

The possibilities of post-territorial political community

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Introduction

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 individual 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.

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, Appadurai 1996; Kuehls 1996; O'Tuathail 1996; Shapiro and Alker 1996). Territorial state-based politics is held to institutionalize the structuring of grand narratives of 'the nation' and to universalize particularist and narrow interests on the basis of the division of those 'inside' and those 'outside' the territorial boundaries (for example, Ashley 1988; Connolly 1991; Walker 1993; Falk 1995; Campbell 1998; 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, Deudney 1993; Walker 1994; Baker 2002; Hardt and Negri 2001; Kaldor 2003; Keane 2003; Shaw 2000).

Let us consider two different, and in diverse ways, key radical or alternative political sets of actors – radical anti-globalization activists and radical Muslim activism in the form of Al Qaeda. In setting out this brief analysis, three key traits of post-territorial politics 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-Globalization/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 atomized 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-Globalization 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).

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 marginalization 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 marginalization 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 organizational 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.

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

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.

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.

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 atomized. When attempts are made to formally organize 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 organized 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 atomization 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.

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?

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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