

CONCEPT AND METAPHOR IN POLITICAL MOBILIZATION

Power, according to an old idea, is built by sorting people into categories. “The union makes us strong,” as the song “Solidarity Forever” has it, because workers learn to put themselves in the same class. United, that class acquires more force than any isolated individual could ever have. People are able to organize, on this view, when they grasp that their interests are the same as those of others. It is by assimilating or even subordinating themselves to a project that they come to recognize as shared, and setting aside trivial differences, that they achieve their most important goals.

If an individual community is like an individual worker, then it follows that it too needs to join with other communities if it is to escape being vulnerable. On the view just sketched, that entails, again, regimenting the merely specific under universal categories. That's how weak “local” struggles become stronger “global” ones. They find common cause with other struggles, or “scale up” to cover more territory. Power, once more, seems to lie in generalization.

It's no wonder, then, that intellectual gatherings aimed at exploring possibilities for social change are so often stirred by restless cravings for greater abstraction. “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 political platform that will ensure public order.

So compelling is this impulse that it's easy to forget how many working processes of political mobilization do *not* revolve around subsuming things into categories, seeking public commitment to propositions, finding least common denominators, or slotting particular struggles into columns labeled “issues” or “interests”. It's easy to overlook the extent to which not only social upheaval, but also political organization, revolves around metaphor and analogy. Around seeing yourself as someone that you are not or as someone that you have little in common with. Around feeling that someone who is not and will not be involved in your campaign or your life nevertheless speaks for you. Above all, around seeing the demand associated with your particular local struggle as what Slavoj Zizek calls a

“... metaphoric condensation of the global opposition against Them, those in power, so that the protest is no longer actually just about that demand, but about the universal dimension that resonates in that particular demand”

and thus won't be satisfied when the demand is met. As Zizek explains, it is precisely this metaphorical leap, and not any process of abstraction, that world rulers most fear:

“The authentic moment of discovery, the breakthrough occurs when a properly universal dimension explodes from within a particular context and becomes ‘for-itself’, and is directly experienced as universal. This universality-for-itself is not simply external to or above its particular context: it is inscribed within it.”

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 food riots down the centuries, the action of one person often becomes a symbol of the action of all, or even of one side in a global class conflict. In

Guerrero, Mexico in 2014, perhaps even the most reactionary could begin to recognize themselves in the 43 students abducted in front of a surveillance camera and then murdered. In view of the hundreds or thousands of similar killings carried out in Mexico every year, the murders gave little additional statistical reason for public identification, fear and outrage. But the murders spoke – they organized – in a way that the other killings could not.

Seeing yourself as another in this way is distinct from putting yourself and another in the same pre-existing category. Seeing your struggle in the mirror of another's, and both in the mirror of a greater “opposition against Them”, is not the same as agreeing with some set of premises or sharing some set of interests. Think of the difference between “getting” Rilke's epitaph “Rose, oh pure contradiction,/desire,/to be no one's sleep/under so many/lids” and understanding that rose petals and eyelids share certain fixed characteristics like shape or delicacy, but that roses and eyes are missing some commonalities. Anyone who understands the metaphors will no doubt already have been preconditioned to see, or maybe will already have seen, that rose petals and eyelids are similar in some ways and roses and eyes not. But understanding the metaphors and registering the similarities and differences are two different acts.

This metaphoric politics has always been 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 per cent. This identification did not consist of the belief that they had much in common with Bush or Berlusconi. Rather, it was about being able to see themselves *as* Bush or Berlusconi, or as acting out parts in an open-ended story in which Bush or Berlusconi were also characters.

Yet there is a special relevance for the oppressed groups usually associated with the left. If, as the political scientist James C. Scott says, it's 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 political organizers with similar inquiries. The poacher may well be an active member of an agricultural workers' political study group. But when his neighbours follow him into violent assaults on private property or suddenly go mute when invited to offer evidence against him, that is not necessarily because they are declaring themselves, and him, as a class whose interests are opposed to those of landowners. They may not think of themselves that way even in private. It may be more that they see the poacher 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 kind of identification lends itself not only to condensation of large volumes of experience, but also to inchoateness, prefiguration and – crucially for the oppressed – a particular kind of inherent, strategic concealment.

Metaphor is not a residual factor in political mobilization. It is not something for illustrating or making more persuasive the supposedly central business of linking social groups through recategorization and abstraction. Its central role is not to add colour or “human interest” to political concepts. Instead, it is constitutive and organizational, and requires its own stage-setting. Comprising much of the rationality of the work of listening, responsiveness and solidarity in sheltered and vernacular as well as public spaces, it exists alongside the rationality of moments of party calculation and formulation of common concerns. Those with movement-building ambitions will continue to need to give as much attention to this rationality as to the rationality of political platforms, open confrontations with capital, and “scaling up”.