
Review Essay

Recalibrating oppositional politics

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Ordinary democracy: Sovereignty and citizenship beyond the neoliberal impasse

Ali Aslam

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Confrontational citizenship: Reflections on hatred, rage, revolution, and revolt

William W. Sokoloff

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The surge of multiple social movements in the last decade has instigated critical theoretical rumination on how to upend the neoliberal order through new ways of practicing democracy, citizenship, and oppositional politics. Ali Aslam's *Ordinary Democracy* and William Sokoloff's *Confrontational Citizenship* emerge as two latest texts in this genre that infuse new streams of thought into the conversation. While providing critical diagnoses of the neoliberal present, both authors also offer prescriptions for what needs recalibrating in leftist political thought and oppositional politics to more effectively combat neoliberalism. As I suggest, however, while Aslam and Sokoloff succeed in engendering renewed insights and perspectives to reanimate contentious politics, both recapitulate certain linear and binary modes of oppositional thinking.

In *Ordinary Democracy*, Aslam draws insights from several distinctive social movements (e.g., Idle No More, Occupy Wall Street, the Egyptian Revolution, Occupy Sandy, and Strike Debt) to impart lessons on how activists and citizens involved in them reinvigorate citizenship and democratize sovereignty amidst the neoliberal deadlock of devitalized agency. Invoking John Locke, Aslam foregrounds the political need to shore up popular sovereignty in order to restore its 'tensional relationship' with prerogative sovereignty (p. 8). He characterizes the



contemporary neoliberal moment as being pervaded by a widespread sense of impasse and unfreedom among citizens. Specifically, the prevailing modes of market rationality and emergency politics result in the sacrifice of the will of the people (who are reduced to passive spectators and consumers) and the bolstering of undemocratic decision-making authority by the sovereign state in the name of protecting national interests and security.

In this context, the recent rise of social movements, as ‘emerging counterpublics ... that are defined by their opposition to prevailing norms’ (p. 16), signals a desire for agency that reveals vital signs of democratic life and popular sovereignty. As Aslam suggests, participants in these movements engage in varied ‘micro-practices of sovereignty’ (e.g., occupations, public assemblies, disruptive dances, religious prayers) in order to challenge hegemonic common sense and the habitual mode of liberal consumerist citizenship (p. 9). Importantly, these movement practices that are aimed to redirect citizens’ habitual attachments and democratize sovereignty do not merely stay at the level of resistance; rather, they involve concentrated efforts to transform juridical institutions ‘through laws, treaties, and constitutional reforms’ to make the state ‘more responsive to the claims made by citizens’ (p. 10). Indeed, at the heart of Aslam’s argument is an admonition to critical scholars and activists that social movements cannot refuse but must engage state sovereignty and work to democratize it through ordinary democratic practices of reforming laws and political institutions in order to effectively counter neoliberal norms and actualize macro-level change. For him, this popular reclaiming of sovereignty critically departs from the contemporary trend of democratic theory ‘that has focused primarily on smaller-scale and episodic political phenomena’ and ‘separate[d] the practice of democracy from its historical association with sovereignty and the state’ (p. 11). Ceding the state, Aslam cautions, would dangerously leave it ‘open to takeover’ by corporate elites, state officials, and neo-fascists (p. 13).

Positioning his methodological approach as what James Tully calls ‘public philosophy’, Aslam goes beyond the disciplinary practice of close reading in political theory by ‘taking philosophy to the streets’ (p. 16), actively analyzing how citizen activists within these social movements make sense of their life conditions and formulate their agendas and strategies vis-à-vis ‘unilateral assertions of state sovereignty’ (p. 15). Hence, in chapter 1, Aslam traces the ways in which the indigenous grassroots movement in Canada, Idle No More, challenged the Harper legislation that undermined aboriginal sovereignty protected in existing treaties by staging the Round Dance in shopping malls in order to express what Cristina Beltrán calls ‘festive anger’ (p. 39). These micro-practices of sovereignty drew on indigenous cultural and spiritual resources to bring about an active and affective dimension of dissonant citizenship in a settler colonial state. As Aslam observes, these direct actions do not merely signal a ‘refusal of state prerogatives’ (p. 47), but are integrally tied to the indigenous activist group’s demand for sovereignty, ‘both



in terms of the renewal of treaty agreements and the restoration of self-governing provisions outlined in ... the federal constitution' (p. 46).

In other chapters, Aslam draws on similar threads of thought though with nuances in each case. For instance, chapter 3 engages with Judith Butler's commentary on the Tahrir Square protests during the Egyptian Revolution as an enactment of ethical responsibility originating from the protestors' 'recognition of their mutually bodily vulnerability' (p. 78). As Aslam suggests, Butler's attempt to 'define democracy in opposition to practices of state sovereignty ... [and] ... in terms of ethical practices alone' (p. 79) overlooks the fact that Egyptian activists 'sought constitutional reforms to protect the gains of the revolution' (p. 23) and to preserve their 'extra-judicial forms of [popular] sovereignty' (p. 100). Again, for Aslam, democracy can only be meaningful if it directly engages (rather than refuses) sovereign power. Chapter 4 juxtaposes Occupy Sandy (the mutual aid and disaster relief network formed in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy) with Lauren Berlant's reflection that mutual aid DIY practices, given their reciprocity and mutuality, help reorient citizens' attachments away from the impasse and cynicism in neoliberalism. As Aslam cautions, however, the DIY citizenship manifested in Occupy Sandy is ultimately inadequate because its focus on self-help initiatives feeds into an anti-statism that fails to unsettle prerogative sovereignty and reorient state governance in the interests of citizens rather than the interests of capital. Lastly, chapter 5 counters Jodi Dean's assertion that contemporary capitalism and liberal democracy have become so entwined that 'only post-democratic political formations [specifically, the return of Communism] have any hope of overturning neoliberal hegemony' (p. 129). By chronicling how Strike Debt, a debt-resistance movement, 'ameliorat[es] the indebtedness that defines ordinary life for many Americans' (p. 150), while building a utopic horizon where citizens engage in 'democratizing the quasi-sovereignty of capital' (p. 131), Aslam argues instead that radical change can come from the 'immanent conditions and experience' internal to ordinary life in capitalist democracy (p. 25).

Like Aslam, Sokoloff in *Confrontational Citizenship* also aims to make political theory 'politically relevant for social and political transformation' (p. xviii) in order to 'overcome the current political impasse and state of intellectual paralysis' (p. xix). Arguing that leftist oppositional politics must go beyond mere critique to recenter 'revolutionary strategy as a political-pedagogical undertaking' of our time (p. 147, n. 27), Sokoloff asserts that 'the most important forms of political change are the result of confrontation, not compromise' (p. xiii). If Aslam eyes the revitalized linkage between the micro-practices of citizen-subjects and the macro-practices of state sovereignty as the key to challenge the neoliberal order, Sokoloff sees the 'current explosion of political passion' in our contemporary political landscape (p. xiii) – in particular, anger, hatred, and rage (and their accompanied constant political protests) directed towards the mainstream political establishment and status quo – as the essential and healthy conduit to engender substantive



political change. Against the backdrop of consensus, commonality, and harmony that dominate the script of democratic theory, Sokoloff advances ‘unconventional modes of popular agency’ (p. xvii) opened up by radical democratic theorists to foreground political contestations and counterhegemonic narratives at the center of citizenship. As he writes, ‘Confrontational modes of citizenship (e.g., civil disobedience, protest, strikes, walkout, boycotts, occupation, etc.) can reconnect political institutions to the people, provide outlets for widespread frustration, lead to positive change, and renew/transform political institutions to ensure their authority and legitimacy’ (p. xii).

Similar to Aslam, Sokoloff does not simply gesture to a politics of refusal or permanent disruption without sovereign ends. While suggesting that ‘utopian theorizing is ... needed to inject a critical dimension into democratic theory’, he indicates that this utopian dimension involves a critical dialectical balance between popular sovereignty and prerogative sovereignty, such that ‘institutions and counterinstitutions [would] sustain the tension between insurrection and constitution’ (p. 7). Moreover, he urges the cultivation of a dialectical political emotion, i.e., confrontational citizens use rage that is triggered by oppression but control it through self-reflection in order to enact a strategic response at opportune moments, engendering a nuanced and thoughtful state of permanent revolt that ‘keeps reform and revolution on the table as viable political options without getting struck on either side of the opposition’ (p. 77).

While Sokoloff organizes the book in a more conventional way that aligns with the disciplinary practice of close reading of particular theorists, he indicates that his methodology can be considered unconventional, both in terms of his nonstandard interpretations of canonical political theorists and the wider range of voices outside the usual confines of political theory that he brings to the table (pp. xxii–xxiii). For instance, chapter 1 rereads Niccolò Machiavelli as a theorist of hatred, suggesting that his thought productively exemplifies how hatred directed at the ruling class through extra-institutional means can be enlisted for positive political change by inspiring ‘a permanent force of insurrection and ... a mass popular movement’ (p. 28) to put pressure on the governing regime and ensure ‘elite accountability to the people’ (p. 23). Chapter 2 reinterprets Immanuel Kant as a revolutionary anarchist, whose concept of genius, defined as ‘a good revolutionary force ... [that] promotes freedom and independent thought’ without the constraint of rules (p. 24), locates radical transformative potential within the human rational faculties of unlimited cognitive growth, flexibility, and creativity – essential to liberate the humankind from old rules and to regenerate society.

Extending Machiavelli’s and Kant’s insights, chapter 5 reconfigures Hannah Arendt’s notion of political resistance as a double concept wherein a regime’s political authority is precisely ‘constituted via active resistance to it’ (p. 88). Sokoloff finds in Arendt’s theorization of political resistance a dialectical movement that ‘overcomes either/or political dichotomies, including order/



anarchy, law/violence, obedience/revolt' (p. 83). For him, this move carves out an expansive terrain of politics that neither blindly trusts the state (à la John Rawls) nor rejects it altogether (à la Michel Foucault), allowing for 'the permanent critique of the state and ... the [redemptive] possibility for positive political change and the renewal of political life' (p. 96).

Such a dialectical reading is similarly exerted in Sokoloff's consideration of two black political thinkers, Frederick Douglass (chapter 3) and W.E.B. Du Bois (chapter 4). He elucidates an inspiring account of dialectical rage in the writings of Douglass, who, as a former slave, used it militantly to nurture a resistant political life, yet calibrated it with thoughtful consideration and restraint 'as an engaged (non)citizen living in dark times' (p. 47). He further captures the essence of Du Bois's political thought as embodied in the Pan-Africanist's advocacy for thoughtful revolt as a way of life, specifically, 'a tactical political stance involving a permanent and protracted dissent against the concentration of wealth, the legacies of imperialism/colonialism, and the rejection of political oppression and racism' (p. 62). Such thoughtful revolt involves a discerning incorporation of both reform and revolution in one's politics, whereby one moves 'beyond a liberal frame, but without becoming unreflective, dogmatic, and dismissive in the process' (p. 78).

Finally, Sokoloff adds the queer Chicana feminist writer Gloria Anzaldúa (chapter 6) and the Brazilian philosopher of education Paulo Freire (chapter 7) as two grossly understudied political theorists in order to supplement and expand his conception of confrontational citizenship. He finds in Anzaldúa's work on borderlands and *mestiza* consciousness a historically informed, nondualistic, and fluid conception of identity politics that blurs and transgresses boundaries across differences in order to expansively and creatively rebuild collective solidarity and coalitional politics (most recently manifested in Black Lives Matter and the Standing Rock protests). He also locates a vital utopian hopefulness in Freire's critical pedagogy that reclaims educational institutions as 'a space for revolutionary struggle and revolt' (p. 127) where teachers and students cultivate an ongoing 'awakening of critical awareness' (p. 125) through mutual learning and dialogical praxis. For Sokoloff, Freire's transformative vision provides a hopeful antidote to the recent critical political theorizing such as in the hands of Wendy Brown, whose 'apocalyptic leftist version of the "end of history"' undermines any possibility of meaningful resistance to neoliberalism (p. 130).

Overall, both Aslam and Sokoloff enrich leftist thinking by injecting renewed passion, hopefulness, and pragmatics into oppositional politics. They provide a critical reminder on the need to engage the state when much of recent critical scholarship has sought to shield oppositional politics from any 'contaminated' engagement with the sovereign power. Both also offer fruitful insights by centering a dialectical mode of oppositional politics that moves beyond the dualistic dilemma between gradual reform and radical change. Nevertheless, both authors inherit and recapitulate certain linear and binary modes of oppositional thinking that undercut



the nuance and complexity of their theoretical analyses. As such, some existing issues of oppositional politics remain in their political paradigms – especially in their approaches to agency, the state, the market, and political emotions – that need to be further expanded to maximize the prospects of transformative change.

First, both Aslam and Sokoloff deploy a series of binary constructs in their theoretical discourses – e.g., active versus passive, participatory versus depoliticized, rupture versus routine, revolt versus acquiescence, and utopian versus status quo – in which the former (counterhegemonic) modes are always favored and evoked as an oppositional critique of the latter (hegemonic) elements. As such, political agency in their hands is conceived in a directly oppositional way, manifested in citizens' collective undertaking of direct action, protests, strikes, and occupation. But such binary-oppositional understanding of agency negates the possibility that many subjects may cross over both elements in their agential enactment. Specifically, there are moments/contexts when we may be active and participatory, just as there are other moments/contexts when we may choose to lay low and be quiet for the time being (which may not always be interpreted as being apolitical but rather exercising agency in mobile and complex ways). There is a nuanced variability in the ways we enact our political agency within the existing social institutions and power structures. In fact, as the black historian Robin D.G. Kelley (1994) and political anthropologist James Scott (1990) have explored, sometimes what appears to be acquiescence to the hegemonic condition may actually belie a hidden swirl of resistance that interrupts normativity in unseen and unpredictable ways. Such a nonlinear and polyvalent account of political enactment and resistance remain missing in both authors' renewed renditions of oppositional politics and deserve considerate incorporation for a more complex understanding of popular sovereignty and revolt.

Second, both authors rightly emphasize the need for the Left to engage (rather than renounce) the sovereign state. However, like much of existing critical thought, there are no specifics in their oppositional frameworks on exactly *how* to strategically engage the state to render meaningful and effective policies and changes. It is unlikely that operating in a strictly oppositional way will directly get one's way, especially when it comes to making political claims on the state. More likely than not, political demands advanced by social movements will be compromised and circumscribed in the process of negotiation with the sovereign power. In fact, there is a critical under-examination of refugees and undocumented migrants in both authors' accounts as these nonstatus subjects stand in an even more challenging position to enact revitalized and confrontational citizenship vis-à-vis a sovereign state of which they are not formally considered a part. While some refugees and unauthorized migrants do engage in radical democratic politics to take rights and liberties in spite of their nonstatus, their efforts do not come unscathed by what Peter Nyers calls 'sovereign re-takings' – that is, the sovereign power also possesses 'a diversity of tactics' at ... [its] disposal' to subversively



deflect, absorb, and retake foreigners' political claims on its own terms (Nyers, 2003, p. 1087). While echoing Aslam's and Sokoloff's call to make the state accountable and produce relevant reforms, my point here is to suggest a more sobering and mobile framework that centers negotiation (rather than strict opposition) in dealing with the state so that social movements can expend valuable time and energy not only on building oppositional visions and contentions but also on the nitty-gritty details/logistics of *how* to operate, strategize, and maneuver to obtain more concessions and rights from the sovereign power.

Third, both authors also inherit and recapitulate similar oppositional sentiment and disposition towards the market in existing leftist political thought. To his credit, Aslam displays a more dialectical thinking on this when cautioning readers not to 'minimize the strength of the affective bonds citizens have to both the market and the forms of devitalizing state sovereignty', suggesting that change can come 'from within rather than from outside ... the existing political and economic order' (pp. 130-131). But he stops short of applying this dialectical insight directly to the market in analyzing the ways in which practices of consumption may be reoriented towards progressive ends/possibilities. As commodification in neoliberal times has saturated every sphere of social life including activism (Banet-Weiser and Mukherjee, 2012), a conventional denunciation of (rather than a revitalized engagement with) market consumerism may well end up constricting rather than expanding the possible channels and sites of social change.

Lastly, this is particularly regarding Sokoloff's approach to political emotions, as he suggests that 'intense emotions (e.g. anger, hatred, and rage) are good as sources of political empowerment, motivation, and engagement' (p. 2). What accompanies these intense political emotions is an 'identification of the political and economic enemy ... to clarify the terms of political struggle (e.g., *us* versus *them*)' (p. 3; emphasis in the original). Yet, vision-wise, one may ask whether such a binary-oppositional mode of affective politics does not recreate boundaries and divisions among human subjects that a leftist emancipatory politics may actually wish to deconstruct and transform. In fact, some critical scholars and activists are also motivated and called to action by their feelings of empathy, compassion, and love for human (and nonhuman) beings.

Such actually is the case of Anzaldúa: it is thus both interesting and contradictory that Sokoloff includes her as an exemplar for his argument, for while Anzaldúa's writing chronicles a painful process of permanent struggles battling racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia, she has not reduced her political affect to mere hatred and rage, and so directed it at an opposite enemy. Rather, as AnaLouise Keating (2013) suggests, Anzaldúa's political thinking embodies a radically inclusive vision of planetary citizenship where one constantly crosses boundaries and embraces differences in forging complex commonalities. Empathy and openness, rather than hatred and rage, take center stage as 'pathways to investigate possible points of connection' (2013, p. 39). What Anzaldúa's poetic



imaginary inspires is a metaphysics of radical interconnectedness that views political struggles and conflicts not from oppositional standpoints but *relational perspectives* in order to ‘move [us] toward healing ... [and] facilitate the development of post-oppositional resistance and nonbinary forms of oppositional consciousness’ (2013, p. 12). Anzaldúa’s transformative affective politics thus generates critical reflection on whether oppositional politics, by conceiving social relations in primarily ‘antagonistic, conflict-driven terms,’ has not reached its limits in radically transforming society as it locks us ‘in an embattled, us-against-them status quo’ that ‘often subtly reinforce[s] the very systems against which we struggle’ (2013, p. 3). A more deeply transformative post-oppositional vision and politics constitute a new vantage point that we may wish to adopt in our continuing recrafting of radical thinking and politics.

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