

The Search for Political Heteronomy- New Ledgers of Complaints

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The “great national debate” offers an opportunity too good to miss. It should be seized upon and used to extricate public consultations from the rut in which they usually take place. Of course, it will be compared, misleadingly, to the pre-revolutionary episode when “ledgers of complaints” (“*cahiers de doléances*”) were drawn up. For the debate to be fruitful, we will have to find a way to repair two threads that seem to be completely broken: how can *political speech* get moving again? And, once it is back in motion, how can it compose the *res publica*? Without these two elements, any “national debate” is somewhat premature since France is struggling, thanks to the “yellow vests”, with the first major crisis of the New Climate Regime.¹ Any desire to debate which solution might be best puts the cart before the horse because no-one, at any rank on the social scale, has the slightest idea how to extract our societies from the social and ecological impasse in which they find themselves.

First, get political speech moving again

The more we read the contributions, tabled in town halls, to the “ledgers of complaints” that try to channel the “yellow vests”, the more we realize how far removed they are from the notebooks of the same name that preceded, in 1789, the meeting of the Estates General. But we also realize how far they are from the *new ledgers of complains* that we should be learning to write by making the most of such a poorly organized debate. This would first of all require us to resolve the crisis of extreme *depoliticization* we are in.

This depoliticization can be summed up in a cruel phrase: mute people trying to speak to deaf ones. While “the people” seem unable to articulate political positions that can be understood by the government; “the government” also seems incapable of listening to anyone’s claims. Blocked at both transmission and reception ends, a feeling of despair settles in. It is as if the breath that energizes the political spirit of an entire nation has completely vanished. It is quite possible that in France we have never before seen a situation of such profound silence in the midst of such a flood of words. We see crowds trying to talk to each other, we see the State trying to fit them into a traditional mold, but, for the moment in any case, we have the impression of a film with the sound-track turned off.

¹ For an explanation of this expression, see Bruno Latour, trans. C. Porter, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, John Wiley: 2017.

There is an old misunderstanding about what it means to express oneself politically. It hinges on the usual distinction between the *content* of a political expression from the *movement* or, if you will, from the spirit in which it is expressed. Millions of people can be heard uttering statements with political content (“the republican order must be maintained”, “Macron resignation”, “Increase the minimum wage to 1500 euros”, “End the masquerade” etc.), without these statements having any political articulation, vector, movement or direction. In other words, between the adjectival “what I say is deeply ‘political’” and the adverbial “what I say, I say ‘politically’”, there is a huge gap.

This explains why one can have the impression of an intense political life, as at present, under the pretext that tens of millions of statements with political content are crisscrossing the mediasphere, even though, from the political *movement* point of view, it seems a deep silence has descended. It is this paradox of apparent wealth and scarcity that explains the impoverishment of current discourse: what members of the government say may be as empty of politics and movement as what some of “the people” are saying, while all feel that they are expressing themselves legitimately and authentically—yet without being heard, much less understood. Enough for someone to get angry enough to want to beat up a cop or decide to get busy with a truncheon.

The origin of this rage seems to come from the belief that people, simply because they have a brain, a voice, experience, something to complain about, a function, a right, *are therefore able, spontaneously*, to say something politically relevant. But for them to be in a position to express themselves politically, they must be addressed in a certain way: thrown off guard, destabilized, provoked, pushed and pulled. It is prudent to assume that, with few exceptions, we have nothing to say that is politically interesting until we are seized by this very particular form of political summons. And this applies just as much to the student from the National Administration School trained at Sciences Po, as to someone burning pallets on a roundabout. As strange as it may seem, it is only when words move publicly in a certain way that citizens are able to react to them as they pass. Without a constituted audience, there is no political subject.

We still have to make this audience exist.² Indeed, the strange property of political statements is that their task—an eminently temporary, risky, fragile task—is to *produce those who formulate them!* Hence the immense difference between a statement of opinion that has no further consequence than being yet another opinion, and a committed statement that demands, upsets, moves, sets in motion and performs this surprising result: a citizen-capable-of-expression. The historians of the Revolution have clearly shown the effect of the birth of the citizen and even to some extent of the French people themselves, as they reacted

² John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems: An Essay in Political Inquiry*, Oxford: Holt, 1927.

to King Louis XVI's summons to write ledgers of complains, yet in 1788 no one would have bet a farthing on the ability of these same "people" to express themselves. The passage of the political word makes the person it challenges stand up and forces him to stand on his feet as if he were being held by another power to act that forces him to speak differently and in a completely different tone. (This is what Joël Pommerat has so cleverly staged in his play—*Ça ira (1) Fin de Louis*—as if we were still capable of representing this process in the theatre despite not knowing how to do it in the street.)

But what is an engaged or engaging word, as opposed to words that look like clicks on a social media network? Why are they so different? Why is the price to be paid for the former so high that they seem to have become quite rare? Because they do not come in any way from a "I think with conviction that"? Far from coming from the depths of the individual, they think they have to keep fishing for what others, further down the chain, will do with them. It is only under this condition that the circulation of this very particular type of expression can end up weaving an *ersatz* political body instead of other forms of solidarity.

To close the circle, it doesn't matter what sector is chosen as the starting point: I am struck by challenging words; they are requiring me to express an opinion; I send that back to my neighbour, like the famous ferret in the children's refrain, as I ready myself for a series of drastic possibilities:

- a) these words are not addressed anonymously to all and sundry (or to the web) but to someone I can specify, name, recognize, whether they are friends, enemies or indifferent;
- b) I must be prepared for the person on the receiving end, whether friend or enemy, to challenge, transform, disrupt or complicate the statement I give him;
- c) I must therefore anticipate a more or less heated controversy which, by definition, cannot be resolved by appealing to a higher principle or an external arbitrator (this is what specifies the modern definition of politics, as opposed to all forms of rationality—learned, instrumental, communicative, etc.—which all assume that a higher level will close the case);
- d) the closure will therefore necessarily come, and I must also prepare myself for it, in the form of a *rough compromise* that will afford no greater satisfaction to me than the others who have been involved in the controversy;
- e) I still have to be prepared that this cobbled-together decision will have good or bad consequences that none of the protagonists wanted or planned;
- f) I must also accept in advance that the way the action is inevitably taken off course will bring about more or less virulent reactions from other speakers, sometimes very far from the interactions with which I started;
- finally, g) these reactions will give rise to statements which, after a more or less long time and in more or less recognizable forms, will come back to me as a new injunction to take sides or to express myself—by challenging me once again.

This explains the *circular* nature of political speech. We are confident, we think, that at one point in the segment the loop is closed: I might begin making a statement at moment *t*, but suddenly I am subjected, behind my back, to a possibly violent comeback concerning what I “wanted to say” and which forces me, once again, to repeat everything: “No, no, that's not what I meant to say at all!” This explains why political speech is so demanding, so difficult: it *never goes straight*. And yet, that is also the source of its power. For, by dint of turning these various demands this way and that; by dint of stirring up speakers who are perpetually caught up again and again by the ebb and flow of disputed statements; by dint of remolding controversies, then what in the end emerges from this strange circular movement is something like a space, a living thing, a *res publica*. It is precisely its tautological nature, this obligation to always go through all the protagonists mobilized by a particular case, which explains its—fragile, momentary—capacity to give substance to public life, a substance that is always somewhat phantomatic (the public, as we know, is always a phantom), but which seems, these days, to be nothing more than an ectoplasm.³

Considering the seven or eight points listed above, it is easy to measure the gap that separates clickbait-type statements from statements that produce political bodies. Without deeply interrogating one's conscience, it is easy to see that when asked the question: “When did you really talk politically about something with people with whom you disagree?” many of us, unfortunately, would find it difficult to put a date on their calendar. We also understand that coming up with an “in my opinion” with audacity, rage or violence, does not prevent us from remaining at the zero level of politics. We can even say that the sole consequence of this type of expression is the undoing, dispersing and further atomizing of the political body that committed statements are desperately trying to create. Even if there are millions of French people who express their opinions with intensity— millions of “in my opinion”s the global result will simply be a proliferation of deaf-mutes ready to exterminate each other because they didn't “get along.” “Undisputable” opinions have never set disputes in motion!

This is especially since social networks have only exponentially increased the difference in weight, price, attitude and commitment between these two opposing meanings of the word political. If the expression model is a click, it is understandable why it has become so difficult to imagine the kind of effort needed to politically *commit* to the same statement. But the evil comes from further afield; access to the web has only accelerated an old tendency: we have gradually moved from the search for political autonomy—concerned with society as a whole—to another sense of autonomy: that of the *individual* who expresses his *personal opinions*. However, if the French political tradition is well equipped to speak of autonomy in the collective sense—the ideal of the Republic—it is totally

³ Walter Lippman, *The Phantom Public*, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1925.

lost if we are reduced to extracting the collective from the *personal* opinions of scattered individuals.

How can the *res publica* be recomposed piece by piece?

We always forget how new this situation of extreme depoliticization is. This explains why we all find ourselves so helpless at both the sending and receiving ends. Until now, despite the rhetoric on the virtues and dangers of political autonomy—and God knows there has been no shortage of that in the two centuries since the Revolution—we knew that the expression of interests, the explosion of passions, the detection of injustices, were not based solely on these fragile statements. There were a thousand solidarities of family, clan, trade, industry, trade unions, religion, and more recently political parties, which involved citizens and gave weight to public expression. A multiform connective tissue, widespread throughout the social body, ensured the buoyancy, so to speak, of these weak statements and gave them a plausibility that did not just come from how well they were phrased. And as it was the same, on the reception side, countless attentive ears allowed themselves, as they say, “to get along.” However, today the connective tissue has so definitively disappeared that all that remains is the exercise of political speech—just as its exercise has become so awkward!

This is the key to the current drama. The individuals atomized by the expansion of neo-liberalism today are really, *genuinely*, atoms without any link between them. Worse, the only links they maintain are those of social networks, a tremendous acceleration of atomization. The founding thinkers of society for its own sake had never imagined that there would be a day when this dream would be reduced to the mere expression of an “That is my opinion, and I stand by it.” And yet the French, and this is the welcome surprise, seem to be trying to talk freely again, thanks to the “yellow vests” movement, about everything related to daily life. So, what do we need to hang all these protests on, in a shared public life?

This is where the expression “ledgers of complains” throws a clear light on the situation and can serve as a model, or at least an inspiration. First of all, there is the simple fact that in 1789, the exercise was quite new (the previous Estates General were 150 years old...), so the writing of lists could not rely on any prior *res publica*: this public thing had to be composed, state by state, corporation by corporation, parish by parish. This is the parallel with today: the old climate regime is in crisis. Faced with that, no-one has a ready-made solution, so the public interest must once again be composed, from the outset, pixel by pixel, case by case, tax by tax, issue by issue, roundabout by roundabout...⁴

What mitigates this comparison, however, is that the good King Louis XVI, in launching his “great national debate,” was obliged to confess at the outset that he

⁴ Philippe Grateau, *Les cahiers de doléance, une lecture culturelle*. Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2001.

had absolutely no solutions. The government of the day agreed to share with its people the strange uncertainty of a multifaceted crisis: “Help me, I don't know what to do.”⁵ The comparison between the King's letter and President Macron's letter is not necessarily to the latter's advantage... And yet the transition from the old to the new political regime was much less painful than the metamorphosis from the old climate regime to the new. The *sans-culottes*, as their name suggests, could change societies and shirts—well, almost—whereas we need to revolutionize our entire physical infrastructure to implement the smallest of our demands. Strangely enough, they were much less imprisoned by their past than we are! This makes it pointless to try to revive Phrygian hat enthusiasm in 2019—or to enjoy the steely sound of the guillotine again...

It is at this point that the question of the composition of the lists arises. And here the parallel no longer works. There is no longer any established collective capable of even assembling to write a list in common and voted on unanimously. There is no point in expecting any geographical or administrative division to form some kind of coherent unity or voice, like a village community or a trade association could have in the past. But this is precisely what makes the task of prior description *even more necessary*: not only do citizens not know what to debate and opine on, but they also do not know with whom and, above all, *against whom*. This is where the resumption of political speech must make it possible to outline, for each subject, what the *ad hoc* collective is that is concerned with an issue. And these collectives, by definition, will all be different. If a given city wants to increase the frequency of its trains, this cannot be posed as the same general public transport problem for a neighboring village. The pollution of one river does not prepare in any way for the clean-up of another. It is impossible for the claims to be the same from Lille to Marseille and Brest to Strasbourg. Precisely because the modification of the material framework of existence—and this is actually what is at stake—requires us to abandon the spirit of synthesis that encloses us, coming from both the habits of the State and the preconceived ideas of the former parties, which have now disappeared. Both still cling to their “overview”.

In history, it is never good to make retrospective errors: the writing of the 1789 lists of grievances did not lead in any way to the Revolution. It can even be

⁵ Letter of 24th January, 1789: “...we require the assistance of our faithful subjects to overcome the difficulties in which we find ourselves concerning the current state of our finances, and to establish, as we so wish, a constant and invariable order in all branches of government that concern the happiness of our subjects and the prosperity of the realm. These great motives have induced us to summon the Assembly of the Estates of all Provinces obedient to us, as much to counsel and assist us in all things placed before it, as to inform us of the wishes and grievances of our people; so that, by means of the mutual confidence and reciprocal love between the sovereign and his subjects, an effective remedy may be brought as quickly as possible to the ills of the State, and abuses of all sorts may be averted and corrected by good and solid means which insure public happiness...”

hypothesized that their contribution has been overshadowed, diverted by the revolutionary “regime change” issue. We continue to ask this question by conditioned reflex, two centuries later, about any subject, instead of applying ourselves to the “concrete analysis of the concrete situation” which will first of all break down unanimity, complicate the investigation of each case, force commitment to be differentiated, constitute distinct groups, in short, finally shape a politics that is not one of opinions expressed by all and sundry. It is only later, when we become aware of the contradictory intertwining of these cases, when we have recomposed the overview step by step, that we will be able to begin to align the demands, define “electoral platforms” and—why not?—see the emergence once again of opposing parties capable of simplifying, dramatizing and concentrating choices. Then, but only then, will it be possible to have a “national debate.” But to pretend to jump into the debate *before* carrying out the task of multifaceted redescription is to content oneself with a vast survey and the abandoning of any hope of knowing on which territory we are trying to land.

In any case, it is not necessary to go back to ‘89 to calibrate the differences, here and now, between the passionate expression of identities and anger at a time *t*, gradually transforming into a more or less anxious exploration, at a time *t+1*, of attachments to living conditions. Just look at the two years it took the United Kingdom to move from the abstraction of an issue (for or against Europe?) to the actualization of the countless links that everyone needs to weigh for themselves (something that the so deeply anti-democratic practice of a botched referendum obviously did not allow). Finally, we are now talking about trucks, workers' rights, legislation, Dover and Calais, a whole materiality that is gradually replacing preconceived ideas about English identity. With the “great national debate,” we are at about the same point as Brexit two years ago. However badly the fit is, will we be able to use it to speed up the description of our living spaces, to again rematerialize the topics under debate?

What probably confuses us is that our times are no longer just searching for autonomy. The generalization of the crisis, which can no longer be called “ecological,” since it is an existential crisis, a subsistence crisis, forces us to rethink the question of heteronomy: on what do we depend to survive, how do we represent these new territories of belonging, who are our allies and our adversaries? What is so surprising, when you take the time to read the ledgers of complains of the past, is this amazing ability to describe a landscape, a *terroir*, or an economy and, at the same time, in the same breath, to point out the injustices committed, to name the enemies precisely, and to suggest ways to correct these injustices.

Because the New Climate Regime forces us to land, it also forces us to describe territories anew.⁶ But this territory is no longer, as it once was, a restricted place that can be monitored with the eyes: it is defined, on the contrary, by all the beings—human and non-human—that are needed to survive and whose list can only be drawn up by a collective-created and contradictory investigation. With this newly designed territory, it is then a question of knowing if we are ready to defend it, and with whom and against whom. It is impossible to avoid this preliminary task if we want to regain the capacities for freedom that were once the powerhouse of the collective quest for autonomy. It can't be helped; we have to go through this heteronomy stage: we depend on a land that we do not yet know how to describe.

⁶ A metaphor developed in Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, trans. C. Porter, London: Polity Press, 2018.