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In/visibility, public-making and the politics of becoming

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Coming from a family that struggled through four decades of dictatorship after the Spanish Civil War, I have never doubted the importance of anonymity in political life. Hans Asenbaum's new book, *The Politics of Becoming: Anonymity and Democracy in the Digital Age* (2023), substantiates this premise and takes the question of anonymity beyond the usual tropes. In this article, I reflect on how foregrounding a politics of becoming generates actionable insights to advance participatory politics and democratic life.

In Asenbaum's account, anonymity emerges as a fundamental dimension of participatory politics not just for what it hides or protects, but also for what it shows and enables. The book demonstrates that anonymity is not just absence but a different kind of presence with its own political thrust. In this light, the liminal and thus potentially transformative dimensions of anonymity become clear –for example, in the case of individuals who render themselves invisible in a crowd to gain political visibility for a shared cause.

Reading this book made me think about how so much of our contemporary world spins around the politics of in/visibility and its impact on public imagination and collective action. For instance, the in/visibility of the data economy in surveillance capitalism; of colonial and imperial violence that sustains geopolitics; of emancipatory movements that fight dispossession and exploitation; of industrial slaughterhouses that anchor extractive food

systems; of the commons as world-making engines of possibility beyond the state-market nexus; of prison systems as criminogenic responses to structural socioeconomic failures; of people tackling everyday injustices in climate-changed worlds; of transient and displaced populations caught in punitive nation-state nets; of pluriverse knowledges reclaiming pluriversal futures; of digital selves pulled between weaponized herds and productive collectives...

In/visibility as a discursive domain of interaction is thus a key site of generative contestation for our times because it frames the scope of our change-making imagination. That is, it throws into relief, or renders invisible, our shared imaginaries of what is possible, thinkable, and desirable. In doing so, it underpins the future-making power of new utopianism, understood as the “education of a desire for being and living otherwise” (Abensour quoted in Thaler 2022, 3). Although the politics of in/visibility is as old as human collectives, its structuring power is amplified in our era of “communicative plenty” with the unprecedented expansion of opportunities for communication (Ercan, Hendriks, and Dryzek 2019, 20).

Paraphrasing Anaïs Nin (1975), we don’t see the world as it is, we see the world as we are. And whatever we are is constantly changing, in a state of becoming. This is good news for anyone longing for a substantial re-assembling of our shared worlds. And this is a key aspect of the theory of change developed in Asenbaum’s book: ‘democratic transformations of the self and society go hand in hand’. A politics of becoming, as a radical democratic project, can thus be seen as unfolding in the shape-shifting spectrum of the politics of in/visibility. Here, the individual comes to the fore not as a unitary entity but as a relational milieu. This

underpins Asenbaum's quest for a more capacious public sphere that can accommodate a democratic pluriverse of identity-building practices with transformative potential. The book invites readers to reflect on our "inner multiplicity" and make space for the many selves that populate a life in the digital public sphere.

The premise of the book (i.e. as humans, we are constantly becoming) would seem obvious were it not for the stronghold of thinking orthodoxies prevalent in the last half century.

Entire disciplines, and their practices, have been built on the notion that we are individually pre-packaged bundles of relatively fixed preferences –e.g. the democratic subject must be representable and thus categorized; the market subject must be exploitable and thus segmented; the bureaucratic subject must be knowable and thus standardized. These world-making rationalities have become so prevalent that they often go unquestioned in mainstream political discourse (but see Stone 1997; Brown 2015; Scott 1998). Before the Schumpeterian turn in democratic thinking –and the groundwork it laid for the democratic elitism of the neoliberal project– thinkers like William James warned against reification and "the dangers of thinking that groups have fixed identities" because "identities change, develop, and mutate" (Bernstein 2010, 69).

This was subsequently emphasized by agonistic thinkers exploring "the constitutive tension between already existing diversity and the politics of becoming by which new constituencies struggle to modify the register of legitimate diversity" (Connolly 2005, 69). Our understanding of the world "comes to life inside the tissue of experience. It is made; and made by relations that unroll themselves in time" (James 2004, 53). Those relations are made consequential in identity-building through engagement with difference and

contestation in the public sphere. Asenbaum's book shows how difference democrats provide a bridge across contemporary theories of democracy. In doing so, it points to a tenet that has propelled notions of democratic equality since time immemorial (Graeber and Wengrow 2021) –namely, that we are all the same: different. In this sense, we may think of democracy as being about the art of how to live together, and apart.

The book develops theoretical devices to contest narratives that conceive a person's identity as reified and thus pre-political (i.e. fully formed before engaging with others). This matters because it presses the urgency of troubling and reworking the pervasive ideology of democratic elitism in the last century (Dewey 1927). That is, the notion that democracy is something that a few do on behalf of others, rather than a form of political life that should permeate everyday relationships in communities, workplaces, organizations, businesses, institutions, economies... as argued by contemporary participatory democrats (e.g. Pateman 1970; Barber 2003). In other words: political, social, and economic inclusion are inextricable. Can you really have a participatory democracy without a participatory society? And can you really have a participatory society without a participatory economy? In this light, and following Amartya Sen (2001, 2009), a politics of becoming can be seen as a politics of unfolding capabilities: the positive freedom to be, do and become.

In the interstices of Asenbaum's suggestive prose, participatory democrats will find new windows into the contemporary political condition. Peppered throughout the book are possible antidotes to the persuasive master narratives built around the pre-political identity of Homo Economicus (cf. Sen 2009). As such, I read Asenbaum as challenging essentialist and foundationalist accounts in political science. For me, the corollary of this work is that

the fundamental unit of political analysis is not the individual but its relationships –what some call ‘the Nested-I’, drawing on Ubuntu relationality as a counter-narrative to Cartesian rationality (Bollier and Helfrich 2019, 89).

Thinking with Asenbaum about the “multiple-self” helps to reclaim the collective dimension of the individualized self. Identities are always in a state of becoming because they are relational: we discover who we are at a given time through our dialogic engagement with the world as it manifests itself in others and through us (see Bakhtin 1984, 293). Identity appears thus inextricable from the collective –or as Ubuntu philosophy puts it: I am because we are (Murove 2012). Identity is the name we give to that emerging domain where the individual and the collective constitute each other. Moreover, identity is where our sense of individuality emerges as a dimension of the collective, which in turn renders visible the urgency of a politics of interdependence driven by care-full solidarities (e.g. The Care Collective 2020). This can sometimes be seen as perilous territory because it can be difficult to find the Goldilocks terrain between the excesses of hyper-individualism and hyper-collectivism that have occupied the polar extremes of dystopian political imagination.

Asenbaum treads that tension carefully, but I would argue that the book would benefit from a stronger foregrounding of relationality (the Nested-I) as the non-essentialist core of democratic agency. Otherwise, at times, the book may be misread as pointing to an individualized notion of the political self, which may be misconstrued as shoring up imaginaries of radical individualism. I would have therefore appreciated a clearer statement on relationality, rather than individuality, as a fundamental node of political life and analysis. As Aurora Levins Morales (2019, 55-88) argues, much historical storytelling has

been anchored on individuality –leaders, martyrs, revolutionaries, despots– whereas the history of communities, collectives, crowds, movements, publics and counter-publics is often harder to tell or purposefully rendered invisible (but see Graeber and Wengrow 2021). A politics of becoming must arguably be a politics not just of the multiple-self but of the Nested-I.

A politics of becoming, as articulated in the book, is also inseparable from the recent rekindling of theories of prefigurative action (van de Sande 2022; Raekstad and Saio Gradin 2020). That is, action that embodies the principles and practices of the desired futures pursued through that action. Prefigurative democratic practices can disrupt the status quo by opening spaces for new ways of being, doing and becoming. This connects to an important question that shapes democratic spaces (Escobar 2017): what kind of citizen are citizens invited to be? Current political systems usually (imagine and thus) invite people to be spectators, bystanders, complainers, consumers, followers ... rather than doers, problem-solvers, co-producers, thinkers, agents. A politics of becoming must recognize that participatory processes do not capture a public that it ‘out there’, they generate publics through a range of public-making assemblages. In other words, the public is not a pre-existing sociological entity waiting to be discovered: publics are made, rather than found (Newman 2011; Mahony, Newman, and Barnett 2010). Contemporary theories of public-making started when John Dewey criticized the “amorphous and unarticulated”, “shadowy and formless” public as a convenient abstraction invoked for the purposes of reproducing established political forces and structures (1927, 131, 142). For Dewey, the concept of the “general public” is a potentially paralyzing fiction: publics can only become democratic

agents when they are assembled around specific issues and embodied through relationality that unfolds in time and space.

Much of political life hinges on the making of publics and counter-publics and the claims and counterclaims that are made on their behalf. Publics are brought into being by contingent practices of summoning, convening, assembling and performing (Barnett 2008). From this perspective, public participation processes do not capture a pre-existing public; rather, they generate and perform a range of publics. Publics are thus contingent assemblages mediated by a range of artefacts and spaces (e.g. digital platforms, opinion polls, public forums, social networks, traditional media, elections, parliaments, democratic innovations...), and it is critical to render visible the political work of public-making (Escobar 2014). Future work towards a politics of becoming must grapple with the challenge of understanding how multiple selves engage in the constitution of multiple publics. Part of the challenge is recognizing the tension between public-making processes that assume fixed identities and those that make space for emerging identities. This interplay may generate new forms of collectivity and solidarity as a tangible manifestation of a politics of becoming.

Seeing participatory politics and democratic innovations as assemblages packed with generative tensions and transformative potential opens alternative understandings and practices. For example, mini-publics are arguably better understood not as mirrors of society but as new expressions or disruptions of the collective –i.e. their main virtue is not that they represent the public but that they enable new public-making assemblages with potential to expand our political imagination. By the same token, exploring the politics of public-making in the digital public sphere can help to make distinctions between a range of

emerging online crowds –for example, the formation of *digital herds* in authoritarian populist movements (where people are invited into *followership*), versus the formation of *digital collectives* in participatory and deliberative processes (where people are invited into *citizenship*).

Asenbaum's book opens lines of inquiry that, as shown in these reflections, can be taken into various domains. But it also leaves a healthy dose of unfinished business: issues that deserve further attention and for which this book provides a launching pad.

For example, the spatial metaphor that dominates the field of public participation too often directs our gaze to the visible *frontstages* of participatory processes, whereas many of the most consequential dynamics unfold in *backstages* that are usually rendered invisible in theoretical and empirical accounts (Escobar 2015). That is one of the crucibles where the politics of in/visibility meets the politics of becoming through public-making work. For instance, the invisible work done backstage by organizers of participatory processes summons particular types of publics with potential to either reproduce or transform the status quo –i.e. by framing the issues at stake; by enabling or constraining emerging identities; by delineating the scope/scale of change that is thinkable and thus actionable.

Another area for further development relates to Asenbaum's unqualified exaltation of the multiple-self. I wonder whether there is a risk that extolling the virtues of the multiplication of selves may erode the sense of a coherent narrative of self capable of sustaining political agency. Is fragmentation and thus potential disconnection the price for decentering the self? Or does decentering speak to the networked self, the Nested-I, thus multiplying its connections and agency? The book opened my eyes to the Janus-faced nature of anonymity,

its virtues and vices, but left me wanting to learn more about the “interruption of modes of identification that stabilize the dominant order”.

Asenbaum’s treatment of the presentation of digital selves in everyday life is bursting with possibilities for theory and praxis. The book offers portals into “microverses” that invite new ways of being, thinking and doing. A collective task never more urgent than in a climate-changed world hard-pressed under the epochal forces of the age of surveillance and cannibal capitalism (Zuboff 2019; Fraser 2022). In my reading, Asenbaum’s book is infused with much needed critical optimism: the politics of becoming is a politics of possibility, but it is not naïve about the constraints and affordances of a present often trapped by the past. It remains to be seen what contribution can a politics of becoming make to the urgent democratic transformations needed for tackling the key challenge of our time: mobilizing collective capabilities not for “mastering Planet Earth” (Thaler 2022, 165) but towards its shared stewardship.

A politics of becoming, as a theory of change, offers ideas to think about as well as ideas to think with. In doing so, it gives visibility to a domain of political imagination and action that often remains latent in ongoing struggles towards desirable futures.

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