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## WHAT IS POLITICAL ORGANISATION?

This short text serves as an introduction to a series of contributions that will be published by Economic and Social Research Aotearoa over the coming months on the possibilities today for new forms of political organisation. Each of these contributions will offer contemporary analysis of new political organisations, new sites of political organisation, new ways of doing political organisation and new ways of thinking political organisation.

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Our purpose in this text is to clarify what we mean when we speak of new forms of political organisation. We therefore provide a provisional explanation of what we mean by ‘politics’, ‘organisation’, ‘political organisation’ and ‘the new’. This is not just a matter of looking up these words in the dictionary, but is rather a political act regarding each of these terms. What counts as ‘politics’, for example, is a matter of struggle and is here itself made into a site for intervention. In what follows we provide an argument for a particular understanding of what political organisation is, what the new forms of political organisation are and why they matter.

### WHAT IS POLITICS?

Most of what is called politics today does not involve politics at all but instead refers to efforts to eliminate or contain politics. In fact, much of what happens in parliament is better described as management. Politics is reduced to management when decisions are made in such a way that there seems to be no room for

disagreement, for instance when things must be done to satisfy the demands of the economy or the market. The goal of planning and policy then becomes to adapt to a set of conditions entirely outside human control. In the extreme, political parties then compete on the basis of their ability to outperform each other in their capitulation to the dictates of capital, a tendency that can be seen across the entirety of the political spectrum in Aotearoa/New Zealand and elsewhere.

This disappearance of politics from parliament has led many to characterise the current situation of parliamentary politics as ‘post-political’. Whatever truth there might be in this, it is important to remember that politics is not just what happens in parliament. Indeed, this question of what is inside and what is outside, what counts and what does not, is fundamental to politics itself. Politics always involves the designation of certain areas as being within politics, and therefore open to contestation, and others being outside, and therefore out of

human control. When something is defined as being outside of politics and therefore outside of our control, it is made to appear as if it belongs to a domain of nature. This desire to designate parts of life as being outside human control also signals a fear of those things becoming political. The distribution of what is politics, and what is not, therefore involves the creation of a domain in which certain things must be passed over in silence. This also means that a great number of people are treated as if they were unable to speak on matters that affect them.

This is why politics always involves turning things that were previously thought not to be political into objects open for contestation. This was one of the key stakes of Marx's critique of economics. Against the claimed neutrality of business owners, landlords, economists and professional politicians, Marx exposed the one-sided way that the world appears to these groups. Moreover, he emphasised that how the world appears to these people is not simply an illusion, but rather a representation that results from only taking the world as it appears, and not treating seriously the fact that the same world is experienced differently by others. Politics arises when those others who are excluded but affected demand inclusion in the construction of a world.

This irruption of politics when there was previously thought to be none is also one of the key stakes of feminism. This can be seen in the way that feminist struggle is not restricted to one particular issue but involves a struggle over the nature of the political as such. Feminism is a claim against the containment of particular bodies to particular places and against the restriction of politics to a place imagined to belong to the 'public sphere'. The demand that the personal is political is not a sectional

demand but a refusal to separate the personal from the political. As such, feminism opened a vital new terrain of political struggle and has bequeathed us today a powerful expanded understanding of politics.

Marxism, feminism, and other great political sequences opened new sites of contestation. Such openings do not come from nowhere or drop from the heavens. Rather, the opening that is called politics requires a prying open, a forcing into the open of something that was always there. It requires actively making political that which was previously not thought as such. This is why politics is so hard. Politics always threatens to break open the situation as it is. To put it another way, there is politics to the extent that every situation is always open to the possibility of something new, even if that novelty is considered impossible within the terms of the situation. This is why politics, far from being the art of the possible, is precisely the art of the impossible.

It might sound, then, as if politics is a very grand thing. In the sense that politics signals a radical overcoming or rupture, politics would therefore be very rare. Politics is indeed exceptional. Still, in recognising that the new always irrupts from within the old, we recognise that politics is very much a possibility every day. Every situation is riddled with contradictions and inconsistencies that threaten its stability. It is always possible to identify groups who are disqualified and not included, or groups who are included only on the condition that they harmlessly assimilate themselves to the situation. What history shows is precisely the possibility of things appearing within situations in which they were considered to not exist or to not fully exist. This can be seen again and again. The abolition of slavery, universal suffrage, legal limitation of

the working week, income tax, freedom from discrimination on the basis of race, sex or sexual orientation, all of these have at one moment been represented as unthinkable and impossible. We do not mention these merely to praise them as the end of the game, as if we could then do no more than congratulate ourselves that democracy has been achieved. We take these as examples of the fact that these, and numerous other demands that we are making today, were and always are possible.

### **WHAT IS POLITICAL ORGANISATION?**

The term political organisation indexes the effort to bridge the rupture of politics with the endless hard work of instituting and institutionalising this change. Radical change is indeed what we are working towards, but for us this comes with the premise that change needs not simply to be imagined or hoped for but collectively constructed step by step. Political organisation involves giving form to politics. It signals a refusal to sit idly by waiting for change to happen spontaneously but rather to become informed and draw political demands out of analysis of the present. Giving form to politics involves coordinating these demands and strategising to produce real change. None of this happens without action and organisation.

Because it is a process of giving form, political organisation can become incredibly formal. In short, effective political organisation involves lots of meetings and seemingly endless bureaucracy. It involves inspiring and mobilising people, as well as caring for one another and eating together. It requires compiling lists, taking minutes, doing the photocopying. None of this is achieved through the internet alone. Political organisation is hard work, not just for those physically present at meetings and direct actions but equally for those others whose

work makes it possible for them to be there. Political organisation involves good facilitation, understanding group dynamics and patterns of exclusion. Without this, old forms of privilege necessarily return, no matter how horizontal the political organisation claims itself to be. The formalism of a meeting can, if it is done well, actively break with traditional relations of privilege.

This great promise of formalism is part of the reason why political organisations have a tendency to drift towards the purely formal. The excessive pull toward formality is the scourge that threatens any political organisation. The problem of pure formalism, when the formalities are the only important thing, is that politics gets lost. In this very real manner, political organisations are always drawn towards the privilege of organisation at the expense of politics.

Organisation alone suggests the containment of politics in institutions, procedures, and therefore, in this sense, is antagonistic to politics as such. The fixation on the party form, for example, can easily lead to the disconnection of the party from those other forms of politics that are supposed to support, motivate and keep the party in check. This domination of organisation over political organisation happens again, for instance, in the privileging of the most organised forms of politics over less outwardly organised forms of action, movement and intervention.

What is important then, and what political organisation offers the promise but not the guarantee of, is the avoidance of the drift towards either of the two terms of which it is composed. Conjoining politics and organisation is the suture of a wound that will never heal. Political organisation is therefore

in a certain sense impossible, reflecting what, in philosophical terms, could be called a dialectic, or a 'unity of opposites'. It reflects the striving to combine the rupture of politics with the formalism of organisation. This is the constant and never ending struggle of political organisation: to avoid on the one hand the infatuation with rupture and politics as such, and on the other hand the fetishisation of organisation and procedure.

Of course, the expression 'political organisation' does not do the magic of producing a dialectical synthesis of politics and organisation. Neither does the practical work of political organisation mark this resolution. Any practical politics involves exactly this oscillation between politics and organisation. Political organisation strives to hold politics and organisation together, while recognising their tension. And to complicate things, in different places, different moments in time, and in the face of different situations, political organisation can take a number of forms. Political organisation is already and always happening and will take various forms specific to the situation being organised within and beyond. There are, in short, old and new forms of political organisation.

#### **WHAT ARE THE NEW FORMS OF POLITICAL ORGANISATION?**

Politics is the principled irruption of the new out of the old. Political organisation gives form to politics. The form that political organisation takes, or what might be called the mode of political organisation, is always subject to reinvention anew. From what we can see, there are at least four interconnected things that are new about political organisation today.

First, there are new political organisations, new bodies and institutions that task themselves

with political organisation. Some of these are underground, covert and hardly known, working in the shadows or the undercommons. Others are out in the open, in the public sphere and therefore open to the ridicule and hatred of the powers that be. Any list would be incomplete and its beginning would seem arbitrary. Novelty and time are complex matters. For some, the political organisation of the Confederation of the United Chiefs or of Parihaka are new. In the narrower sense of time, and referring to the sequence following Occupy (2011-2012), it is possible to name Auckland Action Against Poverty, Auckland Peace Action, Black Lives Matter, the Campaign Against Zero-Hours Contracts, the Doing Our Bit campaign to double the refugee quota, Fightback, the Matike Mai Working Group for Constitutional Transformation, Momentum, No Pride in Prisons, Plan C, Pocaro, Podemos, Real Choice, the Student Housing Action Group, Tāmaki Housing Group, We Are The University, the national and international Womens' Strike, and many others. Even, why not, Economic and Social Research Aotearoa.

These political organisations are diverse in their character. Some are loosely structured, others tightly organised. Some are open, some closed. Some operate directly in relation to parliamentary politics while others are to varying degrees extra-parliamentary. Some are international and some come from here. Many are hated, feared and misunderstood by those in positions of arbitrary privilege. This, we argue, should be taken as one of the signs of their importance.

Second, there are new sites of political organisation. Political organisation arises in new places and mobilises around new objects, or around objects that appear in a new light in

the present. The meaning of struggles around, for example, work, housing and incarceration are incredibly old, but take on a very new significance in the present conjuncture. New forms of political organisation arise from specific sites. These can be the classic sites of struggle or sites that take on new political significance in the present.

Third, alongside new political organisations and new sites of political organisation, there are new ways of doing political organisation. Political organisation today follows the experiments that arose in the sequence of the Indignados and Occupy. To move beyond these forms of political organisation is not to dismiss them as failures, but rather to develop forms of politics that exceed horizontalism, connectivity and direct participation. There is today no question of a retreat back to the glory days of either Occupy or the forms of political organisation that came before it.

New forms of political organisation today proceed from this point. We have learned a lot and are learning as we go forward, building new political organisations while we experiment with new ways of doing political organisation. There are challenges along the way, and our enemies will call us every name they can invent. There is in this something unpredictable and hardly understandable for the defenders of the politics of the past. Because the new forms of political organisation do not fit within the narrow parameters of what they recognise as politics, these new forms will be judged within the old frames of what is taken to be 'politics', or simply not be recognised as politics at all.

Fourth, these new forms of political organisation are animated by new ways of thinking about political organisation. This can be seen in a

range of theoretical writings in recent years that have challenged the very nature of politics and the political, and have sought to identify an opening out of and beyond the present 'post-political' moment. Sometimes, at their worst, these arise from the safety of a position outside the new forms of political organisation that they presume to talk about. But at their best, new forms of thinking about political organisation coincide with the work of political organisation. Indeed, some of the best thinking about political organisation today happens outside the narrow confines of the university and, rather, presupposes that everyone has the capacity for thought, speech and politics.

Thinking the new forms of political organisation is what we are doing here and what future publications in this series will do. This involves work at the intersection of the four characteristics that we have identified here: (1) new political organisations; (2) new sites of political organisation; (3) new ways of doing political organisation; and (4) new ways of thinking political organisation. There will be different emphases, but in their focus on thinking beyond the current political situation these four characteristics are all fundamentally connected to one another.

There are two points that we must never forget about the new forms of political organisation. First, not all new forms of political organisation are good. Some are horrifying. The point of critical reflection is to carefully scrutinise these new forms of organisation.

Second, the new is always connected with the past. If we forget this or get into laying out plans for inventing the new out of nothing then we fall prey to 'utopian socialism' or 'speculative leftism'. Our action is always connected with the

past, as it is with others now and in the future. Indeed, sometimes the most radical and newest intervention is to repeat claims that have been made in the past. In Aotearoa/New Zealand this might involve claiming that there will never be ‘full and final settlement’ and that our history renders justice impossible. Connecting our struggles with the past and projecting these into the future is the same as saying that our politics always arises from where we stand. We can never forget our whakapapa, which in Aotearoa/New Zealand is both the history of capitalism and colonisation, and at the same time the proud traditions of resisting and refusing these. Creating the new out of the old requires knowing the situation as it is and knowing how it has come about. This is not the knowledge or

wisdom of individuals but rather the knowledge and wisdom that we create in dialogue with our ancestors, both those who came immediately before us and those long passed. New forms of political organisation today march with these generations behind them.

Over the coming months, Economic and Social Research Aotearoa will be releasing a series of papers by authors who have thought through these questions as they work to build new political organisations. While we acknowledge the need for analysis and intellectual rigour, this series seeks to go beyond academic formalism and deliver on the promise of the new forms of political organisation that give hope in the otherwise miserable situation we live in today.

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