Becoming Through Detachment
Displacement, Unframing, and Disidentification in the Brazilian June Journeys

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Abstract: This article contributes to the growing literature around the idea of a politics of becoming by emphasizing its deconstructive dimension. It advances the notion of “detachment,” which articulates different angles of such deconstructive dimension. Detachment can draw from three different concepts: displacement (Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe), unframing (Judith Butler), and disidentification (Jacques Rancière). After highlighting the key points of each of these concepts and the way they contribute to an encompassing notion of detachment, the article moves to a brief illustration of how these concepts are relevant to make sense of contemporary protests, focusing specifically on the Brazilian June Journeys of 2013.

Keywords: detachment, disidentification, displacement, June Journeys, politics of becoming, unframing

Debates in democratic theory acknowledge that the identities of democratic subjects are not fixed. They change throughout political processes, as subjects do not enter such processes with stable and preestablished identities. Rather they produce these identities in interaction with others (Lloyd 2005; Markell 2003). The process of subjectivity formation is, therefore, not pre-political but an important foundation for politics itself (Foucault 1990; Honneth 2003; Lloyd 2005). Subjects are not the a priori of politics.

In these debates, however, the negative, deconstructive dimension of identity creation remains underexplored, despite an emerging emphasis on its relevance (Asenbaum 2022). Here we deploy and develop an argument from previous work (Mendonça and Marques 2018) in order to advance the notion of “detachment” as central to the construction of political subjects, drawing from the works of Ernesto Laclau (1990), Chantal Mouffe (2005), Judith Butler (1987, 2011), and Jacques Rancière (2000, 2009).
In broad terms, detachment can be understood as the process through which subjects are separated from a preexisting order (norm, framework, or identity) that would shape one’s gestures and actions. Detachment is a process that facilitates the recognition of the political struggle and the political subject as coconstituents. It is achieved through displacement, unframing and disidentification, which reveal diverse angles of this deconstructive dimension of the politics of becoming.

If subject formation is a continuous process of becoming (Connolly 1996), this becoming is marked by gaps and disconnections that pervade and drive it. Neglecting this leads to misleading comprehensions of identities and of the ways through which identities play a key role in democratic processes. As in a jigsaw puzzle, identity processes involve attempts to fit in: individuals construct their identifications against the background of possibilities that societies make available to them and the forces that interpellate them. There are moments, nonetheless, in which they challenge interpellations or the alleged “natural” frames, detaching themselves and showing the need to disarticulate existing discourses and their desire for a totality.

To explore this “becoming through detachment,” we will turn to key debates about identity formation in radical democracy. Laclau and Mouffe (2001), Butler (1999, 2009, 2017), and Rancière (2010) allow us to conceptualize different angles of the processes of detachments that ground democratic subjects. The angles of displacement, unframing, and disidentification should not be read as chronological steps or even as completely different processes. They are overlapping angles of the complex process through which political actors are separated from a given order, opening ways for the emergence of new political subjectivities. Laclau and Mouffe explain the displacement of chains of equivalence at the heart processes of subjectivation. Butler has an idea of unframing running across her writings as she realizes how the call of a frame into question paves the ways for innovative subjectivities and political claims. And Rancière points to the importance of disidentification to make sense of the emergence of subjects and their democratic role.

After discussing the theoretical arguments about becoming through detachment by engaging with the work of Laclau and Mouffe, Butler, and Rancière, the article turns to a brief illustration of the June Journeys—a series of protests that occurred in Brazil in 2013. Our illustration reveals how the dynamics of democratic change is linked to detachment.

The Politics of Displacement in Laclau and Mouffe

The first angle of detachment that we would like to discuss can be found in Laclau and Mouffe’s (2001) radical democratic theory, which elaborates
on the formation of emancipatory democratic subjectivities. The idea of displacement lies at the very core of their conceptualization about hegemony and articulation. Discussing left-wing struggles in the mid-1980s, they show that it is the very process of displacement of political actors that moves politics forward. Laclau and Mouffe argue that the rise of new emancipatory struggles, such as those of feminist, ethnic, and the LGBTQIA+ movement, not only put new questions on the public agenda but also shift the scene of these conflicts. They claim that the left was undergoing an identity disarticulation, which would make possible the emergence of other revolutionary forms of identification.

According to them, “the democratic revolution is simply the terrain upon which there operates a logic of displacement supported by an egalitarian imaginary, […] which […] does not predetermine the direction in which this imaginary will operate” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 168). The displacement of what exists is therefore at the heart of the quest for democracy as long as it is supported by an egalitarian imaginary. Laclau and Mouffe argue, in this sense, that political subjects are contingent agents, which emerge from particular articulations that displace previous forms of identity. The proletariat, for instance, emerged through the displacement of a previous order and previous identities. It does not have a predetermined mission and destiny, or an enduring substance.

To understand the conceptual basis of the formation of political subjects, Laclau and Mouffe elaborate on the concept of articulation, which is not a simple connection between pre-constituted elements. On the contrary, articulation is an always contingent relationship that modifies the elements linked through it. It hence always implies a displacement with previous articulatory forms. A new articulation changes the very basis of what is being articulated, challenging the substance of what existed before it.

In this sense, Laclau and Mouffe argue that the conditions for the emergence and appearance of political subjects are linked to the displacement of totalizing meanings. This displacement, which seeks to reveal a failure in attempts to symbolize the whole, points to the possibility of change. It demonstrates that there is always an incompleteness of the subject, allowing for a multiplicity of articulations. A unified and consensual political structure is not capable of processing the different points of conflict that emerge and cut across the social fabric. The dismantling of given structures of power involves the displacement of subject positions to enable new articulations.

In the authors’ view, conflict resides precisely in the exposure of contingency. In showing that things (and they themselves) could be otherwise, political actors challenge the existing orders, defying the status
Conflict is born from the denial of an established order, exposing its limits in the quest for displacement. Displacement opens up elements for other possibilities of articulation. In Laclau and Mouffe’s radical democratic theory, politics and political actors are necessarily and constantly in a process of becoming, because displacement and rearticulation are their propelling engines. It is through displacement—our first angle to detachment—that novelty can emerge.

Conflict, therefore, depends on a type of displacement that removes the subject, albeit ephemerally, from the articulatory plot in which they are inserted to open up other possibilities of articulation. It is in this hiatus, in this gap, that the contingency of the world and of the subjects reveals itself in its political capacity. It is the denial of existing articulations that breaks up subjects into reconfigurable elements. To construct identities, it is necessary to first displace the existing ones. Displacements reveal the inherent openness of every social structure, showing its contingency and its limitations.

We argue that this notion of displacement reveals one of the angles of our broader idea of detachment, which we had defined as the negative, deconstructive dimension of identity building. Displacement shows that the radicality of democracy lies in its contingency, since the political actors that constitute democracy are permanently changing. The construction of political actors starts from the displacement of something understood as existing in order to make viable what does not exist yet.

**The Politics of Unframing in Judith Butler**

The second angle to the idea of becoming through detachment can be found in Judith Butler’s idea of unframing. It should be noted that Butler does not explicitly conceptualize “unframing,” but the word runs across her discussions and has been conceptualized by some interpreters of her work (Hankey 2017; Marcondes 2020). Butler’s theory has always challenged the stability and coherency of identities, focusing on the indeterminacy of subjectivation. She has emphasized that identities are not attributes but rather dynamic practices and performances that acquire different meanings in different contexts. It is through continuous iterations that meanings, subjects, and realities are transformed. In this sense, Butler (1990) conceives of subversion as deriving from the deconstruction generated by the displacing reproduction of what exists.

In her later works, Butler (2009: 9) seeks to grasp these processes through which existing frames are “called into question”:
To call the frame into question is to show that the frame never quite contained the scene it was meant to limn, that something was already outside, which made the very sense of the inside possible, recognizable. The frame never quite determined precisely what it is we see, think, recognize, and apprehend. Something exceeds the frame that troubles our sense of reality; in other words, something occurs that does not conform to our established understanding of things.

Following Jeffrey Hankey (2017), we see these processes as forms of unframing. According to Butler, frames are power operations through which we apprehend the world and engage with it. Such power operations interfere in the conditions of appearance and consideration of the subjects, for they outline specific mechanisms through which a way of life is apprehended and evaluated. Frames compose complex networks of actions, discourses, norms, and values, which delimit the conditions for the public appearance of subjects and of their demands, interfering with the understanding of what may or may not count as relevant.

Butler’s (2015: 24) approach seeks forms of mismatch capable of challenging existing frames. The practice of unframing seeks to expose the regimes of violence and appearance that sought to control the functioning of the interpretative schemes. Such a practice aims not only to find new framings but also to intervene in already stabilized interpretations to show their possible fractures and gaps, which would promote other political imaginaries. What is at stake in questioning the frames is the promotion of another way of structuring the “thinkable.” Unframing involves an alteration of a regime of perception. Dismantling and refusing naturalized interpretative schemes, the practice of unframing nurtures connections and disconnections that may raise awareness to alternatives ways of perceiving and understanding the world.

Given that the norms and values that ground identity formation are socially constructed, Butler links resistance to a capacity of unframing the categories and structures that frame actors’ roles and places in the world. To Butler, unframing is essentially a process of deconstruction of identities, through the exposure of the contradictions of norms that ground these identities. Butler argues that the undoing of moral frames can expose the institutional violence that fuels inequality. For her, unframing reveals the fragility of the reproduction of norms when, faced with a moral challenge that denies the recognition of the value of lives, subjects have the possibility of responding in a different way than that already prepared by the existing identities.

Butler’s unframing offers a second angle to our notion of becoming through detachment. While she also emphasizes the deconstructive dimension of identity building, as Laclau and Mouffe do, she deepens the
discussion about the discursive mechanisms through which this process happens and about the moral grounds of identity detachments. Moreover, Butler offers a particular contribution to this debate when she shows that even the act of reiterating oneself leads to self-displacements and detachments, which are seen as the very basis of identity formation. In addition, she is attentive to the aesthetic dimension of unframing, which grounds new forms of perceiving one-self, other political actors, and the world. This specific point brings Butler’s contribution close to the last author we will focus on: Jacques Rancière.

Politics of Disidentification in Jacques Rancière

The third angle of the idea of becoming through detachment that is meaningful to democratic theory is to be found in Rancière’s concept of disidentification. Rancière’s work is fundamentally concerned with the ruptures engendered by the resignification of identities, which opens space for the emergence of politics.

For Rancière, processes of subjectivation are born from ruptures that displace subjects from the positions to which they were previously assigned by the police order. These ruptures establish scenes of dissent. A scene is an assemblage of heterogeneous elements (narratives, discourses, events, images, materials) that enact dissent. It is an organization of the sensible that reconfigures the landscape of what can be seen and what can be thought. In doing so, it alters the field of the possible and the distribution of places and opportunities to act and be heard in social and political experiences that were not predetermined (Rancière 2018).

Political subjectivation is above all the result of disidentifications in the sense of ruptures within a discursive order that assigns each person their location in the hierarchy: “The logic of political subjectivation is never the simple affirmation of an identity, it is always, at the same time, the denial of an identity imposed by another, fixed by police logic” (Rancière 2004: 121). The promotion of equality, which is essentially democratic, requires a refusal of identities and roles offered by the police order. Those who have no part come into existence through a process of disidentification, disclosing the wrong distribution between those who can speak and those who cannot speak and participate in society. Those who have no part are, at the same time, the cause and the symptom of dissent, promoting detachments, insofar as they show how subjects do not fit into preestablished social categories.

According to Rancière, those who “do not count” need to create a common scene of dissent in which they challenge the status of what is
given and make visible what was not previously visible. The political acts of disidentification and subjectivation redefine what is visible and what can be said and are, therefore, extremely central to democracy. Political subjectivation redefines the coordinates of experience when subjects appear in a scene in which they elaborate the terms of their emancipation by taking control of temporalities, spatialities, words, and modes of presence that were previously removed from them. Instead of proposing an emancipatory concept that identifies its revolutionary agent, political subjectivation highlights the contradictory forces of disidentification that establish an unpredictable movement of irruption (Fjeld and Tassin 2015), which lies at the heart of the democratic impulse toward equality.

In this sense, the political subject is not an entity (individual or collective) but a process of subjectivation. Political subjectivation is constituted not through the positive gesture of claiming an identity and requiring its recognition but through negative detachment. It is the production of a gap between the identity of the current order and a new political subjectivity. As in Laclau and Mouffe’s and Butler’s radical democratic theories, the displacing power of democracy resides not in the affirmation of oneself but in the detachment from previously assigned roles and identities. As in Butler’s discussion, such a process is aesthetic in the sense that it affects what is considered passible of visibility and understanding. As a form of detachment, disidentification broadens the scope of the understandable and sayable.

Despite these similarities, disidentification reveals a more specific angle of becoming through detachment. While Laclau and Mouffe and Butler see detachment as inherent to politics, Rancière makes it equivalent to politics. Politics is, by definition, the appearance of a political subject that detaches itself from its assigned identity to alter the coordinates of its experience in through disidentification, when the harm of inequality is made explicit and a new distribution of the sensible is claimed. Disidentification is associated with valuing the intervals between the experience conditioned to expectations and the possible experimentation of other ways of being, saying, feeling, and thinking. The process of displacement of fixed identities produces an excess of words, gestures, and discourses in a scene of dissent. It is through controversial acts that the emergence of a fractured community becomes evident.

A Brief Illustration: The Brazilian June Journeys

The emphasis on the negative, deconstructive dimension of identity formation is conceptually appealing. We used the broad idea of detachment...
to summarize this dimension and argued that displacement, unframing, and disidentification are layers of this phenomenon. But what is the explanatory potential of these concepts when we look at empirical phenomena? In this section, we present a brief illustration of how displacement, unframing, and disidentification may be useful by looking at the 2013 demonstrations in Brazil known as the June Journeys.

These protests can be seen in the context of several multitudinous processes, as those observed in the United States, Spain, Turkey, Chile, and Hong Kong around the 2010s (Della Porta 2015; Fominaya 2014; Machin 2022). Faced with the uncertainty fueled by such demonstrations and the individualizing tendencies of the context (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013; Domingues 2014; Mendonça et al. 2019), social movements research is increasingly interested in the nature of collective identities in multitudinous protest (Gerbaudo and Treré 2015; Mendonça 2017; Monterde et al. 2015). This literature seeks to identify the conditions of the emergence of a “we,” which is unstable, heterogeneous, and plural. What remains underexplored in this literature is the negative/deconstructive move that is inherent to a comprehension of identities as becoming and that is grasped by the different layers of the idea of detachment.

In June 2013, a massive cycle of protests occurred in Brazil (Bringel and Pleyers 2015; Singer 2014; Tavares et al. 2022). It started as a protest against the rise of public transportation fares. As the world turned its eyes to the country in a preparation event for the FIFA World Cup, thousands of youngsters took the streets in marches initially aimed at promoting the agenda of free fare transportation. The violent repression from the police mobilized more social groups, and the demonstrations have grown and become more diversified throughout the month, in what is known as the June Journeys. The streets of most cities and towns of the country were packed with demonstrators with a wide list of demands: from the moralization of politics to the reduction of taxes and the improvement of public services. With more than 1.4 million demonstrators in a single day, these protests have been part of deep social and political changes in the country.

The protests were not anchored in established forms of identification and did not engage in established forms of identity politics. It is not possible to define them as a struggle of a given group. The collectives that have emerged in these protests did not form as mere aggregations of existing identities. The attempts to explain these protests based on the demographics of those in the streets fail to grasp the transformative nature of the identities formed in that collective experience (Mendonça 2017). The creation of some sense of collectivity in this diverse and contradictory process required detachment and a denial of preestablished
categories, opening ways for the emergence of innovative processes of subjectivation.

The protesters of the June Journeys (just as the 99 percent of the Occupy movement or the Spanish Indignados) did not consist of coalitions of previously established political groups. The destabilizing power of the June Journeys lies in the fact that preconfigured identities were challenged. In Laclau and Mouffe’s terms, such a critical point in time can be seen as one of detachment, in which the moments of an articulation return to their conditions of elements that are available for novel articulations. The destabilizing power of such a transforming process, whose implications have deeply marked Brazilian politics in the following years, is related to its displacing capacity. The June Journeys challenged the discourses, identities, and assemblages that stabilized Brazilian politics.

Moving toward Butler’s lexicon, our argument is that a proper comprehension of the June Journeys must not restrict itself to the identification of frames promoted. Calling frames into question is at the very heart of the detachment fostered by these protests. Such an unframing process is obvious in the diversity and contradiction running across the placards and signs brought to the streets. More than a single frame of demands presented by a defined identity, the demonstrations evince the practice of unframing that allows the challenge of established moral grammars, identities, and interpretive frameworks. This deconstructive moment opens possibilities for reinvention and for the resignification of oneself.

This brings us to Rancière’s concepts. Disidentification is at the kernel of processes in which individuals who did not see themselves as a group forged some form of collectivity. The interviews one of us conducted with activists engaged in these protests were consistent in revealing this feeling of surprise and self-transformation, once activists saw themselves marching next to strangers, who advocated different political agendas and who had different beliefs and ideologies (Mendonça 2017). The political subjects of these manifestations are unclassifiable because they did not exist a priori as an identity. They operate outside the extant calculations of shares. They represent, in Rancière’s (2004) terms, the emergence of the “no-parts,” which indicates the limits of the established order. In becoming perceptible, they evince the aesthetic nature of politics and reconfigure the distribution of the sensible, which can lead to the democratic experimentation with new worlds and new modes of existence.

The becoming of political subjects through detachment is also a becoming of the society, as it points to new directions and transformations, which emerge in the public scene through the manifestation of dissent. Displacement, unframing, and disidentification point in the same direction: changes in society require detachment, which pave the way for new
and emergent meanings and identities. By detaching from the roles and meanings previously attributed to them, political subjects (their relations, and societies) are enabled to become something else.

An interesting point in this regard was demonstrators’ frequent use of masks, helmets, and balaclavas. These objects had an obvious intent of making individuals unidentifiable to the police forces and security camera systems. There is, however, more to the use of masks. In concealing identities, masks open up possibilities for new identifications. Anonymity is not only an erasure of identity but a performance that enacts other identity positions (Asenbaum, 2018). As Márcia Maria da Cruz (2018) and Solano et al. (2014) demonstrate, mask wearing in the 2013 Brazilian demonstrations served the creation and strengthening of relationships between individuals in non-preexisting groups. Solano et al. (2014) describe, for instance, how the act of putting on balaclavas was sometimes conducted collectively and felt as a morphing experience.

Displacing identities, anonymity can perform an unframing process. The camouflage exposes the instability of what is taken to be real, legitimate, identifiable, or normal. Anonymity undoes pregiven frames with which we approach identity, challenging its perceived coherence: the boundary between the familiar and the strange is problematized. This unframing process involves the production of other ways of appearing for bodies. The performative character of anonymity draws attention to the unstable textuality of the frame itself. It demonstrates, in other words, that the frame can be a powerful detachment tool, as long as it prompts political actors to challenge the framing of reality and the language upon which these frames rely. Unframing reveals the fragility of the reproduction of norms, leading to the possibility of change.

Such a process of disidentified subjectivation implies the action of collectives that rely on individuals who shape other possible worlds. By deconstructing established identities, actors detached from the existing discourses, becoming elements that could be re-signified under new articulating practices. Disidentifications produce individual and collective transformations, allowing the emergence of novelty.

It becomes clear that the process of disidentification involves a contestation of the existing articulations, which allows for a substantive unframing through displacements. The 2013 protests created new possibilities of subjectivation because they established conditions for interpretive frameworks to be rethought and transformed. It is worth remembering that articulations are not configured by preexisting elements: they configure the elements therein articulated. In this sense, the 2013 protests open historical opportunities for individuals to rethink and redefine themselves in other articulatory plots.
In a nutshell, we argue that protests such as the June Journeys were not mere manifestations of diverse dissatisfactions. Their power is revealed in their capacity to operate as a detachment that calls for reinventions of past and future. Such protests appeared as chaotic and disturbing because they did not make perfect sense according to the available interpretive frameworks. They had a displacing nature because they were underpinned by processes in which democratic subjects unframed themselves, disengaging from previously ascribed identifications. Detachments of this nature are profoundly political because they produce new subjects and, in doing so, affect the current power dynamics and the scenes of dissent where conflict actually takes place. Such detachments open gaps, create derivations, and modify paths of self-recognition, thus reconfiguring the sensible world. The political subjectivation produced by such protests affects the regimes of the comprehensible, sayable, and visible through the way it presents itself. More than actions promoted by a plurality of actors, such protests are triggers of subjectivation processes, feeding the historical configuration of new subjects.

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