

Investigation of distal repetitive sequences in the genus allium

Chester, Michael

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The *indignados*, populism and emotions in political theory: response to Paolo Cossarini

Lasse Thomassen

School of Politics & International Relations

Queen Mary University of London

In his paper, 'Protests, Emotions and Democracy: Theoretical Insights from the *Indignados* Movement', Paolo Cossarini (2014) argues – quite rightly, I think – that there is nothing new about the central role that emotions place in contemporary protest movements such as the Spanish *indignados*. He shows how emotions have played a constant role in politics and in political theory over the centuries, and also in the works of those political theorists who have explicitly disavowed emotions on the basis that they endanger progress. In short, no politics and political theory without emotions.

To insist on the enduring centrality of emotions in the history of modern political thought is also to challenge those – liberals, above all – who read the history of modern political thought as a history of progress, and where progress consists in the gradual victory of reason over emotions, and where emotions are associated with irrationality. But to insist on the centrality of emotions in the history of political thought and of politics raises a different question about the present of that history. If we read the history of political thought as the gradual triumph of reason over emotions, contemporary protest movements based firmly in emotions will appear either dangerous (because they are irrational outbursts of passions) or welcome (because introducing a form of politics that is otherwise suppressed). Contemporary social movements based in emotions become interesting because they are the exception.

If, on the other hand, we read the history of political thought in a way that insists on the centrality of emotions to that history, these same protest movements appear in a different light. They might appear as just another instance of the politics of emotions: 'emotions are not something that only occasionally explode on the political scene, rather they are central to politics itself'. Or they may appear to epitomise the role of emotions in politics and in political thinking: 'they represent one of the most remarkable examples of the role of emotions in politics'. The danger here is that we read the history of political thought through the lens of our present of a particular form of social movements, and that this is done in such a way that this history becomes what establishes that contemporary phenomenon as a normal phenomenon, and/or the truth of that history is revealed in that contemporary phenomenon. In

brief, my question here is what role the *indignados* play in this history of political thought presented by Cossarini.

This takes me to the character of the *indignados*. Cossarini rightly point out the populist character of the *indignados* and similar protest movements. They make claims in the name of the people (in one form or another) and against the system (the government, the political and economic elites, and so on). Some protesters may balk at the label ‘populism’ because of the associations it has, among other things because of the current rise of right-wing populism in Europe. However, as Cossarini notes, and following Laclau (2005), populism precisely takes the form of the creation of an antagonistic frontier between ‘the people’ and ‘the system’, irrespective of who are said to belong to the people and to the system.

Cossarini then adds what I think is a very important aspect of these protest movements: ‘there is a complex articulation of beliefs towards the institutional and electoral political participation’. These movements were not only populist in the sense just described, and they were not simply street movements, and this was so from the very beginning. From the beginning, the movements were engaging with existing institutions – media, internet networks, organisations – while simultaneously maintaining a critical distance from them. And the effects of these movements must also be seen in terms of the ways in which individuals and discourses moved between the movements and institutions (Prentoulis and Thomassen 2014). What is more, from the beginning, there were complex debates within the movements about the organisational structure and different forms of representation; as such, the movements were never completely horizontal, but were always marked by forms of organisation and representation (Prentoulis and Thomassen 2013).

If we look at the protest movements in this way, then at least two forms of analysis appear inadequate. The first is the analysis of the movements – and, I would insist, of any other form of politics – as purely populist. Here we would have to insist that, although the populist creation of an antagonistic frontier may be an unavoidable element of any form of politics, this frontier will never be absolute. Instead, this form of populist politics will always be combined with a more institutional form of politics, even if the balance between the two will vary from one case to another. This obviously complicates the analysis as well as the political strategies available (Prentoulis and Thomassen 2014). The second form of analysis to appear inadequate is the analysis of those who follow Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2012) and insist on the horizontal character of these movements and on the possibility of going beyond verticality and representation. Horizontalism and the critique of representation

are clearly part of these movements. For instance, when the Spanish *indignados* claimed *¡No Nos Representan!*, they were not merely saying that the current politicians did not represent them, but pointing to a larger problem with the political system and, beyond that, representation. However, rather than insisting on the possibility of going beyond all vertical and representational relations, it is more fruitful to analyse the *indignados* in terms of how their discourse or practice articulated new understandings of representation together with horizontalism (Prentoulis and Thomassen 2013).

The question of representation is also relevant to the central problem of democracy, namely political legitimacy. Cossarini writes:

Political representation lead to a hierarchy between representatives and represented, which not only shows the ever-decreasing quality of democracies and the weakness of accountability, but more importantly representation ends up being the problem in the first place.

From this it would seem that representation itself is the problem, not any particular form of representation. But Cossarini then goes on to argue that the protest movements are responding to ‘the slow collapse of representative democratic governance under the domination of economic imperatives’. Here the problem is no longer representation as such, but rather the form that representation has taken today in the context of neoliberal capitalism and government.

I think there are three ways of reading this. One is to say that the problem is representation as such, and that, therefore, representation is always at the expense of legitimacy. The implication is that one needs to minimise representation in order to maximise legitimacy, and we can then read the *indignados* as an attempt to do just that. The problem with this line of argument is that it rests on a view that it is possible to go beyond representation, if not in practice then at least in theory. This is a problem if you believe that representation is constitutive (Thomassen 2007), and that we must account for the way in which political legitimacy is produced discursively (Laclau 2005). Another way of reading Cossarini’s argument is to say that representation and political legitimacy are inherently connected. This is so, one might argue, because there is no extra-discursive, or extra-representational, legitimacy; political claims gain legitimacy when they are recognised as legitimate by others, which means that legitimacy is mediated by language, discourse or representation (Laclau 2005). This is the way in which I would like to understand political

legitimacy and its connection to representation, but here 'representation' takes on a larger meaning than representational political institutions. It does mean, however, that there will always be a *problem* of political legitimacy because there will always be some distance between representative and represented. This takes me to the third way of understanding Cossarini's claim, which is to focus on the second quote and identify the current economic and political order as the problem. Such a reading would suggest that there is no general problematic of representation in relation to political legitimacy, and that any current problems could be resolved by relieving the representative democratic institutions of the imperatives of global capitalism. However, this would miss what I take to be the constitutive character of representation, which means that no political order will be perfectly legitimate. In this sense, the constitutive character of representation may lead to resignation, but it may just as easily be seen as an opportunity to think of democracy as an inherently open ended struggle over political legitimacy.

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