

# **Post-political articulations of democracy: a critical review of the anti-austerity protest discourses**

Jonas Van Vossolle, Centro de Estudos Sociais, Universidade de Coimbra

## **Abstract**

The economic conditions and austerity policies in Southern Europe have produced a hegemonic crisis of democracy. While unions and the traditional left questioned the idea of a democracy without its social substance in the form of social right - new social movements have radicalized the idea. Demanding “democracia real ya!”, they directly attacked representation and the political system as a whole. This paper makes a critical analysis of the anti-political and anti-ideological stance of the newest social movements in Portugal and problematizes its possible articulation with the post-political elements of the dominant neoliberal form. Therefore it first discusses the concept of depolitization and post-politics and its link with the dominant neoliberal ideology. Then this framework is then applied to the founding manifestos of a selection of 6 anti-austerity social movements; Movimento Geração à Rasca, Movimento 12 Março, Acampada do Rossio, Indignados de Lisboa, Acampada de Coimbra and Que Se Lixe a Troika. In each of these manifestoes the elements that reflect the post-political discourse about democracy are selected and criticized. These elements include the self-identification as “personal” and “post-ideological”, taking distance of (party)politics and addressing the crisis as a problem of “politicians”. We will argue that this critique of “the old way of doing politics” and the post-ideological stance; as well as the illusions in participative democracy as such, actually are Fukuyamaist, and avoid addressing the structural problems of the political economy behind the crisis. A conscience of these post-political elements is crucial to avoid a cooptation of this discourse in the dominant neoliberal framework and to make possible an articulation with other anti-capitalist forces in order to bring forward a unified counter hegemonic discourse able to mobilise and politicize the different layers of society against austerity policies.

## **Keywords**

Austerity; depolitization; social movements; protest; democracy

## **Introduction**

In the past few years, the deep social crisis severely shattered the previously existing consensus on the existing liberal electoral democracy in austerity-ridden Europa. In previous work (Van Vossolle, 2014; Van Vossolle & Castro, 2014) I have tried to explain the crisis of democracy in Portugal as a divergence of different models and discourses about democracy in the Portuguese society. An important part of this divergence was provoked by the contestation of electoral, representative democracy, by the large number of new social protest movements that rose from the ashes of the continuing crisis and reclaimed “True democracy”. This epistemological opening around the concept of democracy – a situation of demodiversity the peaceful or conflicting coexistence [...] of different models and practices of democracy” (Santos, 2005, p. lxiii) – is an important element for having the possibility to re-articulate the discourses about democracy in a

counter hegemonic model, able to mobilize resistance for an anti-capitalist alternative. In this article, however I want to address the problematic postpolitical elements of the discourse about democracy of these new social movements. Their parallelism with the dominant discourse about democracy makes parts of the protest-discourse prone for a re-articulation with dominant depoliticized discourses about democracy. Conscience about these elements is thus crucial to safeguard the critical possibilities of these movements and to build a contra-hegemonic narrative that challenges the power-position of the post-political and technocratic discourse of neoliberal democracy in the austerity context. First this paper shall discuss the concept of depolitization and post-politics and how this is part of the dominant neoliberal ideology. Then we will discuss how this post-political elements are reflected in the discourses of the new protest movements in Portugal. Finally we will discuss how these post-political elements are problematic, both in the analysis as in the presented solutions according to the post-political discourses.

## **1. The Post-Political democracy**

The dominant, neoliberal discourse about democracy is based upon electoral representative conception, limited by a liberal division between public and private space. Democracy is narrowed down to the electoral act by which citizens every 4 to 5 years have the right to choose their representatives from recognized political parties. Those representatives have then the right to conduct “responsible” policies; but their area of power is increasingly limited by the primacy of the market in ever increasing areas of social life. In the case of the European countries under Troika governance, these limitations have been brought to their limits; through the limitation of political sovereignty by globalization, the agreements with the troika and the power of financial markets due to their influence on state finances and debt.

Based upon Slavoj Žižek, Jacques Rancière and Chantal Mouffes (1994, 2005) conception of the Political, Swyngedouw (2009, p. 613) sums up the elements characterizing a post-political conception of post-democracy: 1. The externalization of problems which are integral/inherent to the relations of Global neoliberal capitalism, while side-effects are portrayed as a total threat. 2 populist politics that elevate the interest of an imaginary “the people” to a universal level and therefore foreclosing the “opening spaces that permit the universalizing of the claims of particular groups or classes”. 3 the

‘enemy’ or the target of concern is continuously externalized and disembodied. The ‘enemy’ is always vague, ambiguous, unnamed and uncounted and, ultimately, empty. 4. The target of concern can be managed through a consensual dialogical politics and, consequently, demands become depoliticized and politics naturalized.

In the discourses that will follow, this paper critically analyses the ways how the concept of democracy is rearticulated in the post-crisis period show elements of such “depoliticization”. Depoliticization or post-political is here used as a container concept which according Swyngedouw (2009) means “a reduction of the political, it evacuates if not forecloses the properly political and becomes part and parcel of the consolidation of a postpolitical and postdemocratic polity”. This container contains overlapping categories, both Anti-party<sup>1</sup>, which reduces the possibility of organized antagonistic collective struggle, and Anti-political and Post-political discourses, that mainly concern the dissociation between politics and disagreement. (Clarke, 2012)

## **2. The protest-movements’ discourses**

A selection has been made with six of the “newest” social protest movements that surged in the post-crisis period, including Movimento Geração á Rasca (2011 - GR), Movimento 12 Março (2012 - M12M), Acampada de Lisboa (2011 - AL), Indignados de Lisboa (2011 - IL), Acampada de Coimbra (2012 - AC) and Que Se Lixe a Troika (2013 - QSLT). All 6 are characterized by the fact that they emerged as protest movements against the crisis and the austerity policies and that they were independent of the “old way of doing politics” that is to say, independent of trade-unions and political parties.

These movements have been pluralistic, involving people from a wide array of political and social backgrounds society. Some had been active in political organizations and trade-unions for years, but more had their first time experience in broad mobilizations. Many of them had overlapping participations, and the ideas that came out of the assembly movements varied according to the organizational relations inside; some being dominated by organized political groups, others by discourses of experienced individual activists.

The ideas and discourses reflected by such a heterogeneous multitude of people are thus in themselves very heterogeneous, both in discourses as in personal composition.

---

<sup>1</sup> A deeper analysis of how anti-party discourse is part of the anti-political / depoliticized discourse will be developed elsewhere.

Some of them, such as the Geração á Rasca, Movimento 12 de Março or Que Se Lixe a Troika have known huge demonstrations, but were organized by a relatively small group of activists, while other – assembly – movements, such as Acampada de Coimbra, Acampada do Rossio and Indignados de Lisboa have been much smaller; involving more horizontal debates among participants, and have had fluctuant participation.

If we consult the founding manifestos of these movements, all have made claims about democracy; in some way of the other contesting the democratic character of the government and Troika imposed policies. The only exception here is Geração á Rasca – which was initially focused on the rights of the young generation without a future. But as the movements' mobilization quickly became a vehicle of wider protests, the claim of “democracy” became part of the discourse of its sequel Movimento 12 de Março; something which is clearly stated in the latter Manifesto: “Struggling (á Rasca) and outraged (Indignados) but with proposals: we were more than 500.000 - This was the day when we claimed: We are the democracy”.

Most of them presented explicit political and traditionally leftwing and anti-capitalist aims, in particular an opposition to Troika and austerity (AL, M12, QSLT) and against the law of markets governing Portuguese society (AL, IL, M12, AC, QSLT) and in defense of 25 April (M12M). The rest of this paper however, will concentrate on the discursive conceptions of democracy that could be addressed as post-political. I do not claim that these presented elements are a representative reconstruction of the ideas of the newest social anti-austerity movements, the politicized elements are as important. But addressing and criticizing these selected depoliticized conceptions of democracy – which have been moreover been considered enigmatic for these kind of movements internationally – is an important step to understand “dangers” of being coopted by mainstream capitalism-legitimizing discourses and continue a practical critique of neoliberalism through the mobilization of similar social movements that reclaiming democracy against neoliberalism and capitalism.

The 6 movements could be divided in 2 categories; the broad mobilizations and the smaller assembly movements. The broader mobilizing movements such as GA, M12M and QSLT were themselves organized by a smaller group of activists, many of them coming from a background of organized social movements and political organizations. QSLT for example united various activists the Left Block and the Communist Party. The manifestos of these movements show considerably less “anti-political” or “anti-party” statements. It is nevertheless remarkable that none of these three manifestos explicitly

mentions the traditional political forms of organization and representation, such as parties and trade-unions. This absence is in itself a significant part of political discourse – and can be seen as representing a general anti-political and anti-party mood in society.

In these three manifestos a particular importance is given to the participative dimension of the democratic imaginary which of time becomes more “politicized”: In the case of GA this happened in a rather “naïve” depolitized context - which explains why the movement got support from people and movements on the oppositional right – in particular the JSD, and even the extreme right. The Geração á Rasca manifesto had the title “nonpartisan<sup>2</sup>, secular and pacific mobilization” and states: “We protest so that all the responsible people for our actual situation of uncertainty – politicians, employers and ourselves – act together for a quick change of this reality, which has turned up to be unsustainable... We protest for a solution and want to be part of it”. In the following manifesto of the M12M, this changed; the manifesto changed to: “The policy-makers have not listened to us!”, and the renewed appeal for “civic participation” becomes one in which democratic participation becomes a protest activity against the policy-makers instead of with them; in which democracy is reclaimed through this activity: “Democracy is what we make from it”. No mentioning of any political organized structure or practice of representation though.

This is different in the manifesto of QSLT – whose organizing committee, as mentioned before included “hidden”<sup>3</sup> activists of the PCP and the Left Bloc. It presents itself as “a place of encounter of the various democratic anti-troika currents”. Nevertheless it is cautiously stating “We don’t have the pretension of representing organizations or social sectors. We want to discuss and bring together initiatives with the aim of bringing down the government and all the future governments collaboration with the Troika-programs.”

In the three assembly movements the depolitical elements seems to be stronger. Of those three – the Acampada de Lisboa is the one which shows less elements of depolitization in its discourse, as among its members were many organized political party-activists; though also AL states: “We are not against politics but we do not represent

---

<sup>2</sup> Translation from PT: “a-partidario”

<sup>3</sup> The fact that they need to remain “hidden” – and that the press “revealed” their identities equally says a lot about the general anti-party sentiment.

any party or trade-union”. In both the assembly movements of Lisboa and Coimbra there was a struggle between those organized militants (coming from Bloco de Esquerda, MAS, Rubra, SR...) and organized and anarchistic activists who mistrusted any kind of organization, particularly the organized activists intervened as such in the meetings. The suspicion against party-political militants inside, a total disbelief in the legitimacy of electoral party-led democracy and widespread ideas of corruption of political organizations was reflected in the remaining manifestos.

In its “Manifesto Primavera Global Coimbra”, the acampada de Coimbra appealed for an “nonpartisan, secular and pacific mobilization” – repeating the slogan of Geração à Rasca; “we will occupy the squares to build it! We will remain on the squares to create places of debate, sharing and free expression, really democratic, in order to collectively built alternatives and delineate resistance strategies to the politics that bring more than 99% of the population to poverty while a very small minority gets increasingly richer.” Most anti-political and de-political elements however come in the manifesto of “Indignados de Lisboa”, an assembly movement which surged as a split from the Assembleia do Rossio. It presents itself as follows: “This movement is open, nonpartisan and non-violent, with a horizontal structure and without leaders. We condemn in a clear way the political, economic and social system. We refuse to be slaves and hostages of a privileged and corrupt political class, an electoral system closed for the people and a markets-economy without rules nor ethics, leaving us unprotected and voiceless.”

They defend a “True democracy” based upon Participative practices, combined with an electoral reform that has the goal of breaking the electoral monopoly of parties, ending the “privileges of the political class” (pensions, immunities), making elected positions revocable and binding electoral promises, only open to change through referenda. Arguing against corruption and favoring of private and financial interests, they emphasize the importance of transparency. This task of “Refounding democracy, building another more just and solidary world” is one that is a responsibility for “us all”, as “the future belongs to us all, to our grandparents and parents, and particularly to our children”.

### **3. Critique of the post-political discourse**

Typical for these movements is that they appeal to a non-ideological political subject – they are movements of “persons” instead of people with a party or ideological affiliation. “We – citizens” (AL) often followed by a broad summing up of different

identities where anyone can be part of, is something which comes back in different forms in the Manifestoes of AL, GR, M12M and IL... In IL this becomes “We are common people, people with duties, rights and duties, people that wake up every morning to study, work of search for work”. This reflects the Spanish 15M critique of Ideology as the “old way of doing politics”. (Garcia, 2014, p. 208; Perugorría & Tejerina, 2013, p. 433) Such an approach to ideology assumes that it is a fixed body of ideas and values that frames the world; such as would liberalism, socialism, fascism, etc. Based upon the political distrust of citizens and the mistrust for and between present political organizations, this reflects a social consensus that ideologies have failed and we would need some kind of non-ideological resistance; beyond left and right, beyond culture, beyond class. This is problematic because this perception about ideology within the indignado movement is clearly a reflection of the mainstream post-modern capitalist ideology itself. It reflects the post-1989 belief that we would be past the “Big stories of the XXth century”; somehow we would be accepting the end of ideology. At the moment when Global capitalism is confronted with its biggest crisis in 80 years it seems that the left has in some way become what Slavoj Žižek (Žižek, 2009, p. 88) has called more Fukuyamaist than Francis Fukuyama (2006) himself.

To the question “do these movements have an ideology?” (Garcia, 2014) one can only answer with “yes”; as even if it doesn't, it does. Ideology refers to the medium through which consciousness and meaningfulness operate; to how human beings live their life as conscious actors, making sense of their own actions and those of others. (Therborn, 1999, p. 2) To exist as a subject and to mobilize, a subject needs ideology to give meaning to his/her material conditions. Without ideology the indignado's would not exist. Ideology is the only way of recognizing - to have knowledge of a material situation, to measure it - to create difference with, to compare - with ideas of other material situations; and to transform it. Ideology is needed to link the contradictions of the economy – unemployment, degrading living conditions, loss of public services – to the idea that things should not be as they are, and start to search for the causes of the material conditions, problems of the governance structures.

The question thus rather becomes “which ideology?”. Here the assertion the self-assertion that the new social movements would be beyond ideology becomes really problematic. It is a well-known paradox about ideology within the academic literature about ideology – such as defended by Slavoj Žižek, Göran Therborn, Eric Swyngedouw and others – that “the non-ideology” or “apolitical position”, is not only “an ideology”,

but it is “the ideology” of our time. The power of ideology achieves its highest point, the hegemonic position of an ideology, exactly when its subjects do not recognize it anymore as ideology, but as unquestioned “truth”.

While the austerity movements were thus a reaction to the global capitalist crisis and neoliberal policies – and elements of this anti-capitalist and anti-austerity critique are present in the discourse – the discourse also still reflects elements of the neoliberal post-modern hegemony. At the core of this discourse about democracy lies an idea that it blames “politics” for the crisis and “mismanagement”. Ironically, “politics”, here is equalized to rather private matters such as corruption, careerism and “politique politicienne”, personal conflicts between parties and politicians that would disregard the common good, or what Chantal Mouffe (1994) conceived as “la politique”; a depoliticized, unpolitical, domesticated politics. By blaming “politics” for the crisis while conceptualizing “politics” the way it does, it de facto depoliticizes the causality of the crisis. By concentrating on matters of corruption and mismanagement of the political leaders, it leaves out the structural causes of the crisis, the contradictions of the capitalist economy, the structural imbalances of the Eurozone and the neoliberal design of the European Union, etc.<sup>4</sup>

Linked to such a conceptualization of crisis and democracy are the proposed solutions. These new movements haven often been accused of offering no concrete political alternatives.<sup>5</sup> In his analysis of the post-cold war protest movements Boaventura Sousa Santos (Bonet, 2010) had already explained that in detriment of any “real alternatives” to the capitalist system, since real socialism collapsed in 1989, anti-capitalist protest movements had resorted to the rather vague demand of “more democracy”. That is exactly what these new movements did. The political-economic crisis, which results in a legitimacy crisis of the capitalist governance structures, is framed as a crisis of representative democracy: representatives of the people do not really represent the people, but are caught in personal careerism, party-discipline, corruption and lack of power to control the financial markets. As an answer to this “problem”, the movements have tried to give the empty democratic signifier (Žižek, 2009) an emancipatory meaning by

---

<sup>4</sup> This reflects and reproduces the North-European racist framing of the Southern populations, as described in earlier work (Van Vossle, 2012). Addressing the “political culture” ultimately is an example of what Wendy Brown called the culturalization of politics; the racialization of a people, stripping it of its social and historical context, class-relations, contradictions, etc.

<sup>5</sup> Slavoj Žižek support this as critical: “Better to do nothing than to engage in localized acts whose ultimate function is to make the system run more smoothly. The threat today is not passivity, but pseudo-activity, the urge to “be active”, to “participate”. “(Žižek, 2009)



claiming its participatory dimension. Democracia Real Ya (real democracy now) came to mean “participatory democracy” – a demand linked to the very participative horizontal practices that characterized these new assembly movements – and became the primary slogan of the 15 M indignado movement in Spain, serving also as an inspiration in Portugal.

Despite its pretended emancipatory goal, participatory democracy also does not have an inherent social meaning/ideological interpretation aligned to material interests. This is exemplified by the fact that the participatory idea since the end of the 1990’s has been recuperated by the World Bank, and made it into a cornerstone of neoliberal economic “structural” reforms and “development” projects in the form of “participatory budgets” and “participation of the stakeholders”. Participative democracy thus remains a historically and socially disputed concept that awaits for a hegemonic interpretation, one which could have perfectly been part of Austeritarian interventions of the Troika in the PIGS; as part of “good governance practices”.

## **Conclusions**

The purpose of this paper was to discover the post-political elements in the discourse about democracy of the new social protest movements against austerity. It analyzed the manifestos of 6 of the most representative movements in Portugal and selected the elements that could reflect anti-political ideas. This include the silencing or the distancing of parties and politicians in general in those texts and the conception of the “personal” and “trans-ideological” subject. We have problematized anti-political elements in the discourses that framed crisis, that framed their own practices, as well as in the proposed participative solutions for the crisis. The anti-ideological and anti-political elements are de facto political and are a reflection of the neoliberal post-political post-democracy.

This paper only concentrated on these post-political elements. This does not mean that there are no politicizing elements as well. In fact, we have seen that politically organized activists since the beginning in 2011 have been trying to politicize the anti-austerity movements. Many times it happened with bad strategies – such as numeric control – and to a limited success; but still the anti-austerity discourse seemed to win from the post-political populist discourse. The later movements such as QSLT and its sequels have tended to articulate with the politically organized left of parties and trade-unions and

to present ever clearer an anti-neo-liberal agenda. In Greece and Spain these movements have even given rise to huge electoral successes of Syriza and Podemos. The overcoming of the post-political elements – such as a technocratic approach of the debt-question – and the distrust between and for parties and movements of the left in a clear unified discourse and practice against the neoliberal and technocratic European policies, will be crucial to have a similar success in Portugal.

## Bibliography

- Acampada de Coimbra. Manifesto Primavera Global (2012). Recuperado de <https://www.facebook.com/events/220132834764631/>
- Acampada de Lisboa. Manifesto (2011). Recuperado de <https://acampadalisboa.wordpress.com/2011/05/27/as-ruas-sao-nossas/>
- Bonet, A. J. A. (2010). La democracia revolucionaria, un proyecto para el siglo XXI (Entrevista a Boaventura de Sousa Santos). *Revista internacional de filosofía política*, (35), 117–148.
- Clarke, N. (2012). Urban policy mobility, anti-politics, and histories of the transnational municipal movement. *Progress in Human Geography*, 36(1), 25–43.
- Fukuyama, F. (2006). *The end of history and the last man*. Simon and Schuster.
- Garcia, R. D. (2014, novembro). Does tge Spanish 15M have an ideology? Issues of method and measurement. *Athenea Digital*, p. 199–217.
- Geração à Rasca. Manifesto (2011). Recuperado de <https://geracaoenrascada.wordpress.com/manifesto/>
- Indignados de Lisboa. Manifesto (2011). Recuperado de [https://www.facebook.com/IndignadosLisboa/info?tab=page\\_info](https://www.facebook.com/IndignadosLisboa/info?tab=page_info)
- Mouffe, C. (1994). *Le politique et ses enjeux: pour une démocratie plurielle*. Cambridge Univ Press.
- Mouffe, C. (2005). *On the political*. Psychology Press.
- Movimento 12M. Manifesto (2012). Recuperado de <http://www.movimento12m.org/?q=manifesto>
- Perugorriá, I., & Tejerina, B. (2013). Politics of the encounter: Cognition, emotions, and networks in the Spanish 15M. *Current Sociology*, 61(4), 424–442. doi:10.1177/0011392113479743
- Que Se Lixe a Troika. Manifesto (2013). Recuperado de <http://queselixeatroika15setembro.blogspot.pt/2013/01/manifesto-20012013.html>
- Santos, B. de S. (2005). *Democratizing democracy: Beyond the liberal democratic canon*. Verso New York.
- Swyngedouw, E. (2009). The Antinomies of the Postpolitical City: In Search of a Democratic Politics of Environmental Production. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 33(3), 601–620. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2427.2009.00859.x
- Therborn, G. (1999). *The Ideology of Power and the Power of Ideology*. Verso.
- Van Vossolle, J. (2012). *Blaming PIGS; culturalisation of politics and neocolonialism in the EU*.
- Van Vossolle, J. (2014). Divergent narratives on democracy in the Portuguese social conflict: A dialect materialist approach. *Cabo dos Trabalhos*, (10), 1–17.
- Van Vossolle, J., & Castro, B. I. (2014). Narrativas divergentes sobre a democracia no conflito social português – o caso da privatização da água. In A. Aragão, G. Bester,

& G. Hilario (Orgs.), *Direito e Ambiente para uma Democracia Sustentável - Diálogos Multidisciplinares entre Brasil e Portugal*. Curitiba: Instituto Memória.  
Zizek, S. (2009). *In Defense of Lost Causes*. London ; New York: Verso.  
Žižek, S. (2009). *The parallax view*. Cambridge, Mass.; London: MIT.

## **Biography**

Jonas Van Vossele is a PhD student at the Department of Political Science at Ghent University and at the Centro de Estudos Sociais at Coimbra University, Portugal. He is an associated researcher of the Ghent Association of Studies on Parties and Representation, GASPAR. He holds a master degree in Political Science and a master in Complementary Economics, both from the University of Ghent. These are complemented with a post-graduate degree in advanced studies of democracy in the XXI century at the University of Coimbra. Jonas' main research interest concerns the study of democracy, social movements, social protests and critical political science and political economy. His current PhD research focusses on the influence of the euro crisis on democratic legitimacy in Southern Europe, and Portugal in particular. This research focusses on the role of social conflict and hegemony in the conceptualizations of democracy in the political and academic debates. He is a member of the ECPR standing group of South European Politics. He is an associated researcher of the Ghent Association on Parties and Representation at the faculty of social and political sciences in Ghent. Jonas is currently doing fieldwork in Coimbra, at the Center of Social Studies.  
jonas.vanvossole@ugent.be