On Political Impasse

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Aristotle teaches that one thing that philosophy can do is tell us ***that*** something is and ***what*** it is. Today, I would like to try and apply Aristotle's insight by focusing on what I call political impasse. I will make the case that traditional Western notions of political power do not account for impasse. Political impasses are thought of as a kind of stagnation or a keeping of the status quo: there is no clear victor or ruler. Neither people nor objects nor situations in a political impasse seem to change or move. Hence, impasses really are neither important nor significant. If anything, they are irritating or frustrating. I see them differently. Political impasse marks a particular kind of power relation, not of the power of the ruler over the ruled, but somewhere in between ruler and ruled. More importantly, historically and in our current state of affairs, I argue that political impasses have offered and continue to offer philosophy unique occasions, among other things, for some effective and imaginative possibilities of relieving political impasse and creating new political realities.

Traditionally, if we look at the notion of power, we see it largely understood in two ways. First, and generally speaking, Greek philosophy and science indicate that power is to be understood as an action or a capacity to do or enact something, to change one state of affairs into another one. We find this notion of power in such

concepts as cause (*aitia*), law (*nomos*), origin (*arche*), act (*energeia*) and potentiality (*dynamis*). Second, political power, in particular, is understood as rule. Political power is defined by the rule of one party over another. Usually, one party is considered to be stronger or superior to another. Western power, then, can be conceived of as a relationship between the ruler and the ruled or, in more modern terms, the sovereign and his or her subjects. In more pessimistic language, Nietzsche's debtor-creditor relation.

One of the most impressive things about the Department of Philosophy at the University of Guelph is its commitment to pluralist thinking, thinking that comes from various historical periods and cultures. It is this commitment that inspires me to turn to the history of philosophy. We can find evidence for my foregoing claim in the history of Western political philosophy. Plato's *Republic*, for example, is a response to what he saw as a decadent and corrupt Athens, which was suffering from the legacy of the 30 tyrants. Ultimately, he sees his new polis as illumined by the Good: the philosopher-king not only sees the forms but also the Good. Society is to be ordered according to different classes of people that justly carry out what they are built to do, be it ruler, guardian or worker. Plato unabashedly defends a hierarchy of political power. No one escapes the ruler-ruled relationship that Plato establishes among the classes. All classes are bound by the demands of justice: the philosopher king is subject to the truth of the forms and the good. Often, we will find the view that Plato's republic is tyrannical because the philosopher-king is conceived of as the summit of power, having full illumination, while other classes are purposefully and maliciously denied certain kinds of knowledge, as evidenced

by the famous myth of the metals and Plato's insistence on the need for what some have called the noble lie. All the classes, ultimately, need to work as one, if the new polis is to thrive, and this involves the execution of the relationship of ruler and ruled.

Mediaeval views of power, drawing from Plato and the Neo-Platonists, also see power as the relation between the ruler and the ruled. Whether we speak of Dante's defence of rule by the one, namely, monarchic rule, or Marsilius of Padova's firm division between papal power and power of the Holy Roman Emperor, ultimately, all are subject to God. Mediaeval political power introduces into the West an absolute order that is intimately connected to the God of monotheism. This God is the one being that is exempt from the dynamic of the ruler and ruler. God is subject to no one and subjects all. This exemption becomes important in modernity, as there arises the sovereign state of exception: the sovereign is truly sovereign because s/he can exempt him- or herself from the rules of state, a claim that was reserved for God.

Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss, wavering as they did on who the true first modern political philosopher was, can be read as presenting both Machiavelli and Hobbes as the first proper modern thinkers. We find in each of these philosophers the claim for sovereign rule, a rule that can discipline and bring order to a world tragically suffused with human beings' darker nature: Machiavelli notes that politics is born out of the need to try and control the volatility/fickleness of human nature, whereas Hobbes famously sees us in a state of constant aggression, *homo homini lupus*, he tell us, we are to each other as wolves. Yet, in each of these modern models

of politics, whether we have the Leviathan of government, the prince or the tensions of a reworked Roman model of republican rule, and though some form of sovereignty is asserted for rulers in these models, rule is still understood as a relationship between a ruler and the ruled. Machiavelli and Hobbes painstakingly sketch how rulers are dependent upon their subjects, how they should avoid civil strife and bad tyrannical models of rule that inevitably and miserably fail, as was the case for Agathocles. We know that both Machiavelli and Hobbes found themselves in times of protracted civil unrest: they sought stability through new models of rule. The relationship between the ruler and the ruled promised for these modern thinkers some kind of peace, and peace and security were seen as vital for human flourishing.

Though many Western governments have modern forms of political rule, for example, the checks and balances of different branches of government and rule by law, I believe that we are no longer moderns. Michel Foucault, through his analyses of power, shows us how power can manifest itself in a plethora of ways and not only in material ways, nonetheless he views power as structured by relations between a dominant force and a subjected force. The ascendency of a new global financial order, the explosion of technology and communication-information networks, combined with unprecedented growth in human population at a rate never witnessed before, have created a new political order. Zygmunt Bauman calls this liquid modernity or simply globalization. He observes that the establishment of a new financial capitalist order means that traditional forms of governments are subject to the demands of markets in ways and on a scale that have never been

witnessed before. The elected governments of people are moved not so much by the desires of their citizens, but by the demands and pressures of global capitalism, resulting in an alienation of people from their local governments, understood as structures of rule. People are subject to rule that does not stem from their own governments, but from international and global forces, including competitiveness, trade deficits, IMF and World Bank policies, etc.

Does this new form of global political rule simply repeat the dynamic of the ruler-ruled and/or does it make evident (once again, perhaps) a political category I call impasse? I think we have to admit the possibility of both options. Most citizens of globalised Western countries are not only subject to their elected governments but also to the pressure of non-elected international forces that help form and run global economies, resulting in a form of alienation of citizens from an expectation of direct, democratic representative rule. For example, as individuals participating in our local democracies, we have little say over the price of foods, goods, interest rates and the cost of energy resources. These values are established in complex ways tied into global trends, expectations and markets. The materials that sustain life are not fully in the grasp of our local elected governments.

But there are also vast numbers of people living in western democracies that neither feel the oppression of local and global rule as certain poor and marginalized groups and individuals do nor do these individuals have the power to respond in any meaningful or concrete ways that can bring about change: whatever they do, individually or collectively, simply fizzles out or is katechonized, to borrow an expression from Carl Schmitt and Roberto Esposito— all attempts at change are

absorbed by the powers that be, neutralizing and limiting the impact and preserving the status quo, staying off any significant and real change. These individuals find themselves in a political impasse, for they cannot be fully identified with the ruled or subjected, nor are they rulers, even though they participate fully in government and society with all the rights accorded to the citizen by law. Individuals who find themselves in an impasse find themselves somewhere in between the more direct and classical relationship of power we have called the ruler-ruled.

An example of those who find themselves in an impasse probably could be found in the average, middle class citizen of western democracies. Such a citizen is comfortable enough in the sense that they have some economic stability and are not lacking in the essentials of life, like food, housing, security, and financial stability. Such individuals, as opposed to the urban and working poor of our great cities, the refugee, the mentally and physically ill, racialised and ghettoized minorities, some students and temporary faculty, etc., participate in the protocols of government like elections, but their vote really does not have any force to make significant change as it does not affect forces outside of the limited domain of politics as prescribed by our constitution, local and national borders and our laws. Any potential power they could have is blocked or neutralized by the more powerful rulers that control the material and economic resources that sustain life and ground politics. Those marginalised individuals and groups of society that are excluded from participation because of the demands and prejudices of dominant classes, both local and international, truly are subjectivated, *asujetti*, to borrow an expression from Foucault.

If we accept my claim about the existence of a group of people that experience political impasse, it seems that I have confined such a phenomenon to our present age. But, if we explore the margins of philosophy, the other side of the philosophical canon, we find philosophers who have articulated and experienced the sense of political impasse I have described above.

The notion of political impasse is not new to political philosophy. In fact, Neo-Stoic thinkers like Guillaume du Vair and Justus Lipsius meditate on its profound nature. In his elegantly written and thoughtful essay *On Constancy,* Justus Lipsius finds himself in the home of one of his old friends. He admits, after much questioning, that there are genuine situations where one finds oneself limited in one's ability to bring about any real significant political change because of the fighting between entrenched factions who are unwilling to cede any recognition and validity to the opposing side: compromise of any kind is judged to be impossible. In other words, positions are so firm such that no alternatives are possible other than the one enforced by any one given side. Lipsius, of course, is referring to the war of religions in which his beloved Flanders was then enmeshed. He recounts how he is subject to the bad affects of war and religious persecution. Being subjected to a given politics with no possibility of changing it or curtailing its brutal excesses is paramount to understanding the phenomenon of political impasse. One's subjectivity is deeply curtailed by the powers that be, as is one's own freedom or agency. One submits or one is faces the peril of destruction.

Fortunately, Lipsius had the means and the connections to flee to safer harbour in Germany. He admits that the civil wars raging in his native land have

caused him both physical and mental injury. He draws upon both Stoic philosophy and Christian theology in order to find some kind of healing from the effects of bloody political impasse. Physically, he took the option of moving outside the zone of conflict, but the trauma still lingers and afflicts his soul. Our philosopher admits that fleeing alone is not a sufficient answer to deal with the deep and negative effects of violence and political impasse. Neither can he lose himself in fanciful fantasies of the imagination, for they do not deal with the reality of the situation, but only defer it. What to do?

One of the first things that Lipsius does is unpack what it is to live in a time of political impasse. He invokes the Stoic notion of fate, always interwoven with a thick notion of Christian providence, in order to describe the situation in which he finds himself. Fate is to be understood as a kind of necessity in which one's own freedom is severely curtailed or limited. One must learn to accept and respond to what is given in such circumstances because there is no viable alternative. Lipsius invokes the notion of constancy (*constantia*, a difficult term to translate into English) as key to bearing impasse: it is a virtue that connotes strength, perseverance and discipline of mind.

Constancy, it should be remarked here, is sustainable for Lipsius because of his own theological view of God. Ultimately, Lipsius' God is perfect and never abandons his creation. God is also good and is not the source of evil. Lipsius subscribes to the traditional theodicy where, viewed from God's view of the eternal present, what may seem as tragedy to humans in any one given moment, may actually be only a certain stage of development that aims at the eventual realization

of ultimate perfections and goodness. Reminiscent of Boethius' classical argument concerning the providence of God, Lipsius' own belief conditions the very possibility of constancy in the first place. But what if one does not believe in Lipsius' Christian God? What can one do in such times of impasse?

Lipsius gives a very traditional Stoic answer here: thicken one's understanding of oneself, thereby empowering the self to develop attitudes and possibilities that will help one bear the pain and suffering of fate that extends form political impasse. This self is a source of freethinking and thought itself can bring relief but also help distinguish viable possible alternatives. The turn inward, into a zone of selfhood, that can resist or even remain unaffected by political impasse, is vital. I take inspiration from Lipsius' approach, but I also think we need to develop it in order to tackle the noxious effects of political impasse.

A political impasse may pass, either by a turn of events that breaks the impasse or by means of chance or change of personal status, for example, one may become part of the ruling elite or, sadly, find oneself confined by the political situation in which one finds oneself. What can philosophy do in times of political impasse? Here, we can learn from our Neo-stoic philosophers: they tell us that we need to show how hope is possible in such situations, we need to give people some kind of consolation, solace or constancy. It is also an opportunity to think of ideas and concepts, structures, which might be deployed in practice that might make change.

Impasse can help us think otherwise, much like Plato's aporia, we can think differently about what could be. To think otherwise in a situation is a sign of human

freedom insofar as we become aware that the necessity of a given moment of impasse need be neither eternal nor absolute. Moreover, it also restores some kind of agency: the possibilities are given to us in thought. We need to give to them a more active voice and to turn them over further in our thoughtful conversation. To think otherwise is one of the crucial powers of thinking, but it need not arise spontaneously: it can be cultivated through a sustained examination of the encounter between active thought and its more enduring repository in the inner self. But thought alone is not enough to bring about some concrete and imaginative response to political impasse. We require the imagination to extend the possibilities that arise in thinking otherwise: the imagination is what allows us to see newness that can stem from releasing that we can think otherwise. Imagination is what allows these new possibilities to take on a new shape, a reworked shape or even a slight modification of form of something that already exists. Once we have grasped what the imagination brings forward to urges us to will to enact it or, at least, contemplate it s possible concretion or actualization or even its dismissal as a possibility. The imagination not only is active in that it helps bring forward images and fantasies of new other possibilities, but it also has a passive aspect in that it affects us: it indicates which possibilities are more interesting for us, which possibilities we care about more. In many ways, the affect of the imagination incites desires for new possibilities, and these possibilities come with differing intensities. We must use judgement to distinguish between the possibilities that come forward, we must judge which ones to follow and which ones to abandon. The will is that

which chooses between the differing intensities, pushing them to completion, translating them to action.

One might object: But don't people think otherwise as ruler and ruled? Didn't the oppressed of New York respond to the financial crisis with the Occupy Movement and do not major globalised companies, say Apple, respond with new and ingenuous inventions and products? What is unique about thinking in an impasse? In an impasse, one feels hopeless and frustrated though one may not be completely oppressed: the feelings of frustration and despair are not quite the same as the optimism of the ruler or the pressures of being ruled: the oppression is somewhere in between. It is the affective dimension that is different in impasse. The affective dimension produces unique feelings that indicate a certain state of mind, including guilt, *ressentiment*, helplessness and complicity. Nietzsche tells us that these feelings indicate that we must think and be otherwise. The affect of political impasse can be deeply influenced by thinking itself, for Marcus Aurelius shows us how our own thinking affects us, transforms us, good and bad. Thinking is not only calculation, deduction, reasoning or judgement, but it is also an affect. Philosophical thinking and imagination in a time of impasse can affect us, move us to think otherwise, quelling and limiting the affect of being in an impasse, perhaps even creating new political possibilities.

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