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► **To cite this version:**

Valerio Romitelli. On Enthusiasm in Politics: 12 Hypotheses. Revue (In)Disciplines, LIRCES, 2017.
<hal-01549166>

HAL Id: hal-01549166

<https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01549166>

Submitted on 28 Jun 2017

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On Enthusiasm in Politics: 12 Hypotheses

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Abstract

The author suggests twelve hypotheses to revive enthusiasm as a political category and, eventually, to restate the possibility of political action. In this perspective, the enthusiasm of the masses was the essential political element of “The Glorious Thirty Years” that followed the Second World War, characterized by a strong tension to realize a greater social justice. It was also at the base of the “Long Sixty-Eight” and of the processes of decolonization. Enthusiasm is thus thought in opposition both to the monopolistic pretension of political innovation forwarded by communist parties in the past and to the exclusive competence on political-economical decisions claimed today by democratic élites. Re-thinking the enthusiasm that animated these historic sequences of the twentieth century should offer the possibility to respond to “the sad passions” that dominate the era of neoliberal administration of global democracy.

Key-words

Enthusiasm; Democracy; Masses; Historic Sequence; Neoliberalism; Communism.

Introduction

The hypotheses suggested in this essay originate from the studies that I have undertaken on thought, passion and political bodies. My research work examines the possibilities of political materialism in a post-Marxist perspective, yet far from any anti-Marxist notion fashionable today. My main goal is to go beyond the conceptions which reduce politics to a superstructure without its own power of determination.

The propositions presented here collide with many polemical fronts: first of all, they clash against the conception which sees the turning point from Fordism to Post-Fordism as the key to explaining the entire history of the last hundred years. In other words, I reject the concept that everything that happens in politics is due to the capitalistic objectivation of the subjective creativity of the working class. I also take a distance from any idea that considers history as a history of a struggle between opposite economic interests. I think it's necessary to acknowledge that there is an infinity of phenomena, events and sequences that can't be analyzed as an effect of the capitalistic transformations, more or less determined by the class struggles. For instance, it must be recognized that in the name of socialism, communism, fascism and even of the New Deal it was deemed possible to change destiny, in every instance in a singular way, and to understand this we require adequate categories of analysis.

Using Lacan's terms, we can approach this kind of phenomena as subjective phenomena: “subjectifications” or “subjective processes”. However, it is important not to abuse this language by removing it from its field of relevance. A mistake made, for example, by Ernesto Laclau in his book *On the Populist Reason*, where he attempts to interpret Lacan's thought with the idea of “inter-subjective relationships”. This is an interpretation which fails. Wherever Lacan speaks about the subject, he speaks about the interior division of every subject in front of its own singular object of desire: therefore, Lacan's thought does not allow any meta-psychological generalization and this is not the way in which his teaching could help the search for new post-Marxist views. In this perspective it is far more interesting to think about how lacanian psychoanalysis finds objectivity, i.e. inside subjectivity rather than outside it.

This is one of the most useful teachings for a renewal of materialism in politics. It is exactly thanks to this that I argue that also political thought and passions are able to create their own objects. Not always, but sometimes: when they take the shape of organizations that are able to transform the ideas of social justice into experimental issues. The first hypothesis that I propose here originated from ‘the Glorious Thirty Years (1945-1975)’. It was during this age that president Mao spoke about the “masses’ enthusiasm for Socialism”.

1. ‘The Glorious Thirty Years’ as a singular age of social justice

The principal feature of this period can be described as follows: it was the high point of the last hundred years in terms of wages, social security and public education, resulting in the reduction of social differences and the creation of the middle class; the epicenter was in Europe, but at the same time there was also the spread of policies of ‘de-colonization’, which were immediately criticized as ‘neo-colonialism’; at the geopolitical level, this era was also marked by the Cold War first, then by ‘peaceful coexistence’ and ‘*détente*’ between the two ‘superpowers’, and in the meantime by the emergence of the ‘Movement of Non-Aligned countries’.

There are three sets of characteristics which, when combined, can lead to a conclusion of major importance: that the exceptional peak of social justice of this era was initially made possible by the rivalry between the spheres of influence of American capitalism and Soviet socialism, in a time when the latter was still credible as a regime devoted to the creation of greater social justice. The expansion of that kind of regime aroused both love and fear, which can therefore be identified as the driving forces behind this golden era of universal decrease in the gap between the rich and the poor.

2. The “enthusiasm of the masses for Socialism” as a key category to understand ‘the Glorious Thirty Years’

Speaking about the “enthusiasm of the masses for Socialism”, Mao alluded to the passion aroused by those political bodies that were inspired by the same Communist idea, though differently interpreted (i.e. the party-state of the USSR, China and that half of the world where their models were imitated). Even then there were good reasons to doubt that the socialist countries were really creating social justice, but the words of Mao and the actual universal trends of reducing social differences show that, in this age, such doubts were less important than both the “enthusiasm” and the fear for the spreading of communism. Happiness was a condition of politics, not only because prosperity was the obligatory promise of every regime, but also because the future was a source of hope in the socialist countries as well as in the capitalist ones. Saying that the “East wind” was blowing, the Chinese at that time were alluding to the fact that socialist States and communist parties were on the offensive on the world scene.

3. The ‘Long Sixty-Eight’ as an explosion of ‘non-aligned particles’

The ‘Long Sixty-Eight’ is a widely accepted term in historical literature. I use it to indicate the political season that was possible worldwide between the Sixties and the Seventies, thanks to a multiplicity of organizations which were mostly inspired by Communist ideals, but not by Communist parties. At that time, in fact, these parties began to decline because of their subordination to the geo-political relationships between the Soviet and the American “superpowers”.

By using the term “particle” to characterize the political groups of the ‘Long Sixty-Eight’, I aim to stress the ambiguous relationships between these groups and every kind of party: on the one hand, they tried to be organized as a party, but chose not to participate in elections nor

to lead governments; on the other hand, their main goal was to change radically the political systems in order to promote greater social justice.

Furthermore, by applying to these groups the attribute of ‘non-aligned’, I aim to stress their convergence with what is known as the ‘Non-Aligned Movement’, i.e. Third World governments demanding greater justice, but at the geopolitical level.

Symbols of these phenomena were, for instance, the committees organized by the youth of every capitalistic metropolis in solidarity with the resistance of Vietnam. It is not a simple coincidence that both the political groups of the ‘Long Sixty-Eight’ and the movement of Third World governments were virtually contemporaneous in terms of beginnings, developments and final dispersion.

4. The Chinese Cultural Revolution as a crucial sequence of the ‘Long Sixty-Eight’

The Cultural Revolution in China saw its enemy in the culture of a communist party leading a socialist State, but the repercussions of this event were universal during the ‘Long Sixty-Eight’: this peculiar kind of revolution was cited everywhere by every political group born during this time. It is always relevant to ask ourselves why.

The assumption maintained by the culture of those communist parties which were born in 1921 was shared by other political cultures: it concerned the irreducible pre-eminence of experts. It is the famous assumption of Kautsky renewed by Lenin that theory does not arise from social movements, which are considered historically crucial, but politically blind. In the Leninist doctrine as it was established by Stalin and thereafter shared by all the communists faithful to the USSR, the perspective was even more restricted: so much so that the party’s central committee remained the only source of legitimate knowledge.

Cultural pluralism was always openly defended in the capitalist world, but at the same time there was an essentially unchallenged assumption that in politics, as well as in other fields of culture, only experts are authorized to educate the non-experts.

The Cultural Revolution destroyed this certitude. During this sequence, not only Mao’s thought was to be exalted, but also that of the masses.

The investigations conducted by the experts among the masses seem today only one of many totalitarian injunctions which justified deportations and other ill-treatments of dissenters. However, this understanding fails to explain why the Cultural Revolution became a universal reference of the ‘Long Sixty-Eight’. It is not a coincidence that the investigations among the masses, even if otherwise called and with completely other aims, were thereafter considered an absolutely necessary condition of any political or economic strategy even in capitalist countries.

5. The end of the ‘Long Sixty-Eight’ as the conclusion of the most relevant political experimentation in the last forty years

The word ‘revolution’ nowadays is often used in an equivocal way as a synonym to ‘regime change’, i.e. to support the destabilization of local regimes with the aim of promoting various foreign interferences by the most powerful countries. The issue therefore is to restore political dignity to this word and all that it meant from the end of the Seventeenth to the end of Twentieth centuries. My proposition is that of rethinking this long cycle as a season of political experimentations. This choice is justified if we think that the category of revolution was first used in those astrophysical experiments which made the transition “from the closed world to the infinite universe” possible, according to the title of the famous book by Alexandre Koyré. Robespierre, for instance, was absolutely clear about the fact that the French revolution should be a continuation in the political field of what the Copernicus discovery had begun in the field of physics.

Obviously, this experimental way to approach politics has to be distinguished from other kinds of approaches. In order to simplify this distinction, I propose to divide the latter into two types: the first one is normally called conservative politics and the other one is generally known as reactionary politics.

Reducing the political issue to these three major categories (experimental, conservative and reactionary) has multiple theoretical consequences. But the basic assumption remains: the aim of conservative politics is to conserve the continuity of institutions, whereas the aim of reactionary politics is to react in front of an explosion of disorder, so as to restore an imaginary order. Both these types of politics are, however, different from the experimental one in a crucial feature: the latter is only possible if it is thought and experienced as a singular sequence, in discontinuity with all that precedes as well as with all that follows. It implies that we can draw a political lesson from each of these experiences only if we recognize that each one is deeply different from the others of the same type. But we also have to consider another point in this regard: just as in scientific or artistic experimentations, also in political ones, only the course of time decides on the success or failure.

It is very significant that only a few years ago even the former President of France Nicolas Sarkozy declared that it was necessary to break with the aftermath of 'Sixty-Eight'. The recent decline of his public image suggests that these consequences were stronger than he thought.

As a matter of fact, every time conservative and reactionary politics become powerless and the need for new political experimentations emerges again, thinking about the 'Long Sixty-Eight' is unavoidable.

6. There is a correlation between the conclusion of 'the Glorious Thirty Years of the welfare state' and the end of Socialist states' and Communist parties' credibility

In the second part of the Seventies, China definitely took the capitalist path that had always been opposed by the Cultural Revolution during the ten years of its different waves. In the same years, the USSR seemed to obtain some success with its traditional Cold War enemy in the diplomatic plan of the so called '*Détente*' (for instance, in 1976 at the Conference of Helsinki which first recognized the division of Germany). At that time, the USA were deeply wounded by the end of the Vietnam war and by Nixon's impeachment.

Nevertheless, in both the Chinese and the Soviet instances, Communist universalism is explicitly abandoned for the benefit of nationalist interests. Neither enthusiasm nor fear could be generated within these countries anymore. All the socialist and communist parties and class organizations started to decline or to break definitely with their traditions. It was precisely in those years that 'the Glorious Thirty' came to the end.

7. Starting from the Eighties, the global leadership has belonged to the neoliberal democratic regimes which follow the pattern of the so called 'biggest democracy in the world'

Towards the end of the Seventies, an unprecedented opportunity presented itself for the US. From the second post-war period until the Sixties, its influence was limited by the rise of Communism in half of the world and by the enthusiasm thus aroused. After the 'Long Sixty-Eight', the Vietnam defeat and Nixon's impeachment presented problems for the credibility of the 'biggest democracy in the world', which reached a low ebb. However, these problems were overcome as soon as a Hollywood actor entered the White House. While China was folding in on itself in order to reestablish a capitalist system, the USSR was trying to recover from 'stagnation' by embarking on the Soviet-Afghan war, which indeed contributed to its

definitive collapse. Following this, Communism, class parties and class organizations lost all credibility, and therefore so did the ideals of social justice they conveyed.

More than one century of experiences in the name of these ideals was reduced to nothing. This bleak void is one of the first conditions of the epochal turning point which became possible during the Eighties: on one hand, the particular pattern of American democracy can work as a universal model for democracy; on the other hand, this pattern can also impose a new version of economic liberalism. Nothing will be able to hinder the global hegemony of neoliberal democracy anymore. Thanks to its different interpretations, now more democratic, now more neoliberal, this kind of regime will be adopted by all the governments of the richest countries, which each suffer from every kind of criticism and opposition, but remain more unified around the same strategic mainstream than ever before.

8. The present democratic regimes are all constituted by neoliberal political ideals

In other words, it is vain both to fear the existence of a capitalism without democracy (as Žižek and Sloterdijk maintain) and to hope in a democracy beyond capitalism (as Hardt and Negri maintain). Neo-liberalism is often criticized nowadays, but always as a limitation of (or a threat to) democracy. On the contrary, it is important to admit that capitalism needs both democracy and neo-liberalism (as Badiou maintains). The point is that in our time, despite all the increasing riots and general disorders, there is 'no alternative'. In this absence of political and intellectual alternatives, the leading world democracies can reduce the traditional distinction between the rulers and the ruled, the capitalists and the workers, the rich and the poor, to a biological distinction between the worthier and the less worthy: that is, between the fit and the less fit to survive.

Helping disadvantaged populations has become less of a problem for governments. The solution they propose is to increase philanthropic operations, whose aim is to extend financial power to the utmost limits. Worldwide, people such as the '*ninja*' (no income, no job, no asset), the homeless or the poor have been seduced by capitalism and integrated into the system of debts and credits. This is the result of carefully calculated capitalist interests, but also of the unchallenged belief that the so called rules of the market are the most democratic way to select and reward people and communities.

9. “Superclass” and “the bottom billion”: beyond the ruled world

As democratization implies a single political strategy, its main result is the global increase in social differences. During the Nineties, some poor countries began to become richer, but within every one of these countries the gap between the poor and the rich increased dramatically. In 2008 Rothkopf (author of the book *Superclass*) counted six thousand “Very Important Persons” who live far from public eye, but are able to condition the destinies of the six billion or more people who live on the Earth. Whereas Collier counted in his book *A Bottom Billion* of people condemned to fight hunger, thirst, illness and local wars only to survive.

The class struggle theory was the most important interpretation of the classical theory of the division between rulers and ruled, but I maintain it is no longer so.

What is missing nowadays is the social battlefield itself: the most important political problem has become the global injustice suffered by all the growing populations explicitly abandoned by every government. It is not enough to analyze and to emphasize the contingent conflicts that those populations fight against exterior effects of the domination of the “superclass”: the most important political question is how to unify the “bottom billion” around new strategic ideas.

10. Do we live in the “era of sad passions” (as described by Benasayag and Schmit)? Definitely, in one of political apathy

What is necessary for survival depends today not directly on nature, but on the decisions of the powers able to make natural resources available: and that is true everywhere. But these powers are limiting their range of action more and more. Increasing populations thus see their hopes reduced. Not only in the world peripheries, but also at the heart of capitalistic countries where both unemployment and wages too low for workers to survive are already considered normal. The time when the future was a source of hope is only an old memory. Nobody knows how or where the faith in progress can come back. In the psychoanalytical field, a growth of sad passions is noted. In the political one, we simply notice an absence of passions. In this regard the principal problem is, in my view, that the conditions for experimenting with the ideals of social justice are completely new: beyond every conflict between rulers and the ruled, without any certainty of global progress. If that is the case, first of all intellectual work is necessary to renew a debate about the way to conceive these kinds of experiments.

11. Beyond the juxtaposition between democracy and dictatorship

I don't know if it is the case elsewhere, but in Europe we are often told that the rulers have to do their 'homework' as dictated by the requirements of markets. If we consider that the word "dictatorship" comes exactly from the verb "to dictate", it follows that the "dictatorship of markets" is something more than a fictional story created by incurable extremists. On the contrary, the assumption that the many countries allied with the US are ruled in a democratic way is not at all realistic. In effects, this assumption works only to hide the power of the "super-class" who is able to condition markets and politicians.

The self-evident fact is that no political action (meeting or demonstration, negotiation or choice of candidates, election or management of election results, and so on) is possible, if its conditions are not preliminarily dictated by some entity which has the power to decide them. Recognizing that doesn't imply the nihilistic conclusion that all politics are dictatorial, yet entails an admission ever more important today: that in any politics there is always a dictatorial "feature" (according to the terminology of Mao's text *On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People* (1957)', which can be treated into two opposite ways; on the one hand, this feature could be declared, democratically discussed so that to limit its consequences; on the other hand, if this feature is hidden, its consequences are unlimited and democracy is reduced to simulacrum.

But there is also another important implication coming from the admission that no democracy can exist without "dictating". This implication is that no people can have force (according to the etymological root of the word "democracy"), if there aren't intellectual authors able to dictate how and when this force could be conceived and organized. It is not a coincidence that among all the greatest political thinkers it is impossible to find one who believes in democracy as such. And the fact that this belief is virtually obligatory nowadays, shows just how low the passions for politics are.

12. Rethinking the “enthusiasm” of the ‘Long Sixty-Eight’

That the engine of capitalism is greed is not news.

In the last thirty years the novelty has rather been the absence of ideas and organized bodies searching for greater social justice. It is for this reason that today the desire to become richer and richer has no limits, even if fewer and fewer people can be satisfied in this quest. Technical propositions to exit from the crisis are not lacking. The lack is instead of a politics able to experiment with these propositions. Numerous economists invoke their arrival, but the years pass and there is no sign of it.

Therefore, it is not an academic or nostalgic exercise to rethink 'the Glorious Thirty Years', the 'Long Sixty-Eight' and the 'enthusiasm' for a greater social justice aroused by the 'East wind'. At the beginning, all that was possible thanks to the opposition between the two parties present everywhere in the period after the Second World War: i.e. the communist and the anti-communist ones.

Nevertheless, further experiments seeking to establish greater social justice were pushed to the most extreme consequences above all by small groups with big ideas and passions.

Isn't this the best example of what there still is to think and do in politics?

How to learn from the masses, through adequate inquiries? How to experiment with models for establishing greater social justice, starting from where governments are absent? How to organize a new politics, whose aim is not simply to gain power?

These three and many other fundamental questions of the 'Long Sixty-Eight' are certainly not anachronistic.

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