Inspiring alter-politics: anthropology and critical political thinking

Lien : http://www.nomadit.co.uk/easa/easa2012/panels.php?PanelID=1102

Location S302
Date and Start Time 12 Jul, 2012 at 11:30

Convenors
Riccardo Ciavolella (CNRS/EHESS)
Stefano Boni (Università di Modena e Reggio Emilia)

Short Abstract
This panel inquires into how political anthropology inspires radical political thinking. Since the founding influences over Marxism and Anarchism, what is the nexus between anthropological studies on the "politics of others" with contemporary political theories and practices?

Long Abstract
This panel inquires into how political anthropology can inspire radical political thinking. This issue dates back to the influence of "primitive societies" over Marxism and anarchism. This dialogue continued with the use of "primitive economies" to criticise capitalism and with "acephalous societies" inspiring critiques of the modern State, particularly with the Clastres-Deleuze's idea of a "desiring" refusal of encoding forces of modernity. Historical experiences studied by anthropologists have become "heterotopias", epitomizing examples of possible alternatives.

Nowadays, this inspiring influence of anthropology is renewed in imagining alternatives to neoliberal globalization. Several of the issues raised by studies concerning forms of subaltern resistance, peasants' mobilisations, indigenous movements and agencies of discriminated subjectivities are also evoked, in theory and practice, by some of the different tendencies within contemporary social movements (neoprimalism, ecology, post-development and degrowth, post-anarchism and multitude perspectives).

We call for papers on this particular nexus between anthropological studies and critical political thinking both in the past and in the present. We strongly encourage contributions with ethnographic examples, as well as more theoretical papers. But we would like contributors to address the critical points raised by this nexus:

1. How to make "other" political experiences meaningful for "our" time and space, or how to avoid the "illusion of an exotic answer to a historical question" (Augé)

2. How to imagine the political articulation and efficacy of localised and dispersed subjectivities

3. How to think the issue of representation in the organisation of political action (post-anarchist vs. gramscian perspectives).

Chair: Keith Hart

This workshop is closed to new paper proposals.
Papers

Radical citizens: on ideological formation and 'terror' tactics of Maoist cadres in Nepal's transition to democracy

Author: Dan Hirslund (University of Copenhagen)

Short Abstract

Building on 10 months of ethnographic fieldwork, this paper seeks to show the continued relevance of a Maoist vocabulary to actual practices of alter-politics through an analysis of how ideas of a radical citizen in post-war Nepal have emerged that seeks to combine popular forms of activism with loyalty to politics as 'necessity'.

Long Abstract

What can Maoism in non-industrialized countries teach us about current global challenges of justice and activist politics? Despite the demise of state-socialist revolutionary movements in the West, Marxist-Leninist-Maoist parties have continued to challenge state structures in other parts of the world. Following the European crisis of violent insurrection after the 1970's and the deligitimization of Soviet socialism, it has become difficult to envision critical political activism beyond local resistances to capitalism from 'below'. Building on 10 months fieldwork with cadres of the Maoist movement in Nepal, this paper seeks to show the continued relevance of a radical political vocabulary to actual practices of alter-politics. In a context where violent opposition has lost its legitimacy - going from a People's War to a peace process - new forms and ideas of activism have surfaced that are relevant for a general Marxist-inspired politics to ponder. Drawing on cadres' militarized training and the politicization of public space, I trace the way Maoist activist adjust their tactics to a changed political environment without neglging its core analysis of society as class-based and its ideas of direct justice. Thus, I analyze how ideas of a radical citizen have emerged that seek to combine popular forms of activism with loyalty to politics as 'necessity'. Digging out the notion of 'terror' from the Marxist closet to theorize this nexus between Maoist cadres and radical politics in peace-time, I suggest the relevance of rethinking it as an analytic for combining questions of truth, vigilance and politics.

Re-imagining the Russian left: socialism, affect, horizons

Author: Petra Rethmann (McMaster University)

Short Abstract

How do young Russian activists imagine struggles for political agency today? How do they, in an era marked by entrenched capitalism, confront questions of socialism and the past? Does it, in Russia’s current climate, even still make sense to think about the possibilities of socialism and if so, on what terms? These are the questions that drive many left-wing artists and activists in Russia, and this talk.

Long Abstract

How do young Russian activists imagine struggles for political agency today? How do they, in an era marked by entrenched capitalism, confront questions of socialism and the past? Does it, in Russia's current climate, even still make sense to think about the possibilities of socialism and if so, on what terms? These are the questions that drive the many left-wing artists and activists in Russia, and this talk. Undeniably, what has emerged in Russia in the first decade of this millennium is a spirited, committed, and varied movement that seeks to imagine viable alternatives to Russia's current capitalist-reformative system, and to put them into practice. Consisting of a multitude of anarchist, anti-fascist, radical grassroots, Trotzkyte, innovative Marxist, and social action groups, this new left does not associate itself with the humanitarian socialism of the shestidesiatniki, non-conformist subcultures of the 1970s or 80s, or perestroika-era reformist movements, but rather posits the radical critique of capitalism as its
determined target. Taking the concrete political and national situation of Russia's new left as my point of departure, here I seek to map out a few registers of the political possibilities that Russia's new left imagines for itself. Tracing these political possibilities through the diagnostic lenses of the future and affect, I especially seek to understand the difficulties and potentialities inherent in what the Russian new left still understands as the socialist - albeit not state-socialist - project.

La proximité culturelle dans une ethnologie des mouvements altermondialistes: dimensions emic et ethic de la théorie sociale
Author: Elena Apostoli Cappello (Université de Neuchatel)

Short Abstract

Les modalités de participation politique et les rapports que certains groupes radicaux italiens organisent entre eux et avec les institutions étatiques, sont justement conditionnés par un imaginaire exotique, notamment zapatiste, qui comme une poétique de discours, fournit un support cohérent en mesure de donner un ordre et un sens compatibles avec les pratiques quotidiennes.

Long Abstract

Ma réflexion sera ancrée sur l'ethnographie, dans une perspective d'étude de cas. J'interrogerais les relations entre théorie sociale et théorie militante à partir de mon travail sur la question de l'aspiration à « se constituer en société », de la part des mouvements altermondialistes. En Italie, les activistes sont animés du désir et de la nécessité de trouver de nouvelles formes de cohésion quotidienne et de mobilisation collective. En même temps, ils réagissent à un contexte d'individualités socialement et politiquement désamorcées en se dédiant, sur le plan national, à la création de communautés communiquant entre elles sous la forme de réseaux. A côté de l'action locale, et justement dans cette optique, ils entreprennent des voyages pour « aller apprendre » la cohésion communautaire dans des environnements qui sont supposés être communautaires par nature, c'est-à-dire ceux ruraux et « primitifs » notamment du Chiapas insurgé, au Mexique, édifiés, dans la littérature, selon les registres exotisants qui reproduisent l'Orientalisme décrit par Said (1978). La situation de proximité culturelle au sein de laquelle j'ai évolué fait que, par exemple, la plupart des personnes qui constituent les références culturelles de mes « enquêtés » sont en même temps des auteurs en sciences sociales. Ayant travaillé constamment parmi des communautés qui font de la réflexivité une de leurs raisons d'être, il n'a pas été immédiat de débrouiller l'ambiguïté entre la dimension emic et la dimension etic de la théorie sociale.

Understanding emerging forms of mobilization: the Arab spring in Israel
Author: Alexander Koensler (University of Perugia)

Short Abstract

Through ethnographic insights from the Arab spring in Israel, this paper discusses how ethnography can contribute to alter-political thought by rethinking some of its methodological assumption and investigating how emerge possible worlds to come.

Long Abstract

How emerge new trends in social movements, protest and radical political thinking? Can ethnography foresee how new political actors extend the spaces of what seems possible and thinkable? This paper argues that if anthropological approaches are rethought in its methodological assumptions and opened up to interdisciplinary influence, emerging political articulations can be understood more in detail. In particular, ethnographic studies have often been limited by an insufficient conceptualization of practices which leads scholars to focus on those on those practices which "reproduce" social realities rather than those fragile, and emerging one which challenge existing reality. Grounding this approach in ethnographic examples of a local variant of the "Arab-Spring" from the Israeli Negev desert, I try to
show how during the mobilization for social justice in so-called "tent cities", Arab-Bedouin recognition demands met Jewish-Israeli social struggles in unprecedented forms of collaboration and cross-contaminations. Along experimental forms of struggle, new forms of mobilizations combined methods deriving from new age festivals, anarchistic direct action, and ecosophies, distilling new, still fragile structural forms of struggle that are able to overcome divisions forged through the current mainstream re-articulation of cultural differences in mainstream minority and human-rights discourses. In this context, the humility of the ethnographic attention to micro-political dynamics can become crucial to theorize emerging forms of mobilization and sociality. While remaining cautiousness about the wider dimensions of these experimental mobilizations, I argue that renewed ethnography will be able to make experiences meaningful for current alter-political thought, understanding better possible worlds to come.

Critical political movement: an anthropological perspective
Authors: Mar Fernandez
Fernando Jose Carasa (UAM)
Liliana Suarez (Universidad Autónoma Madrid)

Short Abstract
In this article we propose to explore the case of the Spanish Revolution as an illustration of the way an anthropological perspective could contribute to get over a false dichotomy between the politics of "others" and "our" politics, following the path of inspiring analysis such as Clastres.

Long Abstract
Anthropologists have always been close to heterogeneous sociopolitical actors. Nowadays, in a context of a blooming of critical political movements around the world, anthropologists are not only analyzing but also participating actively in a process change challenging hegemonic Modern political paradigms. In this article we propose to explore the case of the Spanish Revolution as an illustration of the way an anthropological perspective could contribute to get over a false dichotomy between the politics of "others" and "our" politics, following the path of inspiring analysis such as Clastres. In fact the analysis will show that the efforts within this social movement to get back a locally rooted assembly methodology is an essential move towards the dismantling of dominant political categories of thinking through which power gets reproduced. In this sense our ethnographically and politically rooted contribution will explore how representation, as a dominant political habitus, is being questioned and remade through this particular political methodology. Finally we will look at the way political articulation of localized and dispersed subjectivities are enunciated in the case of Madrid, enabling difference to emerge a social change of a collective thinking but not unique.

Rethinking the practices of self-organization in South Africa: the self-empowering experience of the 1980s and it's role for the contemporary protest communities
Authors: Daria Zelenova (Institute for African Studies)
Olga Aksyutina (Institute for African Studies)

Short Abstract
Based on ethnographical research conducted in South Africa at various times from 2009 to 2011, the paper analyzes the self-empowering experience of the 1980s and it's role for the political practices of the contemporary protest communities of South Africa.
Long Abstract

It's widely known that the 1980s in South Africa was a crucial period in the struggle against apartheid, when mass participation of the people in resistance to the regime had created an unprecedented experience of social and political self-organization. One of the most popular ideas of how to dismantle the apartheid state apparatus was through reclaiming power by the people (known as a popular slogan of that time "amandla - ngawethu!" or "power to the people!"). And it was not just an idea. The struggles waged in the local communities by marginalized segregated population led to establishing alternative organs of people's power: street, block and yard committees, regular meetings and people's courts as well as various socio-economic projects, which were operating outside state's control. Many of these were based on the principles of direct democracy, horizontality and mutual aid. In the situation of deligitimization of the repressive regime, the organs of people's power started displacing police and collaborationist local authorities from townships all over the country.

After the ANC came to power the growth of state violence and a return to repressive measures against those who are considered now as politically dissenting (more then often the marginalized poor people's communities) we can observe the revival of many of those political practices that were widely used in townships as a self-empowering practice and as means of struggle against apartheid regime.

Based on in-depth interviews with participants of grassroots organizations and local committees, township residents and political activists of the 1980s, many of whom are still active now, this paper seeks to analyze self-organization as a process of peoples' self-empowerment in South African townships of the 1980s and its role for the evolution of the contemporary political practices in the protest communities of South Africa. We will analyze the development of direct democracy as a crucial political practice of the 1980s that was implemented through mass meetings, operation of committees and people's courts and consider it's evolution in the contemporary context.

We would like to reflect upon the following questions: How the conception of "amandla - ngawethu" that was so important for the people in South African townships in the 80s is being re-imagined and reinvented in the contemporary protest communities in South Africa? Is the horizontal self-governing as a form of self-organization still so essential for them?

Assemblies and the struggle to diffuse power: ethnographic examples and contemporary practices

Author: Stefano Boni (Università di Modena e Reggio Emilia)

Short Abstract

An ethnographic review of the use of assemblies to diffuse power; the concentration of power in contemporary assemblies of western parliamentary democracies; the practical problems of social movements' egalitarian political engagement; possible hints derived from political anthropology

Long Abstract

The paper approaches the notion of assemblies as the scene of culturally diversified struggles between the attempt to establish and defend diffused power and tendencies to enforce its concentration. The ethnographic literature on the topic (Abélès, Bassi, Clastres, Edelman, Evans-Pritchard, Lazar, Leach, Lincoln, Graeber, Hornecker) is reviewed with specific reference to the distribution and polyphony of speech; mediation and consensus formation; the definition and flexibility of roles. While formal and informal assemblies in several settings have guaranteed a significant diffusion of power in crucial group decisions, contemporary political assemblies, expressed by representative democracy in nation-states and trans-national institutions, have increasingly lost the capacity to represent collective will. Current social movements denounce throughout the globe the concentration of power in governments and banks and promote more egalitarian political processes as one of their primary objectives. In this effort, they confront issues documented ethnographically in settings of diffused power: the attempts to construct and
defend forms of horizontal political engagement are menaced by hierarchical tendencies that manifest themselves in the control of crucial resources; the emergence of charismatic leaders; the transformation or incorporation in institutions. The management of assemblies in current social movements, as well similarities and divergences with historically and ethnographically documented settings, is examined with a specific attention to practical and problematic management of group decisions.

**Demanding local rights in the global city: the legacy of Henri Lefebvre and Hamburg's "right-to-the-city"-movements**

*Author:* Ulrich Ufer (Université de Montréal)

**Short Abstract**

This paper asks in what ways the work of H. Lefebvre is reflected in Hamburg's "Right-to-the-City"-movements. Local activists challenge promoters of Hamburg as a "Global City" by proposing heterotopic organizations of urban space and by phrasing their demands and strategies in Lefebvrian language.

**Long Abstract**

The past years have seen a resurgent interest in the work of Henri Lefebvre - not only in Academia, but also among activist groups. Urban grassroots movements, in particular, have adapted Lefebvre's concept of the "Droit à la ville" (1968) and have used Lefebvrian terminology to justify their demands and express their aims. This paper will track Lefebvre's influence on the programs of citizens' initiatives and on activists' language in the case of Hamburg. Here, some thirty local activist groups have united under the Lefebvre-inspired umbrella slogan "Recht auf Stadt" (Right to the City) to challenge the visions of promoters of Hamburg as a "Global City". In particular, the occupiers of the Hamburg Gängeviertel-quarter are currently proposing the conception of a heterotopian "alter-urban" space which may serve as a model to spread a different kind of urban modernity. This group has been very successful in articulating their political demands and has employed strategies for occupation, negotiation and communication which are markedly different from those of Hamburg's anarchist squatters of the 1980s. Since Lefebvre conceived the "Right to the City" in the late 1960s, the context and meaning of the term have changed considerably and in a seaport like Hamburg the global dimension of local conflicts and interests thus demand a creative usage of Lefebvre's heritage. What are the overt as well as hidden influences that Lefebvre's revolutionary thoughts on the city have on Hamburg's "Right-to-the-City"-movements? And in what ways have these movements adapted and continued his work in order to fit the conditions of present urbanity?

**The political economy of madrasah education: towards a radical re-interpretation of anthropology of education**

*Author:* Nurhaizatul Jamil (NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY)

**Short Abstract**

My research is primarily concerned with Islamic religious education (madrasah) in Singapore, and its ethical cultivation of gender, sexuality and piety that complicates the formation of national/secular subjectivities. I argue that one of political anthropology’s radical interventions lies in the analytical resuscitation of the field of anthropology of education. At present, anthropological scholarship about
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Long Abstract

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