Inspiring alterpolitics

Edited by

Stefano Boni and Riccardo Ciavolella

Aspiring to alterpolitics
Anthropology, radical theory, and social movements

Riccardo Ciavolella and Stefano Boni

This theme section inquires into the contribution of political anthropology to radical theories, social imagination, and practices underlying political "alternatives", which we propose to call "alterpolitics". The issue of an alternative to contemporary powers in globalization is a central topic in social movements and radical debates. This sense of possibility for political alternatives is associated with the desertion of the belief in "the end of history": the current economic crisis and the decline of Western hegemony presumably announce a radical transformation of the neoliberal world, opening space to alternatives. Actually, the reconfiguration of twentieth-century capitalism is associated with a growing mistrust of political institutions, the crisis being "organic", in the Gramscian sense (Gramsci 1975). Recent social movements and insurrections around the world—from the "colored revolutions" in Central Asia to the Spanish *indignados,* the US Occupy movement, the Arab Spring, uprisings in Bosnia—have raised the issue of alternatives as a reaction to the incapacity of capitalist political institutions—from electoral democracy to dictatorships—to deal with people's problems and meet their aspirations for emancipation and a better future. Contemporary political subjects, characterized as a "network" (Castells 2012) or "multitude" (Hardt and Negri 2004), no longer find their place in traditional categories such as class, party affiliation, or in territory-centered paradigms such

as that of the nation-state. Among critical theorists, too, the debate focuses on the search for new forms of representation, decision-making processes, and political subject formation. In contrast to modern perspectives on power considered as "hierarchical" and transcendent, the emphasis is on the historical possibility for more horizontal political formations, allowing a truly popular and direct participation in politics for the wide variety of contemporary subjectivities. In this context, while anthropology is wondering about its relevance in the public debate (e.g., Borofsky 2000; Eriksen 2006; Pelkmans 2013), some anthropologists, and many of the students approaching the discipline, are affirming its usefulness in envisioning alternative politics. By illustrating the wide range of human political experiences through the ethnographic literature, anthropology has often acted as a tool for denying both the universality and the stability of political and social organizations. This is particularly true for those anthropologists who are engaged in social movements and think that their expertise can serve grassroots mobilizations, as in the case of Marc Edelman's (1999) and Sian Lazar's (2008) ethnographies of Latin American social movements, June Nash's (2004) support of the Zapatistas, and many anthropologists now blending political involvement and academic research, like David Graeber (2002, 2009), Marianne Maeckelbergh (2009), John Postill (2014), and Maple Razsa (2013), direc-

tor of the ethnographic film *Bastards of Utopia* (2010), all offering the general public empathic portrayals of emerging social movements. A critical anthropological perspective may also have a less explicit practical commitment but nevertheless aim at engaging its ethnographic research and theoretical considerations in a broader discussion with critical political thinking.

This theme section aims to explore those theories, ethnographies, engagements, and political struggles where we can recognize a circularity of inspirations between anthropology, radical political theory, and social movements in envisioning and constructing alterpolitics. All articles presented here focus on this interaction, although they differ in regard to the preference given to one inspirational relation or another, in order to grasp the overlaps between the three from different angles. That is why articles in this theme section consider "alterpolitics" in a range of possible different meanings. The more obvious use of "alterpolitics" refers to how the other's political systems can inform and inspire radical theories and practices; but there is also a more general reflection on how anthropology can inspire "alterpolitics", that is, its contribution to the production of a different way of thinking and living politically. Paraphrasing the brilliant title of an article on this matter, can the anthropology *of* noncapitalism turn into an anthropology *for* noncapitalism (Shear and Burke 2013)?

Certainly, it is around the contemporary alterpolitical use of their research that critical political anthropologists often diverge according to ideological orientations. Most notably, divergences are to be found between Marxist and anarchist perspectives, especially concerning the issue of primitivism and exoticism, despite their convergence in trying to imagine societies more desirable in terms of equality, autonomy, labor relations, and political participation. In particular, libertarian or anarchist anthropologists have systematically sought backing to the Rousseauist critique of political modernity in "acephalous", "nomadic", or "antistate" societies: in this tradition, since its infancy (Kropotkin [1902] 1972; Reclus 1883–1893), the "primitive", "barbarian",

or "savage" others were often seen as characterized by mutual help, equality, communal cohesion, and solidarity; later, Pierre Clastres (1974, [1977] 2010) and, more recently, James C. Scott (2009) have focused on alterpolitics to illustrate some of the forms taken by the refusal of domination. On the other side, Marxists have rather insisted on hierarchy and exploitation in other contexts to affirm them as a general constant in human history. As shown by the famous Parisian controversy between Clastres and the philosophers of *Socialisme ou barbarie* on the one hand and Althusserian Marxist anthropologists on the other, anarchists usually accuse Marxists of being unable to see people's aspiration for freedom and their autonomous capacity for emancipation; while the Marxists usually strike back by accusing libertarian anthropologists of a primitivist and exoticizing vision of political otherness (Amselle 1979; Augé 1977; Bloch 1983). Since then, libertarian and Marxist tendencies have transformed their respective stances, responding to reciprocal critiques, both engaging in a humanist approach to history, which recognizes in social groups and collective actions the capacity to transform reality.

Ciavolella's paper shows how libertarian exoticism is still present in contemporary anthropologies and critical theories. To do that, it traces the anthropological inspiration of *nomadology,* from Deleuze and Guattari's use of Clastres to the alterpolitical anthropologies of scholars like James C. Scott and David Graeber and critical theorists of contemporary social movements like Hardt and Negri. Ciavolella's conclusions are that "nomads" have historically inspired libertarian theorists as a metaphor for a spatial exit option—an "alterotopy" outside the state and globalization—while ethnographic evidence of contemporary pastoralist societies rather shows that, since their definitive incorporation into "modernity", nomads call for a different type of alterpolitics; that is, new forms of political representation inside power to overcome their marginalization.

A similar point is raised by Sabrina Melenotte's article. The author proposes a critique of the alterpolitical use of "alter-natives" in the

political struggle of Chiapas, even if here the predominant libertarian posture interestingly converges with heterodox Marxist traditions like autonomism. Melenotte's article analyzes the reasons for the crucial influence the Chiapas insurgence has had on theories and practices of contemporary social movements. The Zapatistas' discourses insist on the promotion of "political alterity", both as a project of self-government and a mobilization against neoliberalism on a global scale, by presenting indigenous populations as "alter-natives" and by involving in their struggle critical political theorists, especially anthropologists and philosophers. These considerations on the alterpolitical potentialities gravitating around Chiapas are nevertheless recast in an anthropological perspective. Actually, Melenotte encourages going back to ethnography in order to test these discourses in radical theory inspired by the Zapatista experience. Her ethnography of the indigenous municipality of Chenalhó does show the daily life of the Zapatista self-government as a concrete utopia, but also as a new political space producing hierarchies and new power relations, while presenting itself as autonomous and alternative to Mexican state power.

In current debates about social movements and popular insurgencies, latent divergences between anarchists and Marxists are surfacing again in relation to political strategies. As a consequence of the apparent failure of revolutionary politics, libertarians (Day 2005; Graeber 2002) generally refuse a unitary program and prefer smaller-scale political initiatives, while Marxists (Dean 2012) often consider such fragmented projects rather naïve and ineffective, and prefer to call for a new Gramscian political subject (Ciavolella 2015). The debate is open now that libertarians, after a century of marginalization, are having more resonance in public debates, as their proposals of horizontal and localized forms of power organization seem to be a better match in these "postpolitical" times. In contemporary social movements, there is a clear intention to root alternative organizational principles and moral values in society at large, in economic activities, in social relations, and

also in political decision-making processes: the aim is an overall cultural change, necessitating the patient construction of a multiplicity of local struggles. The belief that once institutional power is conquered—through elections or revolutions—society will be transformed at will by implementing alternative policies is largely replaced by the idea, resonating with anthropological holism, that only if there is a radical cultural shift in everyday practices can political transformation be achieved.

In this perspective, Boni's article compares the emerging egalitarian trends in the management of assemblies in Europe and North America with gathering procedures described in classic ethnographic settings. Egalitarian assemblies face common challenges in the running of meetings with regard to processes of consensus building, the coordination of assemblies, and the menace of leadership, as well as the management of place, time, and speech. The article argues that the use of alterpolitics by contemporary social movement with regards the organization of assemblies has been largely practical rather than ideological and that it has generally refrained from an uncritical exoticism and essentialism, preferring a contextual use of various alterchronological and altergeographical insights.

Ufer's ethnography on the mobilizations of the Right to the City network in Hamburg exemplifies wider trends in the current strategic use of alterpolitics in contemporary European social movements, envisioning emancipation as autonomy from state and capital domination. In Hamburg, the alterpolitical imagination elaborated in the milieu of social movements tends to be highly hybrid, blending different trends of critical political theories, from anarchism to autonomous Marxism, and drawing on a wide range of inspirational sources, both exotic and local (most notably Henri Lefebvre). What has been labeled the abandonment of ideology by the last wave of social movements is here interpreted as a rejection of the dogmatism and identitarian exclusiveness characteristic of political theories during the second half of the twentieth century.

Interestingly, Hirslund's article gives a different perspective on political strategies, describing the success of an ideologically coherent revolutionary experience. Referring to the contemporary Maoist political revolution in Nepal against a semifeudal social organization founded on a Hindu monarchical upper caste, he shows the effectiveness of Marxist guerrilla tactics in producing a popular response against neoliberal destructive development. Hirslund's article shows that alterpolitical paradigms migrate cross-culturally back and forth between continents in a ceaseless process of contextual reformulation. Actually, Marxism in Asia is capable of attracting consensus and providing possible sources of worldwide inspirations, while European parties that blend Marxism, nationalism, and a hierarchical party structure are increasingly dismissed.

Despite their differences, all contributors engage in a common reflection about alterpolitics today, so this theme section can be considered an effort of "translation" in the Gramscian sense. For Gramsci, as in linguistics, the "translation" of political philosophies is only possible by interpreting them in relation to the historical context of their emergence and by recasting them in the receiving historical context without "betraying" them (Frosini 2003). In our case, anthropologists' typical efforts at cultural "translation" turns into an attempt to provide a historical "meaning" to specific forms of political subjectivation, a sort of "common sense" built out of the different alterpolitical experiences. This anthropological sensibility necessarily plays a crucial role in translating these practices, ideas, and struggles, as it has developed the capacity to render thoroughly understandable "alter" words by representing the meaning of cultural expressions within the context in which they were shaped.

This effort toward translating alterpolitics is more demanding today because of the global panorama of struggles, political subjectivities, and social mobilizations. Actually, today's critical theory debate is strongly focused on the issue of the multiplicity of subjectivities in the *multitudes*, but also on the necessity of founding new bases for alliances, coordination, and

commonalities in strategies and struggles. Some features suggest that we are currently witnessing a convergence in struggles, with interconnected social movements spreading globally, with no recognized center, reciprocally informing one another. Alterpolitical experiences, rather than an exotic fantasy, are increasingly perceived as reciprocally significant in an integrated planet: social movements and local communities face similar worries, sufferings, and impotencies generated by a worldwide alignment of financial capital and government interests. In fact, what is being increasingly recognized are the similarities of struggles, and thus possible common responses, worldwide.

Current convergences in social movements mostly refer to the tactical dimension of struggles and to the practical procedures of self-organization: it still remains to be seen if these multitudes are actually struggling against the same enemy—from the Egyptian dictator to the Wall Street financial elite—and for the same idea of alterpolitics. Moreover, this convergence refers to actual and already formed movements and struggles, which have become extremely visible, while the fragmented majority of the world population is expressing its desire for alterpolitics silently and in disguised forms, and especially inside a more local and immediate horizon of interests and objectives. Nevertheless, both in the cases of convergence in struggles and of fragmentation in political subjectivities, the issue of "translatability" of these particular experiences remains crucial. This is also true in relation to another type of "translation", namely, the effort of engaged anthropologists toward "rendering" their ethnographies on alterpolitics socially and politically meaningful, both to people directly involved in struggles or concerned by their ethnographies and to the wider audience, thus producing new "common sense". This is a crucial issue both for anthropologists directly engaged in the social movements they study and for those working on different forms of struggle or political subjectivities. What has long been considered "the exotic", to be documented for a Western audience, is now crucially involved in

processes of cultural translation in which agents generate their own representations, acting as both protagonists and audiences.

Acknowledgments

This theme section represents the development of a common reflection the authors have had since 2011 about the notion of "alterpolitics", first discussed in the 2012 EASA conference's panel "Inspiring Alter-politics: Anthropology and Critical Thinking." Conveners of the panel were Riccardo Ciavolella and Stefano Boni; the chair was Keith Hart.

Riccardo Ciavolella is an anthropologist at the CNRS and a member of the IIAC-LAIOS department of the EHESS in Paris, where he teaches political anthropology. His research focuses on a Gramscian interpretation of politics among subaltern groups, especially in West Africa. He is the author of *Les Peuls et l'Etat en mauritanie: Une anthropologie des marges* (Karthala, 2010) and *Antropologia politica e contemporaneità: Un'indagine critica sul potere* (Mimesis, 2013).
Email: riccardo.ciavolella@ehess.fr

Stefano Boni has conducted research in Ghana, Italy, and Venezuela. His monographic publications include *Le strutture della disuguaglianza* (Franco Angeli, Rome), *Clearing the Ghanaian Forest* (Institute of African Studies, Legon), *Vivere senza Padroni* (Elèuthera, Milan), *Culture e Poteri* (Elèuthera, Milan), and *Homo Comfort* (Elèuthera, Milan); he has published articles in, among other journals, *Ethnology, Africa, The International Journal of African Historical Studies, Ghana Studies, History in Africa, Anthropos, History and Anthropology, Cahiers d'Etudes Africanes, Vertigo, Ethnography, Journal of Modern Italian Studies,* and *Anthropology Today.* He teaches social anthropology and political anthropology at the University of Modena, Italy.
Email: sboni@unimore.it

References

Amselle, Jean-Loup, ed. 1979. *Le sauvage à la mode.* Paris: Le Sycomore.

Augé, Marc. 1977. *Pouvoirs de vie, pouvoirs de mort.* Paris: Flammarion.

Bloch, Maurice. 1983. *Marxism and anthropology: The history of a relationship.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Borofsky, Robert. 2000. Public anthropology: Where to? What next? *Anthropology News* 41(5): 9–10.

Castells, Manuel. 2012. *Networks of outrage and hope: Social movements in the internet age.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Ciavolella, Riccardo. 2015. Un nouveau prince au-delà des antinomies: Lectures de Gramsci dans les mouvements sociaux contemporains. *Actuel Marx* 57: 112–124.

Clastres, Pierre. 1974. *La société contre l'Etat: Recherches d'anthropologie politique.* Paris: Editions de Minuit.

Clastres, Pierre. (1977) 2010. *Archeology of violence.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Day, Richard J. F. 2005. *Gramsci is dead: Anarchist currents in the newest social movements.* London: Pluto Press.

Dean, Jodi. 2012. Occupy Wall Street: After the anarchist moment. *Socialist Register* 49: 52–62.

Edelman, Marc. 1999. *Peasants against globalization: Rural social movements in Costa Rica.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Eriksen, Thomas. 2006. *Engaging anthropology: The case for a public presence.* London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Frosini, Fabio. 2003. Sulla "traducibilità" nei Quaderni di Gramsci. *Critica marxista: Analisi e contributi per ripensare la sinistra* 6: 29–38.

Graeber, David. 2002. The new anarchists. *New Left Review* 13: 61–73.

Graeber, David. 2009. *Direct action: An ethnography.* Edinburgh: AK Press.

Gramsci, Antonio. 1975. *Quaderni dal carcere.* Turin: Einaudi.

Hardt, Michael, and Antonio Negri. 2004. *Multitude: War and democracy in the age of empire.* London: Penguin Press.

Kropotkin, Peter. (1902) 1972. *Mutual aid: A factor of evolution.* New York: New York University Press.

Lazar, Sian. 2008. *El Alto, rebel city: Self and citizenship in Andean Bolivia.* London: Duke University Press.

Maeckelbergh, Marianne. 2009. *The will of the many: How the alterglobalisation movement is changing the face of democracy.* London: Pluto Press.

Nash, June. 2004. The fiesta of the world: The Zapatista uprising and radical democracy in Mexico. *American Anthropologist* 99: 261–274.

Pelkmans, Mathijs. 2013. A wider audience for anthropology? Political dimensions of an important debate. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19: 398–404.

Postill, John. 2014. Democracy in an age of viral reality: A media epidemiography of Spain's indignados movement. *Ethnography* 15(1): 50–68.

Razsa, Maple. 2013. The subjective turn: The radicalization of personal experience within Occupy Slovenia. http://www.culanth.org/fieldsights/74-the-subjective-turn-the-radicalization-of-personal-experience-within-occupy-slovenia (accessed 14 March 2013).

Reclus, Élisée. 1883–1893. *The earth and its inhabitants.* London: Virtue & Co.

Scott, James C. 2009. *The art of not being governed: An anarchist history of upland southeast Asia.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Shear, Boone, and Brian Burke. 2013. Beyond critique: Anthropology of and for non-capitalism. *Anthropology News* 54 (1–2): 17.