

Preliminary Thoughts on Left Governmentality

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My inquiry here, still abstract and preliminary, explores a certain radical democratic attitude (rather than simply an institutional practice) as a response to the general crisis of democratic credibility in our times. I have called this attitude “left governmentality,” hoping to retain some sort of politics of the left even if the content of leftist politics may no longer be readable in a coherent way, haunted as it is by a sense of irreversible defeat by global capital in the post-1989 world. Precisely because of this historical dis-credibility and theoretical incoherence, the search for left governmentality remains tentative. But for the same reason, it also remains open at both ends, both in conception and in execution. It is not reducible simply to an idea (let alone an idea born of the mind of any one person), but rather realizable in the field of political action by democratic constituencies in specific social-historical situations.

So, from the outset it should be noted that whatever might be— or become—the meaning of left governmentality it will be ill served if understood in the philosophically restrictive sense, as a political concept. If it is deemed to be a concept at all, left governmentality mobilizes a kind of border conceptuality, along the lines of Etienne Balibar’s invention and deployment of notions such as “equaliberty,” “ambiguous universality,” or “citizen-subject.” Border concepts of this kind might turn out to be methodologically better suited to encounter a time of massive conceptual failure in the political terrain, as ideological certainties have been fissured or twisted beyond recognition and long-term institutional safeguards have collapsed in a remarkable atmosphere of violence, lawlessness, dehumanization, and the political incapacitation of vast constituencies around the globe, citizens and non-citizens alike.

It has already become customary to refer to this time of conceptual failure as a time of crisis, in such a way, however, that the notion of “critical time” has lost its gravity. I am reiterating Marcel Gauchet’s simple assertion that “the constant use, in various forms, of the word ‘crisis’ has undeniably eroded its strength.”¹ Surely, in the last few years crisis has become an umbrella term for a whole set of alibis that impede critical thinking, a sort of “screen term” that enables us to slip under the rug a whole set of situations that are difficult to interpret. Thus the use of the term prevents us from pushing up against not only what “crisis”—as a word with multiple meanings—might actually signify but also what has been recently instituted in its name or even in reaction to its existence, whether as expressions and implementations in the first case, or counter-measures and palliatives in the second.

Let’s not forget that the word “crisis” is linked to judgment and decision and is therefore

quintessentially political. It pertains as well to the faculty of distinguishing or discerning, and therefore, in some fashion, to dividing, separating. It is also, in this specific sense, linked to law—to regulation, to the apportionment of value, and in this sense to fundamental aspects of social organization. But all these frameworks of meaning should be considered in light of the fact that “crisis” also pertains to something that is barely stable, precarious—something, as we say, in critical condition—which tempers the elements of finality inherent in judgment, decision, or regulation. Crisis is thus a border concept as well, or, if you will, crisis is always a concept in crisis.

For this reason, there is an equally presumed sense, even if not always articulated, that crisis is nothing new, but rather endemic to the long term situation of modernity—whether as an intrinsic element of the capitalist economy, whereby it even becomes a coveted object, a target, even perhaps a project (capitalism creates crises because this is how it grows), or as an intrinsic element in democratic politics, whereby again it may appear to be a necessary condition, an existential reality, and even here too a target and a project.

However, these two rubrics of endemic crisis—if it is indeed endemic—are entirely different. At least from my perspective, against what is conventionally assumed, capitalist economics and democratic politics are not only intrinsically unrelated but in utter contradiction with each other at an existential/structural level. Capitalism and democracy are profound enemies; pushed to the ontological limit in each case, the existence of each means the other’s annihilation, war to the death. In this respect, however we may define them precisely, the crisis of capitalism is not the same as the crisis of democracy. Or, put differently: capitalism has a different agenda for the use of crisis than does democracy. They put the notion to use in antagonistic ways.

For this reason, the current so-called economic crisis—whether defined as the crisis in financial capitalism signaled by the banking collapse of 2008, or as the crisis in sovereign debt that followed virtually everywhere in Europe—cannot be equated with the crisis in political institutions, national sovereignty, political legitimacy, and so forth, which we are seeing virtually everywhere in so-called “democratic” societies. Nor is it the same as another domain of crisis, which is becoming ever more prominently displayed on a planetary scale: the crisis in the cultural sphere, as it is designated by clichés such as “the resurgence of religion” or “the clash of civilizations.”

Of course, I am not suggesting these matters are unrelated. I am just resisting easy deterministic causal accounts: say, that the whole lot is reducible to the advent of globalization and the domination of the neoliberal order. We can certainly debate the connections and the points of influence and effects—and there are many—but the two situations of crisis are not interchangeable.

Having said this, the conditions of crisis—the critical conditions in which we attempt to signify what presently exists—make for strange equivocations. What appears to be one thing is really another; this is the quandary of the neoliberal order. So, the so-called economic crisis in Europe is actually a political crisis. There is no way we can discount the fact that the agents of financial capital are now wielding real political power, in a way that exceeds the traditional Marxist assertion that economic forces determine political situations. The fact that in 2012 bankers were appointed (not even elected) to be heads of state in Greece and Italy is an overt and reductive indication of what is otherwise covertly paramount. The recent election of Donald Trump, who not only epitomizes global capital but is moreover a veritable brand in his own person, to the planet’s most powerful political

office may be the most overt culmination of this phenomenon. Nothing is more bizarre and yet, historically speaking, perfectly logical than the US Presidency's being in the hands of a brand, the impersonal presence of capital in its pure form. In order for neoliberal practices to achieve across-the-board deregulation of the market, as they purport to do, they have produced the deregulation of the political. Of course, deregulation is a perfect pseudonym to hide explicit regulations—laws and rules (often trumping the prerogatives of the law)—that benefit certain competitive interests over others in the name of (that is to say, in the illusory guise of) open competition.²

It's interesting to consider the trajectory from the notion of "self-regulation" (of both market and government), which is a classic liberal motif, to "deregulation" (of both market and government), which is a neoliberal motif. Both are pseudonyms, as I have said: classic liberalism never allowed self-regulation to exist either, in the sense that it remained reliant on the state apparatus as a safeguard for the market. But a conceptual shift does take place as one set of pseudonymous practices displaces the other. While classic liberalism is nominally invested in a "minimal state" (regardless of what actually takes place historically), neoliberalism is definitely invested in a "maximal state"—to such an extent, in fact, that it mobilizes totalitarian practices despite its rhetoric of unimpeded markets.

This maximal state politics, conducted literally by economic agents, is the present politics of the so-called crisis. This crisis is a manufactured reality whose management serves the sole purpose of turning it into a natural order. In old terms, we could speak of a "crisis-effect"—in the sense of Michel Foucault's "subject-effect" or Roland Barthes's "reality-effect"—in order to describe how crisis produces specific subjects and specific realities whose specifically manufactured historical emergence is repressed. Society's critical condition thus becomes a "crisis-suffused norm," with a culture all its own, including its own kind of governmentality: "Crisis governmentality renders crises its own condition of possibility or virtual core that reproduces crisis after crisis to the point of becoming, not a management of the exception, but the crisis-suffused norm."³

The question, then, of left governmentality and what it might entail exactly—what sort of political action it manifests, what sort of institutional politics it inaugurates or mobilizes—emerges from this present critical condition against this condition: as an immanent reconsideration of the radical democratic politics necessary to disrupt the norm of crisis and the "crisis management" models that are typically proposed in order to enforce and safeguard the crisis norm. In this respect, left governmentality cannot simply be a politics of alterity in the way this is often celebrated and even fetishized as another politics of identity. For it emerges from within an illogical (or paralogical) foundation, where alterity is already assumed, assimilated, and ensconced in the requisite place it occupies in every narrative of crisis. Whatever alterities left governmentality might animate will emerge from the terrain of political action in the process; they are not there already waiting to be swept up by some political *deus ex machina*.

Left governmentality is thus paradoxical *par excellence*. Surely this is evident even from a merely historical standpoint, if we keep in mind the problematic relation of the left—at least in both the Marxist and the anarchist tradition—to the politics of government as opposed to the politics of resistance, which is always instantaneously privileged. The problem emerges from the historical record of the left's incapacity to govern without being absorbed by the institutions against which it stands, even when it has assumed power by force and through the violent dismantling of whatever is

the *ancien régime* of the day. However, this particular historical legacy of violence does not concern me here. I am proposing that we consider the notion of left governmentality not in the frame of the Leninist revolutionary left, but within the limits of a liberal parliamentary system or, more precisely, within the democratic process whereby the left's acceding to the position of government does not abolish the democratic process (any such abolition, regardless of where it comes from, is fascist). Which means, right away, that any sort of left governmentality will have to account for the possibility that it might be overthrown in the same way that it came to be. Hence it is a regime of struggle, a tragic regime.⁴

The paradox is aggravated further if we consider how Foucault's notion of governmentality tends to be interpreted as mechanism of population control, although there is ample evidence in Foucault's thinking that would make governmentality a notion essential to a kind of autonomous, self-empowering politics. I am thinking especially of Foucault's extensive work on the disciplines involved in what he named "the government of the self," for there is no doubt that any sort of left governmentality worthy of its name cannot possibly be excised from the self-governance of the subject, however we might agree or disagree about what this might involve and how feasible it might actually be. Indeed, self-government, the old autonomist adage, which is pertinent to the politics of society, has a "mirror" in the government of the self, with its extensive self-disciplinary practices including those that Foucault sought out in the Stoic period, as we know.

So, if governmentality, in Foucault's writing, is the figure that moves him out of the disciplinary or punitive society model and into, say, the biopolitical or micropower model, by analogy left governmentality is a figure that moves us out of the counter-power model and turns the notion on its head, so that "societies of control" (to use a Deleuzian phrase) become societies of self-governance.⁵ Left governmentality is as much a condition of governing the self (or governance by the self) as it is a condition of governing the other (or governance by the other), in both cases, departing from both liberal-individualist and Marxist-collectivist modes, in which a sharp division between self and other remains.

I invented the term "left governmentality"—initially without much thought, I admit—in response to the political conjuncture in 2011-2012 that brought forth what we now summarily call the politics of assembly movements: the Arab Spring, the Spanish and Greek occupations of public squares, the Occupy movement in the US, and subsequent occupations of public spaces in various parts of the world, including Istanbul, Hong Kong, Brazil, and so forth. To be sure, "movement" might be an inaccurate description because the operative politics involved in all of these cases of assembly is in fact a kind of Benjaminian politics of arrest, of interruption.⁶ Subsequently, the idea of left governmentality found more concrete and higher-stakes historical content in the rise of SYRIZA to power in Greek politics, especially since this rise signaled the rare event of the left's coming to power not through revolution but through the procedures of a liberal parliamentary system.

The key question in the actual politics of left governmentality is obviously: how to move from resistance or opposition to government decision? I don't see this as a mere positional shift in the spectrum of power, but rather as a shift that requires the operations of a different political imaginary and a different framework for social organization. Left governmentality is a border concept because it acknowledges—indeed, it *names*—the paradox of a political constituency that traditionally derives

its authority from negation (resistance to established authority and, at the outer limit, revolution) but has achieved a position of affirmation, the imperative to rule—especially if we understand rule in a radical democratic sense, not as reducible to an ideological partisanship that divides society between rulers and ruled, whatever may be the specific turns of representation. For this latter reason alone, left governmentality entails the sort of rule that pertains to all and is shared by all of society, not just the extension of the specific class interests presumed to authorize leftist propositions of rule—traditionally the dictatorship of the proletariat on the way to communism, or, more recently, the politics of left populism, to which I attend below.

From my perspective, left governmentality has no meaning outside the problematic of democracy—or, indeed, to recall Balibar again, outside the paradoxical politics of equaliberty, ambiguous universality, and the citizen-subject. In this particular sense, the class politics that the Marxist legacy of the left has indelibly established—and, in fact, the class struggle itself as a kind of epistemological framework that informs all levels of political thought and action—cannot be presumed to work against the radical democratic imperative. Anarchist in literal terms—where, in the Aristotelian sense, *archon* and *archomenos*, ruler and ruled, are two instances of the same actor in a single continuous act—this imperative aspires to an autonomous politics at all levels of life and for all involved, regardless of the social differences that are still in play. In the encounter of left governmentality with democracy, the epistemology of class struggle becomes a productive obstacle to the tendency to sublimate social difference in the name of an emancipatory universality; that is to say, it underlines the ambiguous universality that the proposition of equaliberty necessitates.

At a basic level, whatever governmental (state) politics left governmentality enacts obviously cannot be restricted to typical institutional politics. When it comes to governing society as a whole with the inheritance of the capitalist state, the left in power cannot sever itself from the social movements that bring it to power in the first place. By social movements, I mean not simply the politics of negation or resistance, but rather a more radical politics of affirmation: solidarity networks (which must always be international in the last instance); alternative forms of social organization and economies at the local level; collective, self-instituted public services (neighborhood health care, schooling for immigrants, welfare for impoverished social strata); extra-parliamentary politics; and all kinds of performativities of difference.

The movement in this respect cannot be instrumentalized, whether as a potential source for political party organization or even as a symbolic recipient and/or vehicle for institutional alterity at the state level. Pierre Clastres's old argument on "society against the state" (unburdened, however, by his utopian politics of "society without the state") can be very useful here as an epistemological framework.⁷ In invoking Clastres, I mean to suggest that a certain relative autonomy of society, as a field of self-organization, must remain in place in order to keep the movement from being instrumentalized and to enable performativities of difference to flourish, or, even more, to sustain real political effectiveness and not remain locked in ideological self-satisfaction. For this reason, the politics of the state to which the left has acceded cannot presume to dictate the terms of action to the movement that may have created the horizon of possibility for this accession, nor presume to harness a certain raw political power inherent in the movement that, no matter its specific forms of social organization, must remain formless in some last instance.

So, in light of the notorious case of the SYRIZA government's calling for a referendum in July 2015, I argued at the time that the referendum was decided by the government and was won, for the government, by the movement in order for the government to act on its basis. Nothing in this equation should be assumed to be linear or self-evident, or even simply causal. The components are irreducibly linked but cannot be collapsed into each other. Neither the government nor the movement is subservient, and yet both the government and the movement are responsible for each other. They can exist just as easily in coincidence as in contestation, and indeed they must, if the radical democratic impetus of left governmentality is to be sustained.⁸

It is in this sense that left governmentality—again, regardless of how we eventually come to explain it theoretically—cannot be equated with left populism, either as this is ably defined by Chantal Mouffe or in the historical-political field in Venezuela, Spain, or Greece, for that matter.⁹ The now common presumption among ranks of the left that SYRIZA failed—which unleashed extraordinary waves of debilitating affect ranging from depression to rage among large constituencies of supporters, including activists in the movement itself—would have been more productively put to work if the symbolic structure of the whole affair did not have left-populist characteristics, whether these were a matter of psychological investment by the population (a sort of metaphysics of faith) or were instrumentally cultivated and engineered by central aspects of the SYRIZA organization itself. It does not matter whether this cultivation was intentional or unwitting, for the symbolic structures of left populism are machine-like in their ways and channel political affect in a monovalent direction regardless of what might be the material conditions of social difference on the ground.

The disastrous way in which the SYRIZA referendum was constructed, conducted, and interpreted has a lot to do with this machine-logic at work. The left populist imaginary that engendered and prevailed over the referendum, at nearly all levels of society and state, prevented the differences of the social body (on both sides of the vote) from retaining their coherent articulation as actors on the stage of political agonism. This imaginary thus produced a debilitating homogenization of all political signifiers—with the enraged polarization of affect being one of the most acute markers of this homogenization. A series of events ensued: the complexities addressed symptomatically and brought forth causally by the referendum were thereby nullified; the government's subsequent decision appeared to be total deception (for some, it spelled treason, for others cynical confirmation of political realism); the roused population (on all sides) was simply deflated; and any radical possibility in the next phase of political action was disarmed.

The division between “us and them,” which Laclau and Mouffe always held onto in order to leave intact a certain register of the epistemology of the class struggle, is precisely what renders left populism a political machine-logic. (What this does to the epistemology of the class struggle as such cannot be discussed here in a substantial way.) Despite the consistent acknowledgment that the people is a heterogeneous entity, this elemental division inevitably homogenizes the framework of society. The machine reproduces simple 0/1 divisional pairs: people/elite, society/state, disenfranchisement/power, us/them. What happens, then, when, let us say, “the people” come to power? What happens to the state? To “the people” who now occupy the state? We presume that “we” do not become “them,” but on what basis do we turn “their” house (the state) into “ours,” if by sheer constitutive division we have undersigned and sealed its alterity? What does it mean for us to have

come to power? Had we no power before? If disenfranchisement means no power, then how do the powerless achieve power? Likewise, if we presume that there are two different modes of power, ours and theirs, how do we account for qualitative shifts of power in real political and social-historical terms? Either the division between “disenfranchisement” and “power” collapses, or the power “we” now have in the place of “them”—say, the state—is really still “their” power, since after all we had no power of our own.

Notice that I have left the inheritance of capitalism out of this admittedly reductive set of queries to keep the matter focused on the governmental sphere, even though this inheritance can never be ignored. In fact, it is impossible to address the problem of left governmentality without also addressing the key problem of inheriting capitalist structures, at least in the present planetary phase. Because the symbolic structure of left populism is so formalist, the actual politics that it mobilizes will be channeled, at some point in the process, toward inherited modes of oligarchic power—not only in the basic sense in which the movement will be subsumed by the political party form and its metaphysics of representation, but even more in a historically antecedent way, in the sense that the people’s power will be subsumed by the power of national sovereignty at the apex of which remains the heroic sovereign, whether the President of the Republic or the Popular Leader. For the same reason that I have always argued that popular sovereignty is, strictly speaking, a nonsensical notion, I also think that left populism is a nonsensical notion, if we want to retain within the content of the left an undeconstructibly internationalist and radical-democratic (or, in my language, anarchist) ground.

The usual argument, which Mouffe reiterates, that the difference between right populism and left populism is that the first restricts democracy while the second doesn’t, has proven insubstantial, since so many strains of left populist politics have ended up centralizing sovereign power—literally oligarchic power. Left populism is still sovereign state politics, with all the horrific dimensions of nationalist thinking this entails kept intact. Thus, no matter what left populist rhetoric might claim, left populism actually means that national borders must be preserved as sacred markers of difference qua division—that is, as safeguards of identity—which then serve either as pillars of self-enclosure or platforms for expansion and the conquest of the other. This pertains to the internal space as well: it is the paramount gesture of creating internal borders of division and self-enclosure, instrumental power and control over the performativities of difference. This is why left populism is not a border-concept in the way I argue that left governmentality is.¹⁰

This is also why, although left populism may pride itself on mobilizing a movement, it ultimately has no respect for the autonomy of the movement past its point of instrumentalized power. Left populism claims to begin with the movement but is instead always already grounded in the *telos* of governmental power as state power in the name of the people. In this respect, it remains entirely with the liberal framework and plays very well into the hands of neoliberal power. Instead, left governmentality is inevitably grounded in the problem of government, the problem of moving from resistance to government. But government can never be its *telos*, because this would mean *de facto* the conquest of the movement and the voiding of resistance by the formal power of rule. Without the movement—that is, civic action whose institutionality exists outside the state and sometimes against the state—there can be no left governmentality. In other words, although left

governmentality begins with and has sufficient cause in the fact that the left is in government, it cannot be solely conducted at the level of government. It cannot be exhausted within the purview of the political institutions of government but must involve general social practices of *governance*, indeed self-governance.

For this reason, left governmentality cannot revert to simple party politics in the liberal system. In fact, precisely because of the perpetually contentious relations that it sustains between governance and insurgency, government and movement, left governmentality is a border concept that bears a tragic politics. The non-revolutionary left's notorious aversion to taking on the responsibility of government in its name might be due to its fear of losing its authenticity as resistance or counter-power, which is curiously never the fear of revolutionaries despite the fact that historically this loss of authenticity seems to have happened every time, for how could it not? Yet, as Balibar incisively reminds us—and he offers this reminder specifically as a mark of the tragic dimension of politics—“the risk that the revolt might be perverted is never sufficient reason not to revolt.”¹¹ Permit me to add, especially in the conjuncture of present critical times, that the bloody tragedy of left politics today is certainly not sufficient reason to think that left politics now lies dead on the stage.

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Notes

- 1 Gauchet, “Democracy,” 165.
- 2 For details of this sort of argument see my “Responding.”
- 3 Zartaloudis, *Giorgio Agamben*, 52.
- 4 The tragic element is encapsulated in the absence of any transcendental guarantees, including any *a priori* justification based on principle or foundation or any assumed teleology or perfectibility of form and action. In this respect, as a tragic regime of struggle, left governmentality bears the essence of radical democratic politics—of *anarchy* in a literal sense—a point that I don't have the space to develop here but have explored in the essays “Arche” and “Democracy is a Tragic Regime.”
- 5 Here it helps to remember the resonance in the word of the French notion of *mentalité*. Namely, governmentality is not so much the substantive noun from the administrative qualifier “governmental” as it is the designation of a certain imaginary (a mentality) of governance.
- 6 This is brilliantly argued by Mehmet Dosemeci in “The Kinetics of Our Discontent.”
- 7 A key reference point in my making this association with Clastres is the work of Miguel Abensour. See indicatively *Démocratie* and “Savage Democracy.”
- 8 For the full argument, which proved to be quite controversial at the time, see my “SYRIZA Problem.”
- 9 It's useful to consult Chantal Mouffe's recent, succinct comments in an interview on the matter of left populism today and overall. Mouffe, “We Urgently Need.”
- 10 There is much to learn here from how Balibar has asked us to imagine what he has tentatively called “transnational

counter-populism,” defined precisely as an antidote and an alternative to so-called left populism: a politics that opens up and empowers political subjectivities beyond the institutional parameters of “the people” even in a democracy. See Balibar, “Populism.”

11 Balibar, *Violence and Civility*, 150.

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