



Shifting Meanings of Politics

SUSANNE LETTOW

EDITORIAL

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In the present, the crisis of democratic politics that has been diagnosed from various perspectives during the last 10 to 15 years seems to merge with multiple other problematic developments, in particular the return of war in Europe and the related energy crisis, the pandemic, climate change, inflation, and the fear of a serious economic recession. In many European countries the crisis of democratic politics manifests itself in declining voter participation and the success of the extreme right. The recent elections in Italy and the victory of the post-fascist party ‘Fratelli d’Italia’ can be regarded as a case in point. And while social movements that challenge governmental climate politics in the name of environmental justice have gained strength during the last decade, politics of assemblage have also been practiced by right-wing populist movements such as the ‘anti-Corona’ manifestations. Against this backdrop it is more than timely, to discuss the question what politics and doing politics means, could mean, and should mean in the context of a renewal of democratic and egalitarian politics that takes into account the differential vulnerabilities of individuals and groups within and beyond the European nation states. The understanding of politics, however, is itself political insofar as it is always already inextricably bound to a certain understanding of who counts as a political subject, of the existential and social conditions under which political agency is constituted, and the appropriate or inappropriate forms of political action and discourse. Accordingly, understandings of politics vary, change and are contested, both in theory and in practice. To acknowledge this plurality of meanings attributed to politics and of the meaning of politics itself, is certainly a basic requirement for any democratic politics and political theory. In addition, however, it is also crucial to question and actively transform concepts of the political, of democracy and autonomy that tighten social and political structures of power and domination. Indeed, the problem of false universalism, that is, the problem that central concepts of political language and theory claim universal validity while being highly exclusive, has been discussed in critical and in particular feminist political theory for decades but discussions of how to reformulate these concepts still proliferate.

**CORRESPONDING
AUTHOR:**

Susanne Lettow

Margherita von Brentano
Center for Gender Studies,
Freie Universität Berlin, DE
susanne.lettow@fu-berlin.de

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The contributions to the present issue of *Redescriptions* deal with shifting meanings of politics in both ways, albeit from different perspectives and with different thematic focal points: They explore different, changing and contested meanings and, partly, engage in re-formulations and critical explorations of central concepts of political thought.

In his article 'Paradigms for political action. A draft for a repertoire,' *Kari Palonen* introduces a series of ideal-typical criteria through which the different meanings of the political aspect of certain actions can be understood. His theoretical construction is based on his long-standing research in the conceptual history of politics as an activity, and more specifically on his study of debates in the German *Bundestag*. Through an analysis of the various usages of the adjective 'politisch,' Palonen was able to discern four 'paradigms' in the Wittgensteinian sense of model examples: expediency, partisanship, controversy, and contingency. This systematic differentiation, Palonen argues, is not only meant to foster further empirical research on the usages and meanings of terms of political action. On the theoretical level, his 'draft for a repertoire' helps us 'to get rid of the illusion of a common and well-known criterion for political action.'

In the second article of the issue, *Adriadni Polychroniou* discusses two different articulations of the concept of vulnerability which has emerged as a central concept of feminist political theory and philosophy during, roughly speaking, the last decade (see *Redescriptions* 23(2) 2020). Polychroniou compares Martha Fineman's socio-legal understanding of vulnerability that has been applied to multiple realms of public policy by Fineman and other legal scholars with Judith Butler's 'poststructuralist ethico-political theory.' While Fineman's understanding of vulnerability is based on the assumption of a fragile universal human condition Butler radicalizes this onto-anthropological understanding in a way that overcomes the 'gender-blind universalistic structure' of Fineman's approach, as Polychroniou argues. In her reconstruction of Fineman's and Butler's theoretical operations she highlights that Butler introduces a twofold meaning of vulnerability in the sense that the concept for her means both an existential condition and the differential exposure to forms of precarity and violence on the basis of structural forms of inequality. Polychroniou concludes that Butler's understanding of vulnerability is particularly suited to foster 'non-identitarian political coalitions between distinctively precarized subjects.'

A central aspect of theories of vulnerability on which different authors usually agree is a relational understanding of the subject, that is, a critique of the notion of an autonomous individual which is imagined as completely detached from other human beings with whom the individual enters into contact only through contract and exchange. The concept of relational autonomy that *Lisa Bin* discusses in the third article thus in certain respects converges with theories of vulnerability. The author gives a thorough account of the development and discussions on the concept of relational autonomy. In addition, she makes clear, that the re-formulation of autonomy in terms of relational autonomy, on the one hand, can give fresh impulses to theories of recognition. On the other hand, Bin argues, that the understanding of relational autonomy could and should be further developed through a conversation with theories of recognition. This, she concludes, would finally help to clarify the understanding of alterity that looms in approaches of relational autonomy without being specified.

Grigoris Markou, in the fourth article of this issue, discusses the question whether conspiracy theories are ‘endogenous to populism.’ In studies of populism and in the public understanding of populism, conspiracy theories are often held to be a specific feature of (right-wing) populism. However, Markou shows that a closer look at definitions of conspiracy theories in the field of populism studies reveals that they are rather vague, as is the very notion of populism. With reference to discourse analysis, as developed by the Essex School, the author argues that in contemporary political discourse the charge of deliberately using or falling trap to conspiracy theories is often used in a polemical way, that is, as a discursive tool to undermine the credibility of one’s interlocutor. In the second part of the article, Markou turns to the Greek political discourse as an example. He argues that the polemical usage of the term and charge of conspiracy theories does not foster a more rational political culture and debate but, in fact, has a negative impact on politics and society.

This case study and the problematization of the concept of populism that has also gained prominence during the political period of accelerated and condensed experiences of crisis since 2007/2008 again make clear that political language and concepts of political theory are themselves part of politics and are constantly re-signified and re-politicized. The emphasis on the constitutive openness and incompleteness of these processes, however, should not be understood as relaxed reassurance that everything is in universal flux but as a plea for further critical analyses and engagements with shifting meanings of politics.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATION

Susanne Lettow

Margherita von Brentano Center for Gender Studies, Freie Universität Berlin, DE

Lettow

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