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REPLY

Post-political ontologies and the problems of anti-anthropocentrism: reply to Tsouvalis

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This is a reply to:


Judith Tsouvalis (2016) mounts a lively and interesting critique of the post-foundational Left’s theorisations through the marshalling of Latourian insights into the possibilities for a more grounded, pragmatic and concrete approach to political action. Tsouvalis takes Latour’s appropriation of John Dewey’s philosophical pragmatism (classically stated in the 1927 [1954] work, The Public and Its Problems) to argue that problems enable Dingpolitik – object or problem-orientated politics – through assembling concrete plural publics around matters of shared concern and contestation. She counterpositions this pragmatic politics of concern, through which new communities of understanding are formed, to the abstract and ‘anthropomorphic’ critiques of the ‘post-political condition’, which offer little in the way of a constructive engagement in the collective making of a better world.

Tsouvalis has little sympathy for the post-foundational Left who are accused of passively ‘waiting for Godot’ – the spontaneous emergence of the excluded and invisible ‘phantom masses’, constitutive of ‘proper politics’ – when all around us there are opportunities to engage in positive and concrete forms of collective ‘world-making’. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the critique of the post-foundational Left is very non-political: their lack of constructive ‘ethical’ engagement is the key problem highlighted. This lack of analytical content reduces the power of the article’s concerns with the similarities and distinctions between post-political critique and the ‘deeply ethical’ engagement promised by Dingpolitik.

Her piece argues that there are two superficial similarities between the two frameworks – firstly, a shared concern with depoliticising forms of politics as technical governance, and secondly, a critique based upon the disruptive and creative agency of those excluded from these regulatory discourses. However, the argument hinges on the centrality of the distinctions, enabling Dingpolitik to be concrete and constructive, rather than merely critical in the abstract. Tsouvalis is entirely correct to describe the post-foundational Left’s critique as abstract, relying on the hidden, autonomous and always already existing power of the excluded masses. This was, however, a form of ontological politics, with its essentialising ontological claim for the ever-present (though not visible)

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excess of the political of constitutive power – ‘the power of the powerless’ – vis-à-vis the
constraints of constituted power – the policing regulation of politics. This excess was
ontologically implied by the destabilisation of grounds or foundations central to the Left
Heideggerian critique with its two level analysis, of the ontic and the ontological,
hierarchically bifurcating regulatory ‘politics’ and the underlying creative possibilities
of the ‘political’.

The claims of Latour’s Dingpolitik therefore should not necessarily be distinguished
on ontological grounds. Are Latour’s ‘missing masses’ any less of a ‘phantom’ than those
of the post-foundationalists? On the face of it, Latour, in fact, appears to be extending the
ontological framing of post-foundationalism to the ‘two houses’ of the Modern constitu-
tion: science as well as politics (see Latour 1993, 2004), adding more ‘missing masses’ –
those of the second house of science. Both these houses attempt to preserve contingent,
constructed and contested forms of representation, regulatory order and constituted power
against the fluid, vital and creative struggles of the excluded. It is the extension of the
post-political framing to science as a contingent and restrictive representational frame-
work that enables Latour and other science and technology studies theorists to extend the
critical reach of their work beyond that of the theorists of the post-political.

It could be argued that the contingent and constructed nature of representation, that
Tsouvalis posits, undergoes not ‘political’ disruption through the agency of human
subjects but the disruption of the politics/science divide, through the emergence of new
‘matters of concern’ that destabilise accepted scientific authority over ‘matters of fact’ and
in so doing enables the emergence of new political collectivities (see Callon, Lascoumes,
and Barthe 2011). Thus, the excluded are not just ‘the people’ but also the relational
connections and assemblages of the material world that enable stabilised representations
to be possible but also always exceed and destabilise them. Tsouvalis argues that the
positive possibilities for political engagement in the here and now thus depend upon
Dingpolitik’s sensitivity to the materially entangled nature of the problems of politics
today, enabling the material world to enter political struggles and the constructions of new
communities of association. However, this sensitivity comes at a price: the ontic level of
regulatory power loses its distinctiveness because politics now only operates at the
ontological level (see, for example, Latour 2003; Callon and Latour 1981).

It is interesting that Tsouvalis emphasises the ethical rather than political nature of
Dingpolitik engagement. This helps put the critique of the post-foundational Left in its
context: while Dingpolitik is ethically constructive in changing the world for the better,
the post-foundational Left can only be understood as an unethical barrier, critiquing but
not constructing a better world. The critics of post-politics thereby become a stand-in for a
veiled critique of the unreflective, unaware and uncaring masses, happy to complain about
inequality, capitalism and exclusion, but unwilling to get involved in projects of open and
constructive community and ecological transformation.

Despite Tsouvalis’ stress on the inclusive and egalitarian nature of Dingpolitik – where, in her case study of the Loweswater Care Project, human actors are humbled by
‘the power of the algae’ – there is something deeply problematic in her critique of the
‘anthropocentrism’ of the post-foundational Left. It seems that the casual use of ‘anthropo-
centrism’ as an all-purpose term to dismiss critical political theorists is a polite way of
veiling the troubling assertion that these understandings are narrow, self-interested and
unenlightened: a rejection of ‘politics proper’, which necessarily involves shared collective
understandings between humans and non-humans, appreciative of mutual fragilities and
vulnerabilities.
In its problematic and potentially elitist dismissal of representative forms of politics and the implicit critique of the unenlightened masses, rather than being distinctive to the post-foundational Left’s concern with post-politics, Dingpolitik appears merely to dress the wolf in new sheep’s clothing. Emerging from the disillusionment with the ’68 movements and the failures of the French and Italian Communist Parties, the Left Heideggerians similarly sought to construct alternative worlds ‘in the here and now’ turning their backs on political ideologies, political parties and the struggle for state power – dismissing representative politics as too narrowly constrained by the hold of elitist and bureaucratic political parties (including, the main culprit, the Communist Parties), they later expanded the list of excuses for not politically engaging with the unenlightened masses to include the de-politicising hold of science, the power of neoliberal technocrats and various other depictions of the post-political condition.

The fact that ‘the material world’ is central to Dingpolitik does not necessarily make it any less problematic than the politics of the post-foundational Left. The critique of ‘anthropocentrism’ gives the game away in its claims to be privileging ‘reciprocal relations with non-humans’ in ‘articulated and shared commonalities’. Tsouvalis’ case study is an appropriate one, levelling the agency of human and non-human individuals and collectivities – equating the domestic use of phosphorous-enriched washing powders, leaking septic tanks and geological processes with economic logics and commercial interests. The post-foundational Left may have given up on political engagement but at least they maintained a critical stance to the ontic level of the sociopolitical order on the basis of the creative potential of the abstract ‘phantom masses’. For Latour, the ontic is dissolved into the ontological: there can be no ‘anthropomorphic’ separation between the political subject and the social order – this is a ‘flat’ ontology without levels of the ontic and the ontological – and thus no possibility of critique, even the abstract critique forwarded by the theorists of the post-political (see Latour et al. 2012). Dingpolitik maybe pragmatic, constructive and highly ethical; it may even be an effective management technique, but it has even less to do with politics than the abstractions of the post-foundational Left.

References


