

CONCEPT AND METAPHOR IN POLITICAL MOBILIZATION

In international radical politics there often appears a restless craving for a particular kind of rational, institutional, publicly-visible revolutionary order that, it is assumed, will deliver strength and unity. Power, the idea goes, is built through a certain kind of generalization, abstraction and categorization, an assimilation of the (weak or local) specific into the (more powerful and regimented) universal. “What narratives can be used to make more *general* cases from our *particular* struggles?” wonders one Marxist activist from South Africa. “How can we organize beyond the *pockets* of *local* resistance that characterize the current scene?” asks a trade union leader from Norway. “What’s the *global alternative*?” demand political parties, unions, NGOs, and social movements accustomed to acting as transmission belts between unruly, outraged mobs and rule-making elites looking for a coherent political platform that will calm them.

Yet where in this picture are the working processes of mobilization that do **not** revolve around (but rather cut across) the acts of putting things in categories, seeking public commitment to propositions, or linking particular struggles that seem to be about the same “issues”? Where is that aspect of upheaval that revolves around metaphor and analogy, around seeing yourself as someone that you are not, around feeling that someone else who is not involved in your “campaign” or your life nevertheless speaks for you? On the anti-Marcos streets of Manila in 1986, there were irresistible moments when marching nuns were suddenly (felt to be) speaking for atheists, and communists for the middle class; when feminists were cheered by patriarchalists. In Mexico today, perhaps even the most reactionary can begin to recognize themselves in the 43 students abducted in front of a surveillance camera and then murdered. In food riots or Egyptian anti-government demonstrations, the action of one person often can be seen as a “metaphoric condensation” (Slavoj Zizek) of the action of all, or even of one side in a global class conflict. Seeing your struggle in the mirror of another’s is not the same as agreeing with it, being able to predict where it will go, nor necessarily even thinking that you share the “same umbrella”. It requires a different kind of stage-setting “work”.

This metaphoric politics is important for the right as well as for the left. Bush and Berlusconi won elections not because anyone believed that they represented their interests but because, following huge organizational efforts, enough white men could be induced into identifying with them instead of with the 99%. Yet there is a special relevance for the oppressed groups usually associated with the left. If, as James Scott says, it is not in the interest of the 18th-century European poacher to “help the historian with a public account” of whether he is “more interested in a warm fire and rabbit stew than in contesting the claim of the aristocracy to the wood and the game he has just taken”, then neither is it necessarily in his interest to help social reformers or political organizers with similar inquiries. Even if the poacher has been an active member of an agricultural workers’ political study group, when his neighbours follow him into violent assaults on private property or suddenly go mute when invited to offer evidence against him, that will likely be because he is seen as a metaphorical version of themselves, transmitting into the public words and other deeds that they have themselves rehearsed around a fire when the gamekeepers and foresters are sleeping. This is the rationality of the work of listening and responsiveness in sheltered, vernacular spaces that are not hollowed out more than it is the rationality of party calculation, “common concerns” and new narratives prepared for public ears in an era of global infrastructure. But for those with revolutionary movement-building ambitions, it will presumably continue to be the case that as much attention needs to be given to this rationality as to the rationality of political platforms, public confrontations with capital, and “scaling up”.