rather than theorising from engagement in the subject matter, whereas it was engagement with the subject matter that marked out the, now much derided, problem-solving approaches.

The politics of post-territoriality

Let us consider how key political actors (whether ostensibly state-based or non-state) – radical anti-globalisation activists, liberal lobbyists, radical Muslim activists in the form of Al Qaeda, and government and inter-governmental institutions – all share a number of similar approaches to (post)territorialized politics. In setting out this brief analysis, the three key traits of post-territorial politics (mentioned above) will be highlighted: those of non-instrumentality, i.e. the means are self-justifying and no longer attached to instrumental ends; the privileging of activity/ emotion over theory/ intellect, i.e. there is little emphasis on argument/ ideas; and the privileging of difference over communality, i.e. highlighting diverse identities rather than shared interests. It will be suggested that these three

traits, essential to post-territorial political activism, privilege the individual over any social collectivity and operate to undermine the possibility of the emergence of post-territorial political community.

Radical activism

For radical activists – exemplified in the anti-Globalisation/Capitalism/War social protests – it would appear that there has been a profound shift away from the politics of parties and collective movements to a much more atomised and individuated form of protest. This was highlighted in the February 2003 anti-Iraq war protest demonstrations which attracted more people than any previous political protests but which markedly did not produce an anti-war 'movement'. There was no attempt to win people engaged to a shared position; people expressed disparate and highly personal protests of disengagement, such as the key slogan of 'Not in My Name'.

Being 'anti-war' is today an expression of personal ethics rather than of political engagement and does not indicate that the individual concerned is engaged in a campaign of social change or is interested in either understanding or debating the causes of war (capitalism/ human nature etc). These forms of practical and intellectual engagement with a political community are only relevant if the desire to end war is understood as a practical or instrumental one.

Similarly, the anti-Globalisation protests and collective comings together in World and European Social Forums are not aimed at producing a collective movement but at sharing the feelings and respecting the identities of various groupings involved (Klein, 2002; Kingsnorth, 2004). The fact that large numbers of people are engaged in these forms of radical protest is in marked contrast to their political impact. The fact that they appeal to the disengaged is their attractive factor, the inability to challenge this disengagement leads to the lack of political consequences.

One of the most individuated expressions of symbolic politics which puts personal ethics above those of a collective engagement is the desire of radical activists to make individual journeys of self-discovery to the conflict areas of the West Bank, Chiapas, Bosnia or Iraq, as humanitarian or aid workers or as 'human shields', where they are willing to expose themselves to death or injury as a personal protest against the perceived injustices of the world.

Here the ethics lie in the action or personal sacrifice, rather than in any instrumental consequences. This is the politics of symbolism of personal statement, a politics of individual ethics which, through the ability to travel, becomes immediately global in form as well as in content. There is

no desire to engage with people from their own country of origin, in fact, this activism is often accompanied by a dismissal of the formal political process, and by implication the views of those trapped in the state-based politics of the 'self-satisfied West' (O'Keefe, 2002; Chandler, 2003).

Liberal lobbying

For the liberal lobbyists, defined here as those involved in NGO campaigns and lobbying, such as Make Poverty History, Oxfam, Greenpeace, Fairtrade etc – again it is clear that there is a distinction to be made with the collective political movements of the past. Government lobbying is no longer a private affair but necessarily has an exaggerated public form, today, in the vacuum of traditional political forms of protest and engagement, the campaigning and protests of small lobby groups makes headline news and can set the public agenda.

For the activist/ lobbying campaign groups, the appeal is two-ways. Firstly to the public, who are expected to play a largely passive role as consumers, of Fairtrade products, Live 8 wristbands etc, or as donors, through annual membership (with no say in the policy-making process) or as donor/consumers. This appeals to a disengaged public who want to make a passive statement of their identity/values/beliefs and confirms the ethical value of such passive approaches to the political.

The second appeal is to governments and policy-makers, often an appeal for inclusion in policy-making on the basis of expertise in policy or the moral value of the causes which are advocated for. Even here, for global ethics in probably their most instrumental form, there is an essential avoidance of public engagement. Where the public are involved it is as a stage army, with no influence on decision-making or direction (or disbandment) of various campaigns and initiatives. This form of advocacy politics speaks for no fixed constituency, but rather seeks to articulate an ethical position or moral claim. Furthermore, it seeks to short-cut or bypass the political process of engaging with the public to seek representational legitimacy. The only actual engagement is with elites, which places moral advocates in a relationship of dependency, their status stems from their elite recognition (viz. Geldof and Bono's relationships with Tony Blair and President Bush) rather than their representational basis within society. The desire to short-cut the process of public engagement is indicative of the liberal advocate's perceived isolation from broader society and the diminished importance of the old political framework of collective engagement.

These liberal lobbyists do not rely on representational legitimacy nor the strength and grounding of the argument (viz. Greenpeace and Brent

Spar) instead they appeal to emotional and moral sensibilities – appealing, on the one hand to an atomised audience who can passively consume or sponsor an ethical identity and, on the other, to governments and international institutions also keen to develop an ethical sense of their own identities through relating to the politics of symbolism on offer.

Al Qaeda

The desire to take part in martyrdom operations in the cause of the global jihad is representative of the unmediated political action which immediately makes the personal act a global political one. The jihad is a break from the politics of Islamic fundamentalism, in the same way as radical global activism breaks from the traditional politics of the Left and is founded on its historical defeat. The jihad is not concerned with political parties, revolutions or the founding of ideological states (Roy, 2004). Al Qaeda's politics are those of the imaginary global space of the ummah, making the personal act global in its effects. It is the marginalisation and limited means of Al Qaeda that makes its struggle an immediately global one, similar to the marginal and limited struggle of, for example, the Mumbai slum dwellers or the Zapatistas. This marginalisation means that their actions lack any instrumentality – i.e. the consequences or responses to their actions are entirely out of their control (Devji, 2005).

Where intentionality and instrumentality were central to collective political projects aimed at political ends, martyrdom operations in the West are purely ethical acts – this is gesture politics or the politics of symbolism at its most pure. Al Qaeda has no coherent political programme, shared religious faith, or formal organisational framework. The act of martyrdom is the only action for which Al Qaeda claims full responsibility, the autonomy of the self in self-destruction makes the most fully individual act also the most immediately global, in its indiscriminate claim on the viewing public of the global sphere. Martyrdom also reflects other new political trends of the politics of global ethics mentioned above. Those involved need no engagement with political or religious learning, nor any engagement with an external audience, nor relationship with any external reality. The act of martyrdom is in-itself evidence of the highest ethical commitment, the act serves as its own proof and justification, its own final end.

Western governments and international institutions

I would like to suggest that it is a myth that the new politics of individual/global ethics is confined to the margins. This false understanding is

of necessity voiced by those that are the most vocal advocates for rejecting the old collective forms of engagement based on the politics of interests. In order to make the call for rejection a radical one it is necessary to exaggerate the strength of the object to be resisted. But just where does the politics of interests reside today? The strongest answer to this is America. For some radical critics, the United States is the last nation-state, a global unilateralist, the last bearer of interest-based politics. (Of course, it should be noted that these critics wish to state that Europe is post-modern and post-national entity and that its virtues can be best understood vis-à-vis the Other of the United States.) Nevertheless, even those who would argue that the politics of interests are alive and regrettably well in Europe and other parts of the world, would still argue that America provides the prime example of interest-based politics in the world.

I suggest that this vastly exaggerates the strength and confidence of the US and that the US finds it difficult to articulate or to legitimate the projection of its power in terms of self-interest or the national interest. Even where the 'nation' is called upon to legitimise policy it is not to project US interests or to universalise them. National interests in security terms are soon coalesced into the human security discourse where the Other is both indefinable threat and measureless need, as exemplified in the Other as threat and need in the framework of responses to the 'failed state'. Wars are not for oil/profit/territory but for the 'liberation' of the Other, whether in Yugoslavia, Afghanistan or Iraq. The inability of America to project a national interest is clear in the inability of the government to bear the costs (in terms of tax or body-bags) of its interventions abroad. To understand the widespread flying of the American flag on the doorsteps of people's homes as a sign of confidence in a national project would be to make a trans-Atlantic cultural error, it would probably be more insightful to see US flag use as akin to tea-light burning in Europe – as symbolic of a virtual community of individuals rather than a genuine political collectivity.

There is no better example of the unmediated politics of symbolism and global ethics than the US government's attempt to establish a Manichean divide of the 'war on terror', this formulation is not one of national interests, in fact it is a de-territorialised conception of struggle that is more ethical than political. There is little instrumentality or interests involved in a war which is metaphysical rather than geo-political. There is no clear demarcation between an 'us' and a 'them' and the enemy is no longer geographically or politically defined – this is less of a war and more a search for meaning and identity in which every government action is immediately global and ethical. Meaning is sought in action – in the war against Iraq, for example –

in a way that is little different from the actions of the ostensible enemy, Al Qaeda. The war on terror is not a projection of US national interests (as realist International Relations theory would conceive it) but more a search for US identity through the morality of acting in the global sphere.

It is quite possible to read the end of interest-based politics in the policy focus of other Western governments and international institutions, from the World Bank to the United Nations. The Cold War discourses of regulation, such as those of security, development and democracy have all been fundamentally undermined and the content hollowed out to replace particularist interests with universal ethics. Security no longer refers to interest-based national security but to ethics-based human security, where the Other is privileged above the Self. Development is no longer concerned with the ambitious modernist project of industrialisation and modernisation but with sustainability, poverty-reduction, and social inclusion; with grand narratives replaced by the respect for difference, 'country-ownership', and the consequential institutionalisation of inequality. Democracy promotion, for example, no longer concerns processes of equal say but the ethical ends of rights protection. With the collapse of the legitimating ends of external regulatory institutions, the articulation of clear interests is problematic and has been replaced by global ethics and the symbolic rejection of interests – hence the ubiquitous language of 'empowerment', 'ownership' and 'capacity-building' in every official policy document.

Leading the way in the international rejection of interests is the United Nations, which appears more as an ethics-based NGO than a political institution of nation-states. The UN's policy programme is an ethical one, not a political project, with a wish list of Millennium Development Goals of women's equality, abolishing poverty, education and health provision for all, democracy and peace, which has no concrete programme attached to it. This global symbolism hides a retreat from engagement with the world. This retreat is well reflected in the doctrinal acceptance of the human security thesis which upholds the circular thesis that all problems, threats and needs need to be addressed simultaneously, including those of security, democracy, human rights and development – this is a recipe for the evasion of responsibility not a political programme. Just to highlight the other-worldly nature of this thesis, it should be noted that by definition, interests no longer exist in the human security framework, we are allegedly all equally vulnerable to global threats and all equally responsible to act to address them – this is the virtual community of global society made real in virtual policy-making on a global scale.

Symbolism and identity

This disjunction between the human/ ethical/ global causes of post-territorial political activism and the capacity to 'make a difference' is what makes these individuated claims immediately abstract and metaphysical – there is no specific demand or programme or attempt to build a collective project. This is the politics of symbolism. The rise of symbolic activism is highlighted in the increasingly popular framework of 'raising awareness' – here there is no longer even a formal connection between ethical activity and intended outcomes (Pupavac, 2006). Raising awareness about issues has replaced even the pretence of taking responsibility for engaging with the world – the act is ethical in-itself. Probably the most high profile example of awareness raising is the shift from Live Aid, which at least attempted to measure its consequences in fund-raising terms, to Live 8 whose goal was solely that of raising an 'awareness of poverty'. The struggle for 'awareness' makes it clear that the focus of symbolic politics is the individual and their desire to elaborate upon their identity – to make us aware of their 'awareness', rather than to engage us in an instrumental project of changing or engaging with the outside world.

To what extent can we speak of post-territorial political community?

What are the consequences of this shift to new unmediated forms of 'being' political, away from instrumentality and intellectual engagement and towards an individuated activist ethics? Is it possible to construct a post-territorial political community?

Community and self-interest

Without individual interests, it is not possible to engage with other people or take part in, or assist in the constitution of, the life of a political community. The pursuit of interests, by definition involves the attempt to change the present and thereby necessitates an active engagement with others and the creation of a collective project. It is only the attempt to convince others that their interests can similarly be pursued that makes it necessary to engage with the Other to listen to what the Other says, to reformulate arguments to convince the Other of a shared Truth, a shared way of seeing and engaging with the world.

In a world without interests, there can be no human, genuine engagement with the Other or with broader society. If politics was merely about

identity, all that would be required is the expression of this identity. Activity, performative statements, or the elaboration of self-identity would be all that was required – this does not require or constitute a political community – all that would be needed was a stage on which to perform – any engagement with the public would be a passive one. Paradoxically, the politics of identity assumes that the most that could be asked of the Other is the recognition of our identity. The claim for recognition or respect involves no engagement with the Other. In fact, it is grounded on the impossibility of genuine engagement and a radical separation of the Self.

Community and instrumentality

The politics of interests implies a grounding of the political in the desire to achieve change rather than merely to express values and identity. It was this desire to change the present that made the question of state power a vital one, as the levers of state control could be used to change policy. For this reason, the location of sovereignty was important – but this importance is lost as soon as the politics of instrumentality are replaced by the non-instrumentalism of individuated ethics.

It is only those who do not have a political project of change who would dismiss the location of power as irrelevant. State power is only irrelevant if the politics of identity are privileged over the politics of interests. If politics was merely about identity then the state as instrument becomes not only irrelevant but an embarrassing legacy of the past. Today when national governments are more inclined to the politics of identity than those of interests, their control of the instruments of power is an embarrassment, raising the question of how they intend to use these instruments and for what ends. Questions of intentionality and instrumentality are legacies of the old framings of politics which governments are uneasy with and seek to avoid by denying their capacity to act in the old way (Chandler, 2006). This is done by arguing that power (and responsibility) has been, or should be, devolved upwards to the European Union and downwards to regional assemblies or local councils and elected majors and neighbourhood committees.

Community and social mediation

It would appear that in freeing politics from the constraints of territorial political community there is a danger that political activity is freed from any constraints of social mediation (see further, Chandler, 2004a). Without being forced to test and hone our arguments, or even to clearly articulate them, we can rest on the radical 'incommunicability' of our personal identities and claims – you are 'either with us or against us'; engaging with those who disagree is no longer possible or even desirable.

It is this lack of desire to engage which most distinguishes the unmediated activism of post-territorial political actors from the old politics of territorial communities, founded on struggles of collective interests (Chandler, 2004b). The clearest example is old representational politics – this forced engagement in order to win the votes of people necessary for political parties to assume political power. Individuals with a belief in a collective programme knocked on strangers' doors and were willing to engage with them, not on the basis of personal feelings but on what they understood were their potential shared interests. Few people would engage in this type of campaigning today; engaging with people who do not share our views, in an attempt to change their minds, is increasingly anathema and most people would rather share their individual vulnerabilities or express their identities in protest than attempt to argue with a peer.

Conclusion

Is there any way to repose the question of the constitution of political community? Or are the paradoxical binaries – of instrumentality and indeterminacy, interests and ethics, the territorial and the global – set to haunt every discussion about how we might be or become political or constitute political communities?

This paper is not intended to be a nostalgic paean to the old world of collective subjects and national interests or a call for a revival of territorial state-based politics or even to reject global aspirations: quite the reverse. Today, politics has been 'freed' from the constraints of territorial political community – governments without coherent policy programmes do not face the constraints of failure or the constraints of the electorate in any meaningful way; activists, without any collective opposition to relate to, are free to choose their causes and ethical identities; protest, from Al Qaeda, to anti-war demonstrations, to the riots in France, is inchoate and atomised. When attempts are made to formally organise opposition, the ephemeral and incoherent character of protest is immediately apparent.

The decline of territorial political community does not appear to have led to new forms of political community (in territorial or post-territorial forms), but rather to the individuation of 'being' political. Therefore 'being political' today takes the form of individuated ethical activity in the same way as 'being religious' takes a highly personal form with the rejection of organised churches. Being religious and being political are both statements of individual differentiation rather than reflections of social practices and ways of life. One can not 'be' political (anymore than one can 'be' religious)

except by elaborating a personal creed or identity – being political or religious today is more likely to distance one from one's community, or at least to reflect that perception of distance. The elaboration of our individual 'being', of our identity, signifies the breakdown of community and the organic ties of the traditional social/political sphere.

It is this atomisation of society and the breakdown of community and the artificial nature of our individual elaborations of self which makes the personal immediately political and therefore immediately global. It would therefore seem that to 'do' politics, rather than make claims to 'be' political, would necessitate the revival of constraints on the freedom of the political.

There can be no return to traditional forms of political community but equally the only present alternative of 'virtual community' is unsatisfying for those who wish to engage with society. The mediations between the individual and the global which would be necessary for such forms of engagement need to be consciously created by our own experimentation and encouragement of others to do likewise. The development of artificial constraints would involve new ways of thinking through the possibilities of subordinating the individual to the social, of strengthening our social bonds through shared engagement.

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