Re-thinking Radicalism between Politicization and Depoliticization

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ABSTRACT

This paper reconsiders political radicalism as it relates to politicization and depoliticization. It contends that processes of politicization, the public rendering of certain social elements contingent and needing to be changed, can in fact be anti-radical in their practical strengthening of hegemony. By contrast, the depoliticization of the social can permit for the expansion of agency and re-ordering of relations in practice. This paper highlights the paradoxically hegemonic role of politicization and the potentially dislocationary function of depoliticization. Politicizing a prevailing norm or practice does not just contest these elements but also helps to socially order how and in what direction their change should be. Fundamentally, dominant forms of politicization can become crucial forces for domination generally, granting subjects an ontological security in the struggle for transformation rather than its realization. Conversely, processes of depoliticization can provide the opportunity for individuals to enhance their capabilities and “do otherwise” without the vulnerability that often accompanies greater social visibility or the psychic insecurity that comes with challenging established identities. Strange as it may seem, often the best way to radically change the world is to make it as less political as possible.
**Introduction**

Understanding the dynamics of social change remains a primary concern of social and political theory. Specifically, what are the possibilities for conceiving and instantiating radical social transformations? This question has been subject to particular reconsideration in light of the failures of 20th century Communism. Indeed, the supposed “end of history” of liberal democracy has given way to a seemingly unstoppable forward march toward a global “free market”. Indeed, Jameson’s (2003: 76) oft-quoted observation that “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism”, has perhaps never rung so true than it is today. The resiliency of corporate globalization in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis puts this political immobility in even sharper relief. Given this situation, a better theoretical understanding of the forces and strategies underpinning social transformation and radical politics is particularly urgent.

A dominant way for approaching this problem is distinguishing between political and social logics (Glynos and Howarth, 2008). More precisely, to tease out those moments when otherwise entrenched cultural configurations are rendered open to contestation and change. This reading builds on a deeper distinction between the political and politics, with the former representing the new social orders and the latter the institutionalization, and therefore naturalization, of these novel orderings (see Marchart, 2007). Such a paradigm gains its inspiration from a conception of the social as eternally careening between greater and lesser periods of contingency and with it radical transformations. Put differently, while society is never inherently determined, its availability to change is linked to a political movements revealing its underlying contingency.

However, this paradigm has been increasingly challenged. Notably, theorists have highlighted the often stabilizing function of politics. Empirically, resistance movements and identities can be key parts of a given social order, and even more so important forces for its continued reproduction (Fleming and Spicer, 2008; Mumby, 2005). Philosophically, the existence of resistance is itself always, to a degree, hegemonic, shaping selfhood and perceptions of social possibility (Bloom, 2013). Fundamentally, the act of contingency revealment is inexorably linked to processes of ordering, whereby the organization of the social is found not in the repression of contingency but its framing in historically specific and entrenched ways (Bloom and Dallyn, 2011).

Expanding on these insights, this paper seeks to rethink radical politics through reconceptualizing established understandings of politicization and depoliticization. To this end, politicization is commonly equated with resistance while depoliticization with anti-politics. However, recent interventions put into question these conventional understandings. Resistance is linked paradoxically to the stabilization of a status quo (Bloom, 2014; Bloom and Dallyn, 2011; Fleming and Spicer, 2008). Similarly, ideas
equating ‘radicalism’ with revolution or a ‘pure’ ideology are increasingly challenged by less explicitly politicized instances of ‘micro-emancipation’ (Thomas and Davies, 2004) along with a wide array of popular mobilizations, inside and outside existing power institutions (Dean, 2014). Building on these insights, this work investigates how resistance can serve in practice as a type of ‘anti-politics’. Likewise, it distinguishes depoliticization from ‘anti-politics’, and in doing so opens the space for a deeper examination of how depoliticization can be strategically deployed for producing a radical politics.

**The Hegemony of Radicalism as Politicization**

Social change is conventionally linked to processes of politicization. More precisely, the subjecting of an issue or problem to social debate and contestation so that it can be possible altered. (Rancier, 2004; Glynos and Howarth, 2007). In its most traditional forms, such politicization occurs within the framework of governing institutions and existing political systems. Power, in this respect, is intimately associated with the ability to determine which issues are politicized and in what ways (Lukes, 1974).

More fundamentally, ideological change is thought to be inexorably linked to these instances of politicization. Luxemburg (1966), for instance, quite early introduced the importance of “struggle” for not only overthrowing a prevailing power regime but cultivating an advanced “class consciousness”. Gramsci (1996), similarly, viewed the transformation of a society’s ideological “common sense” as inexorably associated with the political maneuvering involved in a continual “war of positions” waged both within the political and cultural spheres. Returning to Lukes (1974), the antecedent to the most pervasive form of power – ideological control – is the politicization of these naturalized unquestioned social assumptions through raising awareness of their existence and influence on our individual and collective decision-making.

Underpinning these diverse but, nonetheless, connected theories of socio-political change, is an established paradigm whereby politicization is a pre-requisite for radical social re-ordering. In other language, for transformation to occur there first must be a period or instance whereby once entrenched policies or beliefs are questioned and as such made questionable. Change, accordingly, is opposed against states of relative stability, whereby the former challenges the secure and unchallenged status of the latter.

Perhaps the most clear theoretical expression of this established paradigm is found in Laclau and Mouffe’s (1986) concept of “discursive hegemony”. In their famous work *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* they take on any forms of social or historical determinism. Rather they propose a model of the social as being inherently contingent. Yet this underlying constructiveness is continually masked in the production of social relations, so that hegemony represents more than a domination by powerful actors or governing institutions but rather a “closed paradigm” of the social. Change is therefore located in this play of hegemony, this eternal oscillation between higher and lower levels of the awareness of the contingency of any and all existent norms and practices.
Politicization is considered to be crucial to such counter-hegemonic forms of contingency revealment. It is only in being adequately politicized that that the contingency of a hegemonic discourse can be exposed and altered. This insight has informed a broader theoretical perspective for the general modelling of social order and dynamics. In particular, the social is composed of the contestation between the political, on the one hand, and politics, on the other. The political represents those moments where dominant ideologies are shown to be contingent and changed, while the political is the incorporation of these transformations into a new hegemonic social order. Glynos and Howarth take this perspective perhaps even further in their distinguishing of political and social logics (2007), respectively.

This view of the social, and as such the prospects for radical change, maps out onto contemporary discussions of politicization and depoliticization. The former, as its name indicates, refers to the politicization of a previously non-politicized institution, belief or practice. The latter, conversely, represents the rendering of a once political social element now non-political. To this end, the capacity for reforming or more radically transforming a social phenomenon is contingent, if you will, on the degree to which it is politicized or de-politicized.

Reconsidering the Radicalism of Politicization

This paradigm, however, has been increasingly questioned. The supposed unimpeachable link between politicization and radical social transformation is challenged by new theories stressing the eternal existence of contingency and resistance, respectively within any and all social configurations. Consequently, they are not merely forces for dislocating and countering a prevailing hegemony but also for reinforcing it. This stabilizing function also applies, in turn, to processes of politicization.

Philosophically, theorists have point to a certain “paradox of order” (Bloom and Dallyn, 2011) in which the greater the awareness of contingency often times the more stable a social order is. This is based on a deeper critique of Laclau and Mouffe’s original conceptions of discursive hegemony and politics. Notably, it is asked, if contingency is inherent to the social, then how can it ever be said to be eradication, even if only temporarily? For this reason, what is proposed is an updated theory of the politics of hegemony – whereby its strength lies in the shaping of openness and pluralism rather than its elimination.

These insights have complemented and, to an extent, catalyzed a growing reconsideration of how resistance is understood, especially in relation to social change and stability. Stressed is the mutual constitution of power and resistance rather than their simple opposition. He argues that

Rather than view power and resistance as separate better to view them as mutually constitutive – as the subject is neither completely colonized or constantly resisting but rather that control and resistance exist in a dialectical relationship as ‘mutually
constitutive, and as a routine social production of daily organizational life" (Mumby, 2005: 20).

Fleming and Spicer (2008), to this end, maintain the need to replace this dichotomy with the concept of “struggle” signifying the dynamic and evolving ways power struggles continually shape a given social order. More fundamentally, Bloom (2013) has proposed what he terms the “power of safe resistance” to explain the stabilizing function of resistance. In particular, he notes that all forms of resistance have a hegemonic element, in that they promote one set of understandings, demands and identities at the expense of others. These dominant forms of resistance commonly provide individuals with a “safe” and secure identity with a relatively stable ordering of the social.

Empirically, scholars across the social sciences have noted the ways resistance can positively shape and reinforce prevailing cultural identities and relations. Collinson (1988), for instance, observed ethnographically that workers embraced a dominant resistance identity linked to traditional and quite conservative notions of masculinity. In a broader sense, he contends that resistance cannot be examined as if it were separate from workplace discipline and control. Oppositional practices often draw upon the very forms of control that generate resistance in the first place. Indeed control and resistance can be so mutually reproducing that they actually constitute one another. (Collinson, 2000: 51)

This insight echoes Gabriel’s point about the socialized character and always present existence of struggle as it relates to identity and identification:

it is important to analyze the spaces within organizations in which ‘human agency may be rediscovery’ illuminating individuals within the workplace as ‘a struggling, feeling, thinking, suffering subject, one capable of obeying and disobeying, controlling and being controlled, losing control and escaping control, defining and redefining control for itself and for others” (Gabriel, 1999: 179).

In terms politics, this has raised fresh questions over the relation of resistance to radicalism. Specifically, resistance is progressively understood as an activity that strengthens dominant ideologies and practices as much as they challenge them. Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) write of the “new spirit of capitalism” in which previously transgressive themes of creativity and individuality are not integrated as supportive parts of contemporary capitalist organizations and employment relations. Socially, resistance is put forward as a rather ubiquitous, and therefore not especially dislocating, social phenomenon. More critically, Contu (2008: 367) introduces the idea of “decaf resistance” that she makes distinct from “resistance, as a real act that suspends the constellation of power relations, has a cost that cannot be accounted for”.

This re-thinking of contingency and resistance also permits for a conceptual and empirical reconception of understandings of politicization and depoliticization. It gestures
toward the dialectical rather than strictly opposed relation of politicization and depoliticization. Notably, every instance of politicization produces in its wake processes of depoliticization. It is necessary, therefore, to more fully theorize and explore the hegemonic function of politicization and, in turn, the radical possibilities of depoliticization.

**The Hegemony of a “Safe” Politicization**

A key claim of this paper is that politicization and depoliticization exist in a dialectical rather than merely opposing relationship. As such, it is crucial to analyse how politicization does not simply challenge existing social orders but also stabilizes and strengthens them. Specifically, to explore the underlying dynamics through which hegemony is achieved exactly through socialized forms of social politicization. In doing so, it reveals the ways such dominant forms of politicization not only produce processes of depoliticization but also contribute to broader instances of social domination.

Central, in this regard, is the mutually constituting relationship of politicization and depoliticization. This relationship mirrors the often paradoxical interaction between pluralism and closure discussed above. Just as certain types of pluralism deny the existence of others from emerging, so to does certain forms of politicization help to marginalize and prevent the emergence of alternative politicizations from occurring. In this sense, an instance of politicization also signifies a moment of depoliticization. At stake, therefore, is not to simply investigate whether or not an institution or issue is politicized but rather to analyze in what ways and to what ends? Moreover, it is to assess what is being depoliticized connected to this politicization?

Foucault gestures to such a dynamic interaction in his discussions of morality and visibility. Examining sexuality in the Victorian age, he notes that the articulation of certain sexual mores in the 19th century far from eliminating what it deemed as immoral and perverted behavior instead gave it life, granting it a social recognition and making it available for social consumption. He contends that such public morality “did not aim to suppress it (perversity), but rather to give it an analytical, visible, and permanent reality” (Foucault, 1990: 44). Analogously, processes of politicization “make visible” certain social feature while rendering others less visible. In doing so it shapes the ideological and material direction of social change.

Such insights reflect the importance of the discursive dimension for the formation and reproduction of these complex material social systems. Social articulations guide dominant understandings, providing a simplified framework for making sense of heterogeneous and often times rather unpredictable configurations of power. Foucault (1990) observes that power is always simultaneously “non-subjective” and “intentional” which means, as described by Bloom (2013), the “individuals act knowingly and tactically within a range of culturally provided networks that are not of their making”.

Returning to the specific concern of this analysis, the social articulation of politicization frames how individuals and communities view the possibility for transformation and
radical politics. As such it depoliticizes other aspects, rendering them acceptable and often unquestioned components of their broader material discipline as social subjects. This reading builds upon Foucault’s own distinction of “subjection” from “subjectivation”. The latter represents, according to Butler (1997: 2), an identification “that consists precisely in this fundamental dependence on a discourse we never chose but that, paradoxically, initiates and sustains our agency”

Accordingly, politicization must be studied in terms of its role for subjectivation and as such its contribution in this function for maintaining broader systems of subjection. At stake is to better understand the “affective dimension” of subjection. It is to as Butler (1997: 102) suggests critically ask

To what extent has the disciplinary apparatus that attempts to produce and totalize identity become an abiding object of passionate attachment? We cannot simply throw off the identities we become, and Foucault’s call to refuse those ‘identities’ will certainly be met with resistance...In particular, how are we to understand not merely the disciplinary production of the subject but the disciplinary cultivation of an attachment to subjection?

Crucial to such an understanding is to consider the affective appeal of these dominant politicizations. More precisely, how they ironically provide individuals with ontological security. Akin to resistance, a prevailing and accepted politicizations offer individuals a “safe” identification through which to ground their selfhood. It mirrors, in this regard, the paradoxically stabilizing effects of resistance, using ostensible desires for social change as a means for anchoring one’s identity and knowledge of the world. Here politicization becomes a force for reproducing and maintaining social order rather than dislocation.

**The Dislocation of Depoliticization**

The previous section discussed the ironically positive role politicization has for forming and maintaining hegemony. Making a given power relationship, norm or practice available to political change is a crucial component of social ordering. In the first instance, it does so in very specific ways at the expense of others, thus creating a dominant understanding of what needs to be done, how and why. In the second instance, it creates for subjects a “safe” identification, providing them ontological security through an entrenched worldview and sense of self. Yet just as politicization is a force of hegemony, so to can depoliticization be a force for dislocating hegemony.

The perhaps counter-intuitive relation of depoliticization with counter-hegemony is intimately linked to the unexplored distinction between dislocation, on the one hand, and politicization, on the other. Dislocation is defined as the making unstable and rendering contingent of a given hegemonic order. It exists as a means for changing a prevailing set of social relations. It is, in this respect, an alteration to a dominant discursive configuration. As such dislocation directly impinges on the operation and reproduction of
hegemony, not merely its representation. Politicization, conversely, speaks to the framing of a given social element as contingent.

Laclau and Mouffe’s well-known example of the playing of football reflects this distinction. They observe that (1987: 82):

> If I kick a spherical object in the street or if I kick a ball in a football match, the physical fact is the same, but its meaning is different. The object is a football only to the extent that it establishes a system of relations with other objects, and these relations are not given by the mere referential materiality of the objects, but are, rather, socially constructed… For that same reason it is the discourse which constitutes the subject position of the social agent, and not, therefore, the social agent which is the origin of discourse—the same system of rules that makes that spherical object into a football, makes me a player.

Here, dislocation represents the modification of how the game is played or more fundamentally the reconfiguration of how this space and its subjects is used and understood. By contrast, the politicization of a football match would be the effort to change certain entrenched elements of the game. It is again the public framing of this hegemonic social relation as contingent and therefore modifiable.

The distinguishing of dislocation from politicization may appear initially to be merely semantic, yet it has potentially significant theoretical and practical implications. It mirrors, in this sense, Delueze’s (1988: 27 – 28) separation of the “discourse” from the “visibility” of power. Here the former represents the deeper and often heterogenous logics disciplining subject’s actions. The latter, conversely, signifies the knowledge of such inscription. This distinction echoes Foucault’s differentiation of economics and politics early in Discipline and Punish (1977: 137)

> Discipline increases the force of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience). In short, it dissociates power from the body; on the one hand, it turns it into an ‘aptitude’, a ‘capacity’, which it seeks to increase; on the other hand it reverses the course of the energy, the power that might result from it, and turns it into a relation of strict subjection.

Economics, in this respect, is not exhausted by politics. The expansive effects of a discourse cannot be completely circumscribed by how it is made socially visible. Crucial, then is to understand how dislocation can occur at the level of discourse that may or may not be reflected in the sphere of knowledge. As Ortner (1995, p. 186) presciently notes, ‘every culture, every subculture, every historic moment, constructs its own forms of agency, its own modes of enacting the process of reflecting on the self and the world and of acting simultaneously within and upon what one finds there’. Agency is, then, distinct from identification, signifying the prevailing and socially cultivated capabilities of subjects.
Dislocation can hypothetically, thus, occur without politicization. There may be an instance where a new capability, a novel form of agency, emerges that is not immediately publicly associated with changing an existent social order. Foucault hints to such an occurrence in his discussion of bodybuilding:

> The ‘mastery and awareness of one’s body’ originally shaped for purposes of military training and education produced in its wake ‘responding claims and affirmations, those of one’s own body against power, of health against the economic system, of pleasure against the moral norms of sexuality, marriage, decency’ (Foucault, 1980, p. 56).

In this case, the effect of capitalism and its need for physically healthy workers, created new capabilities and disciplining opportunities for subjects to reshape their body. There was a dislocation in the entrenched power relation whereby those in the authority had almost exclusive sovereignty over an individual’s body. Emerging, instead, was a new agency now available to individuals for controlling and taking control of their physical self. The politicization of such agency was distinguishable from this instance of discursive dislocation in practice.

Indeed, politicization may actually work against such dislocations to dominant forms of agency. It can associate these changes to feelings of trauma linked to the loss of a “safe” self. When the expansion of capability is rendered political, this creates in its wake an unsettling of the social order and its attendant secure identifications. In doing so, it runs the risk of being intimately connected to the loss ontological security found in these hegemonic subjectivations. These “crises” commonly result in the reversion to and tighter embrace of such subjectivities – as individuals invest in narratives of “recovery” so as to stave off this psychic insecurity (Bloom, 2014b).

Conversely, the strategic reproduction of these “safe” identities can be quite useful in catalyzing a less traumatic and more effective form of dislocation. To this end, the maintaining of a prevailing social constructed self can open the space for individuals to substantially alter their ways of acting in the world without risking the diminishment of their ontological security. As Bloom (2013: 233) theorizes regarding why peasants were so actively involved in the proletarian struggles of Marxist revolutions:

> unlike for workers, such ‘resistance’ was safe in that it did not directly challenge their secure identification as peasants. More precisely, they were able to retain the ontological security they gained in their identity as ‘peasants’, even while rebelling against the capitalist system overall.

The production of a “safe” dislocation through processes of depoliticization permits for a broader re-thinking of radicalism. More precisely, it illuminates how social re-ordering can be accomplished exactly through lessening the perceived political implications of altering one’s practical engagement with a prevailing norm or practice. The expansion of agency is, thus, commonly best achieved by decreasing rather than increasing its social
visibility. Dislocations to hegemony, in turn, are strengthened when the politics surrounding them are weakened.

Re-thinking Radicalism Between Politicization and Depoliticization

Thus far this paper highlights the paradoxically hegemonic role of politicization and the potentially dislocationary function of depoliticization. Politicizing a prevailing norm or practice does not just contest these elements but also helps to socially order how and in what direction their change should be. Fundamentally, dominant forms of politicization can become crucial forces for domination generally, granting subjects an ontological security in the struggle for transformation rather than its realization. Conversely, processes of depoliticization can provide the opportunity for individuals to enhance their capabilities and “do otherwise” without the vulnerability that often accompanies greater social visibility or the psychic insecurity that comes with challenging established identities.

These insights, which may seem rather counter-intuitive at first, nonetheless, allow for a reconsideration of conceptions of what constitutes political radicalism. Traditionally, radicalism is, as suggested above, primarily understood in terms of its public contestation to hegemony. Here it is the antecedent to Foucault’s definition of domination as

> When an individual or social group manages to block a field of relations of power, to render them impassive and invariable and to prevent all reversibility of movement … we are facing what can be called a state of domination. (Foucault 1988, p. 3)

It visibly troubles this entrenchment of social relations, revealing their contingency and availability to transformation. Such a conception of radicalism is witnessed in a range of different yet nevertheless resonant contemporary theories of revolutionary social re-ordering. Laclau and Mouffe, for instance, depict counter-hegemony as found in the emergence and cultivation of antagonism (1986). Similarly, Ranciere (2004) depicts the fight against the inherent “policing” of the social as made possible in a politics of “disagreement”. Indeed, even Badiou (2008) attributes radical alterations to a prevailing “situation” to a very public dislocationary “event” reflecting new social truths and the fidelity therefore to the making of a radically new social order.

These rather dichotomous theorizations of radicalism and domination have been challenged by new ideas stressing the more subtle character of this relationship. Dean (2014) is critical to this end of “all or nothing” views of radical politics that ignores concrete social movements in favour of a righteous cynicism. Bloom (2014b) points out the dangers of linking social revolutions to instances of visible crisis – pointing out that such events have an inbuilt conservatism revolving around the desire of individuals to recover what they feel is a lost psychic security in threatened hegemonic ideologies and identifications.

This analysis aims to add to these reconsiderations of political radicalism. It does so, first and foremost, through highlighting the distinction between dislocations at the level of
“discourse” of power and in its “visibility”. Put differently, it approaches transformation in terms of its effect on the agency individuals have in their action within a broader socio-political configuration. Furthermore, it de-links these shifts in agency and capabilities from traditional modes of public contestation. Rather, it views this “visibility” of power as positively or negatively effecting and enabling such practical re-orderings.

With specific regard to questions of politicization and depoliticization, it aims to illustrate how established associations of the former with change and the latter with stability must be reconceived. Visible forms of politicization, in this sense, can be counter-productive to dislocations in practice. Notably, it can draw increased attention from power holders regarding potential challenges to their sovereignty and overall hegemony. By contrast, keeping such subversions “under the radar”, so to speak, of elites provides these on the ground alterations with greater room and opportunity to expand and grow.

Just as significantly, the immediate incorporation of these transformations to a public demand for politicization and social re-ordering, can unduly limit the scope and direction of these new types of social agencies. As noted, power at the level of “visibility” is always hegemonic, revolving around the struggle for domination by competing ways of thinking and acting. The potential for doing otherwise is threatened by its “visible” association with a given articulation of counter-hegemony. It is moved, in Foucault’s terms, from being expansionary and “economic” to being limited as an instance of the “political”.

For Foucault, of course, the economic and political occurred simultaneously. The enhancement of capability was concurrently delimited by its associative political purpose. Yet the analysis offered here demonstrates that politicization does not necessarily have to so immediately inscript and shape new forms of practical agency. Instead, novel modes of action can produce challenging and exciting potentialities for the re-ordering of practices and lived social relations distinct from, and in fact even aided by, their lack of social “visibility” as part of a process of politicization. More to the point, the linking of these agencies to questions of identification and selfhood can be hindering to such possible radical alterations, subscribing them to feelings of ontological insecurity and as such psychic trauma.

Depoliticization, conversely, can actively aid in the rise and continuation of these discursive dislocations. As noted previously, it shields, though obviously never completely, changes in practice from the scrutiny and repression by those with power. Moreover, it permits for these modifications in action from being intimately coupled with the loss of ontological security. Individuals, thus, are spared the trade off between radical change and psychic insecurity. It exists, in this regard, as a “safe radicalism” as opposed to a “safe politicization”, one whose safety contributes to the practical reconfiguration of the social rather than its stabilization around entrenched “visible” modes of public contestation.

**Conclusion**
This paper reconsiders political radicalism as it relates to politicization and depoliticization. It contends that processes of politicization, the public rendering of certain social elements contingent and needing to be changed, can in fact be anti-radical in their practical strengthening of hegemony. By contrast, the depoliticization of the social can permit for the expansion of agency and re-ordering of relations in practice. This analysis is meant not to be an exhaustive account of this dynamic and to extent ironic relation. Indeed there is much potential future work to be done on how this may help reimagine power between, using Foucault’s terminology, “capability, communication and relationships” as well the ability to both strategically and tactically use politicization and depoliticization for radical political ends. Nevertheless, this analysis has sought to provide the beginning foundations for a novel perspective in conceiving radical politics. Strange as it may seem, often the best way to radically change the world is to make it as less political as possible.

References


