Introduction: A return to politics

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Abstract
What does politics mean in contemporary anthropology? Counter to propositions that argue that neoliberalism has produced a "post-political" condition, we argue the notion of a post-political world was never empirically accurate. Instead, using the ethnographic method, our contributors show ongoing and diverse forms of political practices and contestations in the contemporary moment. We reconsider politics at a conceptual level, defining politics as *practices of world-making that proceed through the formulation of constellations of critique, disagreement, difference, and conflict.* We build this definition through a discussion of contemporary theories of the post-political and agonistic politics, and by tracing a history of political anthropology. Finally, we consider politics as both a practice and a goal. The authors in this collection show that new political anthropologies are particularly attuned to questions of commoning/uncommoning, spaces of articulation and disarticulation, and struggles to live "otherwise." We argue that a return to these questions with a robust and specific engagement with politics is necessary for anthropology and increasingly urgent given the global conjuncture.

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Politics at the end of post-politics

This special issue seeks to bring anthropology back to the question of politics. This is both an intellectual concern and a concern rooted in the urgencies of this moment of history, which is marked by the uncertain end of neoliberalism, the rise of new democratic movements, a resurgent authoritarianism, and the exigencies of the changing planet. The questions of politics and the organization of the political are directly at the heart of these times.

For the last three decades, neoliberalism has been the dominant form of governance in much of the world. Although scholars have noted the diverse array of histories and meanings associated with this term (see Ferguson, 2010; Goodale and Postero, 2013; Harvey, 2005; Muehlbach, 2012), one of the central questions raised by the post-1989 neoliberal "consensus" surrounds the fate of the political during this period. The era has been notable for the embrace of democracy, the florescence of political aspiration evident in vibrant social movements, and new claims to citizenship among previously excluded groups. It was also accompanied by a new governing ideal that mobilized economic logics and visions of technocratic managerialism, substituting political struggle with market-based social reconciliation (Brown, 2015; Mouffe, 2005). This "perverse confluence" is often described in terms of the diminished state many citizens discovered once they finally had access to it (see Dagnino, 2003).

Other scholars have characterized the governing formulation that underlay this period as "post-political." Erik Swyngedouw defines the "post-political" as a "condition in which a consensus has been built around the inevitability of neoliberal capitalism as an economic system, parliamentary democracy as the political ideal, humanitarianism and inclusive cosmopolitanism as moral foundations" (2009: 609). Indeed, in many spheres, market logic and technocratic managerialism appeared for a time to be the reigning forms of governance, obscuring political disagreement. Wendy Brown (2015) argues that these neoliberal formulations of governance inaugurated a broader shift in how humans are understood and valued: the shift from *homo politicus* to *homo economicus* not only evacuates politics in specific situations, but also paves the way for a transformation in modes of governing, living, and relating defined entirely by economic logics.

There is no doubt that this was the ideal of neoliberalism. In the post-1989 moment, "market democracy" offered a vision of the good that not only vanquished socialism but also imagined it was possible to reconcile the political tensions produced by capitalism by allowing the market to govern and expertise to reign. This was and is the neoliberal political project: by enacting a new distribution of roles between the state and the market, its proponents hoped to find a form of societal life free of contestation. However, like all forms of government, neoliberalism never produced consensus; instead, it was and is deeply disputed. Moreover, in many places, as the limitations and contradictions of this form of governance became clear, other sites and modalities of politics emerged.

On the one hand, global democratization spread the promise of citizenship more broadly than in perhaps any time in human history. Indeed, democratic aspirations have stirred political action and given public voice to emergent communities previously subordinated or internally invisible. The Occupy protests and the Arab spring in 2011 are among the most visible, recent examples of these emergent political formulations. We can also point to the global protagonism of indigenous peoples, pro-democracy street protests, coalitions of activists targeting police brutality, and increasing demands for equal rights by LGBTQI groups as signals of these changing political sensibilities. As we discuss in greater depth below, this is a time of tremendous energy, as activists and citizens work to create new commons – be they cities, nations, or transnational communities.

On the other hand, not all emerging political struggles have advanced a progressive agenda. Indeed, conservative forces have also used the same political space in their struggles to limit the scope of democracy and restrict the domain of the political to match their own ethnic, national, gendered, racialized, religious, or sexual preferences. This expanded political field has in many parts of the world fostered counter-movements seeking to restore the old political order through authoritarianism. From the Thai military dictatorship and Duterte's violent police state in the Philippines to the conservative ethno-nationalist forces in the United States, Europe, and, most recently Brazil, the figure of the totalitarian sovereign has become a widespread phenomenon.

How are we to understand this conjuncture? What is anthropology's contribution to analyzing and, perhaps, acting in this moment of danger? Our goal in this special issue is to advocate for an anthropology of politics for this contemporary era. We find the current conceptualization of politics and the political more broadly to be both underdeveloped and surprisingly neglected (e.g. Candea, 2011: 310). This collection of papers seeks to return the field to the question of politics in order to rethink its meaning and to unpack the broader question of the political for these times. Our aim is to provoke further investigation into the ways actors engage with each other as they seek to transform the institutions, structures, and social formulations that shape their lives.

We take three interrelated approaches to these questions:

First, using the ethnographic method, we undertake an analysis of political subjects, practices, and contestations in the contemporary moment. What is the lived experience of politics today? The papers in this collection demonstrate that anthropology can and should have a strong voice in contemporary discussions of the political because of our keen eye on the relationship between macro-political economic shifts and the micro-realities of everyday political life. Ethnographic sensitivity to the complexity of human practice provides a lens onto the ways larger shifts are understood and refashioned into critiques and disagreements on the ground. On occasion, these disagreements coalesce into shared visions of the good that may inspire subjective or even structural transformations as they cohere into larger political movements. Other times, when no shared vision can be reached and no legible political formulation emerges, ethnography offers a means to make

sense of the relationship between structural limitations, internal contradictions, and the internal power struggles that challenge collective mobilization (e.g. Li, 2019). While disagreement and agonism are fundamental to building the political, so too are solidarity and empathy. To attend to politics then is to ask how, when, and why forces of disagreement and solidarity emerge, intertwine, or pull at each other. It is also to consider the broader histories, effects, and trajectories of such processes. In this sense, while politics may seem to have been evacuated from logics of governance, anthropologists find politics—incipient, nascent, tentative, and in full bloom—in multiple other venues, from rivers, forests, mountains, and the sea (see Blaser, 2019; De La Cadena, 2015; Muru-Lanning, 2016; Subramanian, 2009), to infrastructures (Anand, 2017; Elinoff, 2016; Harvey and Knox, 2015; Von Schnitzler, 2016), to the space of the city (Chance, 2018; Holston, 2008, Perry, 2013; Sopranzetti, 2017). Attending to sites of politics, anthropologists document the disagreements, fault lines, and fissures that form in these sites, as well as the forms of sympathy and collaboration that link human, non-human, and more-than-humans in efforts to produce social change.

Second, we reconsider politics at a conceptual level. Our ethnographic material provides us with elements for a provisional definition of politics, which we hope will be the making of a new anthropology of politics: *a practice of world-making that proceeds through the formulation of constellations of critique, disagreement, difference, and conflict*. As Li notes in her article, this definition entails the yoking together of two, often opposing sides of political thought—politics understood as disrupting power relations and politics understood as settling power in a new form. We take up these dual aspects deliberately. Politics always entails a risky drawing together of people in contentious acts (Arendt, 1958). Occasionally, however, the collective work of politics coalesces in the form of new political subjectivities and transformative movements enunciating a new arrangement of the political (Rancière, 1999). Just as often, they dissolve or fracture, giving rise to new antagonisms and, worse, violence. These papers are interested in precisely the sites in which forces that bind and forces that fracture are most present, using them as grounds from which to better understand the contentious processes of world-making. This definition of politics insists on close engagement with the novel forms and sites where politics happens, which are not reducible to spaces of institutional governance.

Our main argument here is that while the effacement of politics by economic logics has been a critical feature of the neoliberal period, the notion of a post-political world was never empirically accurate. Our ethnographic findings require a different conceptual understanding of politics as always proceeding through unfinished contestations about the proper arrangement of the political itself. As we show, even where political actors successfully create new commons, political struggle often entails difficult negotiations between profoundly different worlds across multiple scales. A corollary argument is that the political—the domain where people are defined as legitimate subjects of politics—is itself a site of deep contestation. If each conception of the political includes distinct actors differently, then

anthropological engagements with the political help us understand the shifting terms of these arrangements and the possibilities they afford those who live within them. This comes to bear on the way that actors are policed and whether their acts are understood as legitimate expressions of politics or seen as riotous, rebellious, seditious, terrorist, or simply incoherent. Contests over the political thus reflect deeper transformations in the polity more broadly (e.g. Herzfeld, 2016).

Finally, we consider politics as both a practice and a goal. Describing the "worlds otherwise," we see being imagined and constructed in our field sites raises important questions about our own political commitments, reopening important discussions about the world-making potentials of anthropology and its activist possibilities. We also recognize that by writing in this "moment of danger" (Benjamin 1968) our own scholarship can serve as both a site of politics and a resource for future transformation.

In the remainder of this introduction, we analyze the discipline of political anthropology, placing it in historical context of debates surrounding the political and the changing empirical contexts in which its insights were generated. To support our working definition of politics and our argument about the centrality of the political, we describe how these notions have been conceptualized and used by previous generations of scholars. Then, drawing on the papers in this issue, we suggest three sites for rethinking politics and political anthropology in the contemporary moment.

From the commons to disagreement

For Aristotle, the word "politics" is itself based in the specific notion of a commonly held social organization. The Aristotelian notion of the political is based in the opposition between the political unit (the city-state) and its political subject (the citizen), on the one hand, and the domestic sphere and its non-political subjects (women and slaves), on the other. To engage in politics was to be a citizen engaged in the business of the polis—governing and being governed. For Aristotle, politics was a practice reserved for specific types of people. Nevertheless, politics had broad effects that included the production of law, the delineations of types of members of the polis, and the production of moral community and its boundaries. This was a practical concern that included writing a constitution, which was not simply a document of laws, but an ordering of "the inhabitants of the city-state" (1981, III.1.1274b32–41) and a means of establishing a "way of life" (1981, IV.11.1295a40–b1) in the polis by proposing a vision of the common good. As Holston (2019) notes, Aristotle emphasized that friendship and intimacy are fundamental to the creation of the polis as a political community.

Yet, we note that this formulation implies the construction of both a commons and a zone of exclusion. Aristotle collapses the realm of the political into the space of the polis, the practice of politics into the practice of governing, and the legitimate subject of politics into the body of the citizen. Just as the citizen appears as the *only* legitimate political actor engaged in the making of this common sphere, so

too does *his* good appear to be the sole common good. These exclusions mean that the demos is inherently divided (Rancière, 1999: 19). Such observations reveal the way that any commons entails the production of new domains of uncommonality, exclusions, and dispossessions that come to bear on what counts as legitimate political speech and who counts as a legitimate political actor (Blaser and De la Cadena, 2017).

The inherent unevenness of shared community is fundamental to liberal politics as well as its discontents. Liberal democracy, building on this Aristotelian framework, determines the boundaries of social life, partitioning the citizen into public and private selves (Marx, [1843] 1978). In classic liberal theory, the public sphere becomes the space of political action, again reserved for specific sorts of rational citizens, while the private becomes the sphere of economic and individual interest. Marx argued that this partitioning privileges the private, "egoistic" economic being over public interests (Marx, [1843] 1978). The bifurcation of the liberal public sphere has drawn criticisms for its exclusions. Indeed, as feminist, post-colonial, and subaltern scholars have argued, the liberal public sphere is at once deeply exclusionary and historically particular (Chaterjee, 2004; Fraser, 1997; Mehta, 1997). Liberal universalisms have always been riven exclusions based on race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and religion. Yet, liberal democracy holds out a promise of universalism as the category of citizen and the category of human articulate in theory, if not in reality (Povinelli, 2002).

These tensions surrounding who is included in the common political community thus form a critical line of inquiry into the contemporary political condition. What is the work entailed in transforming the political to include new actors? How do histories of exclusion shape and limit the emergence of new political formations? How do internally excluded groups make claims to legitimate politics? Given the built-in exclusions of liberalism, how commonly held are democratic communities? While this final question has preoccupied anthropology recently—for good reason—we are interested in bringing this attention to exclusion into relation with the other questions here. Rather than abandoning the notion of a commons because of such continuing exclusions, we follow our interlocutors as they attempt to actualize the possibility of common democracy even (and especially) when it seems to be both deeply unequal and receding from view. Thus, in recent years, citizenship claims have expanded across the globe, bringing with them new efforts to forge community amidst tremendous difficulty. In the process, political actors not only experiment with new forms of identity, but also new practices of disagreement, coalition-building, and solidarity.

Yet, for thinkers like Max Weber, Carl Schmitt, and Giorgio Agamben, the political must also be seen as a space irreducibly connected to questions of violence and power. Weber's (1919) sense of politics as a "struggle for power" is closely related to his definition of the state as the holder of a monopoly on the legitimate use of force. For Weber, politics is at its most decisive reducible to violence. This echoes Von Clausewitz's (and Schmitt's who follows later) sense of politics as "war by other means" (1853 [1996]). Where Weber saw one of the hallmarks of the

modern state as producing increasingly rationalized forms of politics, and thus the organization of violence in both bureaucracy and the professionalization of a political class, Schmitt and those who followed considered this professionalization of politics as a restriction of the realm of legitimate struggle to the state itself. In contrast to Weber, Schmitt takes the violence immanent to politics as a kind of definitional starting point helping to delineate it from the state ([1932] 1996). What composes the political for Schmitt is the friend/enemy distinction, which reflects the irreducibly antagonistic character of social life. Thus, he argues, an entity is only political to the extent that it can make such a distinction and then muster the support to be able to "kill" the enemy. Such a distinction is essential to the production of a political space in which oppositional forces are at odds with one another and must work out their differences decisively.

Schmitt's fundamental insight into politics as a domain of sublimated violence and antagonistic social relations offers an important contribution to our notion of politics, yet we recognize its limitations. For one thing, a strict reading of Schmitt can have dire implications for the possibility of plural democracy. Indeed, many of the pieces in this collection voice deep skepticism of this rendering of social life (see Holston, 2019; Müller, 2019). A second critique of Schmitt is that his notion of the political is ethnocentric, based on Western societies where political power is centered in institutions, especially states. In contrast, Pierre Clastres (1989), for instance, looks at the political from the perspective of Amer-Indian societies, which he claims refuse to allow dangerous and violent political power to cohere in leaders or institutions. Instead, in these "societies against the state," the social body is the locus of the political.

Instead of narrowly casting our thinking with Schmitt, we follow Chantal Mouffe (2005), to "think with Schmitt, against Schmitt," positioning disagreement and difference as a key, constitutive feature of political life but not allowing these antagonisms to subsume our understandings of the processes of solidarity and affinity also necessary to collective politics. Indeed, Mouffe (2005) amends Schmitt's focus on antagonism to describe "agonistic" relations of adversaries, who can radically disagree with each other, seeking to gain hegemony, while still respecting liberal institutions. In doing so, she reminds us that any formulation of the political must necessarily address the "antagonisms" that are "constitutive of human societies."

French theorist Jacques Rancière (1999: 16–17, 29) defines politics as an emergent process that occurs as actors reconstitute the political community by asserting their claims as legitimate political beings. Rancière opposes "politics" to what he calls "policing," the set of power relations and technologies that maintain the social order. Politics erupts in that rare moment when those excluded from the existing social order make themselves visible through disagreement, calling attention to the "scandal" of their invisibility. For Rancière, politics is rare because it entails the reformulation of the social itself, redistributing bodies, roles, and times of action as new sorts of political actors make themselves visible.

Rancière's writing on the political provides many resources for anthropologists, but three things stand out for us. First, he highlights again the fundamental and irreducible way in which difference is embedded in social life. He situates difference in the aesthetic dimension, positing a "distribution of the sensible," in which some people are literally not heard or perceived, but are only "noise." Second, the distinction Rancière draws between politics and police is analytically useful because it enables us to maintain a keen interest in the ways in which power relations are enacted, while distinguishing such enactments from the sites in which disagreement might challenge such power relations. Finally, Rancière's notion of politics helps us to understand how *new* distributions of social relations entail the emergence of new subjects of politics who were previously unnamed. The political here is an unfolding terrain of disagreement, emerging as new configurations of actors enact politics from often unexpected places.

To ask about the conditions for collective world-making, then, is to attend to forces of empathy, solidarity, and sympathy, as well as the terrains of disagreement and violence that unfold as people come together to remake the world. The concepts these scholars have provided—the commons, exclusion, violence, politics, and policing—reflect foundational insights within anthropological engagements with politics. We argue that a return to many of the key understandings of political anthropology can enable us to redefine our terms in the contemporary moment.

Political anthropologies and anthropologies of politics

Early political anthropologists explored political relations in small-scale societies, analyzing structure, hierarchy, leadership, and rules of succession as constitutive of political relations (see Evans-Prichard, 1940). These scholars described politics as processes that enabled actors to navigate through predefined social structures. Thus, they emphasized how shifting structural conditions enabled distinct social groups to coalesce and dissolve, to navigate and mobilize, especially in complex hierarchical systems (see Bailey, 1969; Barth, 1965; Gluckman, 1940; Leach, 1954). Such studies often bifurcated "little p" politics from more overt forms of "big P" Politics associated with the state, yet they also considered how antagonistic relations were both endemic to social relations and highly productive for actors within different groups (see Swartz, Turner, and Tuden, 1966; Vincent, 2002). They also reflected an implicit tension between studies that addressed the forms of power and order that maintained social relations and the practices that emerged in relation to such orders, which sought to manipulate, disrupt, reorder, or challenge such embedded relations.

For instance, Max Gluckman's (1940) classic description of the opening of a bridge in Zululand describes in detail the ways different groups of people—local people, colonial administrators, and missionaries—received the new development and how it played into existing sectoral interests and disputes. Gluckman's complex telling demonstrated how, in our terms, the bridge became a space of disagreement and difference that exposed the tense relation of forces critical to the

construction of what he calls a "social situation." Gluckman's emphasis on the constitutive force of social tensions offered a new direction for political anthropologies, especially those that took their cues from the writing of Marx, by situating localized political struggles within the contested history of capitalism (see Mintz, 1985; Nash, 1993; Smith, 1989; Wolf, 1982).

The subsequent generation of political anthropology embraced the work of Antonio Gramsci ([1971] 1995) taking up notions of hegemony and contestation to characterize forces of domination and struggle (see Comaroff and Comaroff, 1991; Li, 2007, 2014; Roseberry, 1994; Williams, 1977; also see Crehan, 2002). The anthropological attraction to Gramsci relates to how he positioned culture as a contested site of struggle over the organization of the state and capitalist economies. Gramsci's notion of hegemony helped elucidate how culture transmitted power relations in ways that were simultaneously coercive, consensual, and contested. This framework was embraced because it clarified the terms of ongoing struggles over the relationship between decolonization, globalization, and emerging nationalisms. Such insights not only demonstrated what held capitalist logics together, but also pointed toward the spaces in which both market and state projects were being challenged by actors actively engaged in resistant projects (wars of maneuver), in less overt forms of organizing (wars of position) (Gramsci, 1971: 238–239), or merely standing in opposition to capitalist expansion through less organized or targeted micro acts of resistance (Scott, 1985; see also Ortner, 1995).

However, the Gramscian framework went beyond resistance to emphasize the role of civil society as the site in which state power is supported and where it might also be contested. Thus, it provided a normative stance for anthropologists to leverage their work within projects of social justice. Similarly, as Stuart Hall (1988) and Raymond Williams (1977) pointed out, Gramscian understandings of political struggle not only account for the possibility of positive political transformation but also for its opposite—failure, regression, or lateral transformation. In an earlier era, we might have considered such emergent politics through the language of resistance, hegemony, and counter-hegemony, situated within fields of class struggle. While still relevant, we argue that attention to class politics must be augmented by more careful attention to the delimitations of the political itself. Yet, Gramsci's insights continue to be important. As Katie Crehan highlights, Gramscian notions of hegemony enable anthropologists to consider the ways the "heterogeneous clutter of detritus deposited by history" is drawn together in a specific conjuncture (2002; see also Li, 2014: 19). In this way, present-tense contestations over the commons emerge from specific formulations of the past. Stuart Hall's Gramscian-inspired work on the beginnings of the neoliberal era in the United Kingdom gives us an illustrative example of this. He demonstrated how an unexpected structural articulation between working-class values and neoliberal policies enabled the decimation of the British Left and gave rise to Thatcherism (Hall, 1988). Indeed, efforts to understand the emergence, conditions, and effects

of that historical conjuncture have dominated a great deal of anthropology for the last two decades.

Political anthropology in the neoliberal era

In the wake of the collapse of communism and fall of the Berlin wall, the changing global landscape raised questions about the locus of the political. Since 1989, the question of the state, which was already the subject of a great deal of analytical debate (see Abrams, 1977; Blom Hansen and Stepputat, 2005; Corrigan and Sayer, 1985; Mitchell, 1999; Poole and Das, 2004; Scott, 1998), became an empirical question as well. Scholars debated whether and how the state had receded in importance as well as how the market had replaced it as a governing mechanism of social, political, and economic life (see Foucault, 1991; Rose, 1999). Indeed, many anthropologists turned toward the language of global flows to analyze the expansion of market logic and the ways capitalist actors were reconfiguring state-society relations (Appadurai, 2000; Ong and Collier, 2005). They drew attention to new forms of governance that transformed spatial arrangements as well as to non-state actors fundamental to emerging regimes of governance (Ferguson and Gupta, 2002). They also examined the ways in which such regimes of governance implied and produced new forms of knowledge and advocacy (Fortun, 2001).

In the next decade, political anthropologists responded to this series of shifts by turning in several directions to interrogate emerging relations between governance and politics. The question of citizenship, political subjectivity, law, and state sovereignty emerged as one crucial terrain of inquiry (Caldeira and Holston, 1999; Holston, 2008; Ong, 1999; Ong and Collier, 2005). As societies emerged from decades of civil war and dictatorships in Latin America and authoritarianism in Eastern Europe, weary populations looked hopefully to liberal democracy. Civil society became a central site of study, as "new social movements" pressed demands for recognition (Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar, 1998). In this moment of identity politics, citizenship proved a productive site of struggle for indigenous peoples, environmentalists, the urban poor, and gender activists, among others. Amid this enthusiasm, scholars thought carefully about the meanings of citizenship and its limitations. For instance, Caldeira and Holston (1999) showed how these emerging democracies could be disjunctive, providing new political rights while simultaneously denying civil rights to whole classes of peoples, especially the poor. Scholars focusing on indigenous demands showed how new regimes of neoliberal multiculturalism reframed political demands for inclusion in terms of cultural recognition, producing new forms of citizenship that articulated with capitalist logics (Hale, 2002; Postero, 2007; Povinelli, 2002; Richards, 2013). Other scholars reminded us of the overarching power of national sovereignty, which continues to be enacted through violent performances of the will to rule, embedding citizenship in the practices of bureaucracy and empire (Blom Hansen and Stepputat, 2005; Gupta, 2012).

As Ferguson and Gupta (2002) made clear, in the 20th century, national sovereignty in many parts of the world was constrained by conditional loans from international lenders and the prevailing realpolitik of the Cold War. Thus, especially in Latin America and Africa, many post-colonial nations never had full fiscal, much less political, sovereignty. Similarly, the production of nation-states in East, South, and Southeast Asia took place through tight arrangements between cliques of state actors and the same non-state institutions listed above, producing hybrid sovereignties that benefited small numbers of national elites, often led by military governments (Sopranzetti, 2017). Yet, even within places following models like these, designed to constrain political struggle, like Vietnam, citizens have found ways of waging disagreements (see Harms, 2016; Karis, 2017). In the Global North, the state as the legitimate site of the political has been reserved for select parts of the populace and even as that number has expanded in the form of voting rights, market logics have nibbled away at state institutions and state structures of welfare at the precise moment many excluded classes were granted full access to the state as citizens. Wendy Brown argues that, as a result, democracy is in danger of being "undone" and democratic practices replaced by the merciless rule of the market (Brown, 2015). As Tania Li (2019) makes clear, in many places in the world, the injustices of capitalist practice are not only excluded from political debate, but also act to defuse critique and interrupt politics among those most affected.

Michel Foucault's theories offered an important framework for thinking about politics and the political in this era. He argued that sovereign power, based on the right of the sovereign to kill his subjects—the power over death—had been replaced in part by disciplinary power and biopower—the power over life. In his 1975–1976 lectures, Foucault considered the Schmittian notion that politics was a continuation of war by other means. He concluded, in part, that war had permeated the entire social body and become part of every social relationship (Foucault, 1997: 162). Thus, in contrast to coercive power that must be resisted, he theorized new productive forms of "governmentality," enacted through discursive regimes as well as "techniques of the self" that were internalized by subjects (Foucault, 1991, 2010). In the neoliberal period, much of political anthropology turned toward this Foucauldian approach, as scholars found discourse and governmentality helpful tools for understanding the post-political effects of the increasingly hegemonic neoliberal market logics (Ferguson, 2006; Ong and Collier, 2005; Paley, 2001; Rose, 1996, 1999). For instance, Veronica Schild showed how neoliberal governmentality acted to create gendered "market citizens," conceived as empowered individuals capable of enhancing their lives through responsible choices as consumers (Schild, 2000: 276).

We want to underline that biopolitics and the anthropology of neoliberalism, more generally, should not be understood as a general theory of politics or the political (in which all politics are now bio-politics), but rather as a deep engagement with a particular arrangement of the political within a certain historical moment. While we are sympathetic to James Ferguson's (2010) suggestion that

neoliberalism has come to denote so many things that it is difficult to pin down its meaning, we also appreciate the careful work scholars have carried out to understand the diverse and often occluded effects of the dual expansions of capitalist regimes of accumulation and liberal modes of being and governing. These studies point to the wide variety of modalities through which power continues to be enacted in the present even as it becomes ever more obscure. By doing so, this scholarship has documented the complex and varied modes of policing associated with neoliberalism and its pernicious undermining of political practice. Yet, one danger with these studies has been that that they can render neoliberalism impossible to contest. It seems necessary to resist characterizing the effects of neoliberal governance as totalizing, even, or perhaps especially because the outcomes of market reforms have never been straightforward. Anthropologists have documented ongoing struggles to resist and transform neoliberal policies and discourses (e.g. Graeber, 2009). If the end of the 20th century was dominated by struggles over neoliberalism, what form will the political take in the 21st century? How should anthropology respond?

The question of the political in the 21st century

Noting the strength of the international consensus surrounding liberal governmentality, democratic politics, and capitalist economics at the broadest levels of policymaking, many political philosophers argue that our moment is uniquely "post-political" (Arditi, 2009; Crouch, 2004; Swyngedouw, 2010). The term "post-politics" emerged as part of a discussion among these (mostly European) philosophers as they lamented what they saw as weak forms of democratic practice in the neoliberal era. As Slavoj Žižek put it: "It is crucial to perceive…the post-political suspension of the political in the reduction of the state to a mere police agent servicing the (consensually established) needs of the market forces and multiculturalist tolerant humanitarianism" (Žižek, 2006: 72). For Rancière, post-politics refers to growing consensus, which forecloses the possibility of disagreement, the basis of politics: "Consensus is the dismissal of politics as a polemical configuration of the common world" (Rancière, 2003: 4–6). Tracing the debates, geographer Erik Swyngedouw (2008) concludes there is an urgent need for rethinking the political today to combat the new police order in order to reclaim political democracy.

From the outset, the post-political framing ambiguously conflates the social fact of post-politics with its articulation as a governing ideal. Although the post-political emerges as both a theory of governing and a technique of power, it is unclear the degree to which this is a diagnosis of our present situation or merely a mutation in state form; either way the effects have been profound. Although scholars like Wendy Brown have pointed out that *homo economicus* has almost entirely replaced *homo politicus*, anthropologists have been deeply tuned into the ambiguities of post-political governance from the outset. For example, James Ferguson's (1994) classic assessment of the "development apparatus"

demonstrates both the "anti-political," "instrument effects" of development and the failures of such an apparatus to entirely quell dissent (see also Li, 2007). Indeed, it has often been at the ragged end of the implementation of neoliberal governmentality that efforts to reformulate the political have taken place. As Nancy Postero (2017) shows, indigenous activists in Bolivia led a radical challenge to the neoliberal order, claiming it linked colonial orders and capitalist practices to produce a racist form of injustice. As James Holston (2019) shows, urban residents from São Paulo to Istanbul are successfully protesting privatization by reviving visions of the associational life of the city-as-commons. Other scholars have shown us how democracy and liberalism themselves became objects of political contention (Elinoff, 2014; Hickel, 2015; Trnka and Trundle, 2017). The victory of Donald Trump in the 2016 US presidential election demonstrated precisely this, as widespread albeit disarticulated, discontent with the complicity between "Wall Street" and the government converged in a conservative–populist–ethnonationalist coalition. These examples are evidence that discursive analyses can only take us so far and that closer attention to the ways in which collective political life was actively remaking the political (especially by conservative groups) will be critical to return to in the waning days of the neoliberal consensus.

Thus, focusing on politics—carefully documenting the practices of coalition building, association, and empathy as well as the disagreements, differences, and fissures that produce social change—we can demonstrate how new world-making projects come into being, what their aims are, and what tensions and contradictions they bring with them. Our papers do this by parsing governing (policing) from politics as an analytical move, if not a social fact. In some cases, of course, politics and policing blur, as emerging political subjects get incorporated into the police order. Yet, we seek to disentangle these processes to help bring clarity to the terms upon which people critically engage with the forces shaping their lives and occasionally transform or reconfigure structures of domination, for better and worse.

So, although we take up Swyengdouw's call to locate the political, we do so not from a philosophical position but from an ethnographic and empirical one where politics has never left the scene, even though those who govern had hoped that it would. Following Schmitt, we suggest that this consensus approach to governance is a classic "depoliticizing" and "neutralizing" strategy, one that attempts but fails to eliminate the political domain of life (Schmitt, [1932] 1996: 86). Political anthropologists have produced remarkable ethnographic studies that demonstrate that although the "evacuation of the political" (Swyngedouw, 2010) remains an important and far-reaching logic of governance (and certainly an aspiration for many powerful actors), such a project is far from complete empirically.

Because both politics and the political are the results of specific cultural, social, and economic configurations, ethnography moves us closer to the relational practices of politics and the composition of the political itself. Thus, what anthropologists have documented is that politics itself lies at the boundary of defining what is legitimately political. We argue, following Candea (2011), that the answer to this

question is itself an ethnographic question. As we show here, opening up the political as an ethnographic question enables an investigation into the places in which new political sites are emerging—like urban social movements (see the contributions of Holston; Elinoff, 2019) and new struggles over sovereignty (see Postero and Fabricant, 2019)—while also pointing out that the struggle to become a legitimate political actor itself hinges on the contested boundaries of the properly political. We are not talking here about an academic question of how we scholars define the political. Instead, we are drawing attention to the ways that various conceptions of the political include distinct actors differently. This raises the question of inclusion, asking how various actors come to be seen as legitimate political beings, with the capacity to make intelligible demands, while others are seen as irrational, incoherent, or mute. As Elinoff points out in his contribution to this issue, poor "villagers" in Thailand are often deemed unprepared to be citizens and therefore their aspirations for political belonging, expressions of political will and visions of the good are easily ignored, and/or their contributions to political life erased altogether. Or, as Blaser (2019) points out, the specific shape of the political reduces the range of actors who are accepted as "properly political subjects," often reducing the complex human–non-human coalitions, what he calls "emplaced collectives," to simple human-centered land claims.

The authors in this collection demonstrate the complex modes and scales through which politics is happening in the contemporary world. Indeed, they provoke us to ask if, in the wake of subsequent capitalist shocks, 9/11, multiple global wars, the 2008 financial collapse, and the current turn to ethno-nationalism across the industrialized world, the age of economics is giving way to something more contentious, perhaps what we might call an "age of politics"? Particularly in the wake of the increasingly militant turn toward forms of authoritarian governance, it no longer feels accurate to characterize the ongoing challenges to contemporary state-society models as simply responses to neoliberalism. Instead, following our authors, what strikes us as fundamentally different in this moment is the refigured and refiguring sense among the people with whom we work and study that the time has come to include new voices and perspectives into the ongoing disagreements about the making of worlds to come. Such perspectives can and should cast new light on our understandings of the political.

Moreover, although we see a focus on politics and the boundaries of the political as analytically and practically necessary for the discipline, we are mindful to de-link politics from a sense of inevitable emancipatory possibility. To varying degrees, our contributions point toward the instability and non-linearity of such processes. Emergent politics from Thailand to Bolivia to Brazil did not produce new emancipated publics, but in fact, gave way to yet more complexity: military dictatorship, indigenous-conservative alliances, and the return of the extreme Right, respectively. Yet, such openings and transformations portend new possibilities. The papers in this collection draw attention to three important spaces in which we see politics emerging in the contemporary era, to which we now turn:

(1) processes of the "making" of the commons; (2) the spaces of disarticulation in which politics are negotiated; and (3) emerging forms of world-making.

New trajectories in political anthropology

Making the un/commons

One way of conceptualizing the political is to see it as the process of making common social worlds (Latour, 2004; Stengers, 2011). Unless societies are in constant states of war, they must find ways to organize their disagreements in such a way as to form and maintain communities. This is precisely what the early political anthropologists studied, and the basis of Clastre's (1989) argument about societies without states. Our papers pay close attention to the political practices entailed in the making and remaking of common worlds.

The contributors to this special issue insist that this is not easy work, when it occurs at all. Instead, the political is made and remade through the negotiation of difference, through both agonism and contention, as well as solidarity and empathy. As both Birgit Müller's and Tania Li's contributions point out, politics at its most germinal stages consists in the human capacity to act on one's own time, what Müller calls *eigensinn*. Often this capacity does not lead to deep political engagement, but instead acts as a nagging and raw suspicion about forces shaping one's life that, as Li's case demonstrates, may or may not coalesce into larger transformative projects. Yet, as they point out, it is that same stubborn capacity that enables people to find others to discuss and coordinate with to begin the collective process of confronting power and assembling the world otherwise. As Müller's case of GMO activists demonstrates, the capacity for politics rests on both the capacity for obstinate stubbornness and the empathy and "warmth of things." She shows how the movements that coalesced around one stubborn farmer's fight with multinational agribusiness was not sustained through disagreement alone, but also through generosity and warmth. Similarly, James Holston's description of new urban social movements describes how protests from cities across the globe reflect how shared discontents become nodes of new forms of collectivity. Holston argues that because urban life is to a large degree a commons itself, the city provides a framework for common engagement and a platform for the enactment of democracy. Here, he focuses on the forms of sociality, friendship, and collective engagement that take place as actors attempt to come together not only to wage disagreement, but also to act on the promise of the city as a space of collective justice. These papers reveal that the production of shared notions of the good is deeply political (cf Ortner, 2016; Robbins, 2013).

Our emphasis on the common world as an emergent, contested field echoes both Isabell Stengers's (2011) and Bruno Latour's (2004: 455) notions of *cosmopolitics* in which the boundaries of the political are emergent, subject to making and remaking. The assembly of actors may take place through shared ideas or resources, but might also cluster around other less obvious practices and involve the linking of uncommon

actors. Blaser's case (2019) demonstrates how heterogeneously composed indigenous worlds bring non-human actors into the scene of politics in ways that not only reflect their ontologies and "life projects," but also portend complex challenges to mainstream human-centered politics. Similarly, Joe Hankins's article demonstrates the ways that politics itself is a product of social assembly across lines of difference. As his ethnography of Japanese leather workers and Indian Dalits demonstrates, the sympathies that underlie humanitarianism might undergird forms of solidarity that bring groups together even as such encounters entail the management and control of difference itself. Thus, Hankins finds politics in the process through which different actors "live together," actively cultivating a sense of attunement and proximity. Through this labor of sympathy and engagement, these activists understand themselves as part of a shared body in which they are co-substantiated and, in the process, create new political possibilities.

As often as politics assembles social life, then, it also disassembles it. Tania Li's article shows us how eigensinn—that permanently distributed capacity to "act on one's own time"—doesn't always lead to movements or connections and, more often than not, forestalls them. For her, politics may be rooted in the capacity to disagree, but disagreement does not necessarily lead to mass political struggle or even justice. Here, she draws attention to the "unheroic" times, in which the everyday practices of capitalism in Indonesia palm oil plantations make overt forms of politics untenable or unthinkable. Though such cases do not amount to revolutionary politics, her research in sites of politics interrupted prompts her to excavate the fundamental questions at the heart of a new anthropology of politics.

As Lauren Berlant reminds us, "Politics is also about distributing insecurity, after all" (2016: 395). In this way, the commons cannot be taken as apolitical or neutral, but rather as a political project—composed of disagreement—through and through. This is because what is often taken for a commons in public and private life will under anthropological scrutiny also look very much like what Blaser and De la Cadena (2017) call an "uncommons'— where goods are shared unevenly and values distributed differentially on the basis of race, class, caste, religion, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and complex, locally specific admixtures of these ethno-regional identities. Indeed, these differences also acknowledge the fact that some bodies are deemed inassimilable; their voices rendered inaudible within a particular framework of the commons. So, an emphasis on politics as disagreement helps ensure that understandings of commoning are tightly enmeshed with analyses of co-occurring exclusions. It also highlights how the excluded call attention to their invisibility, offering visions of worlds organized otherwise. Ethnographically, the commons is not an end point, but rather a stubborn question that remains open to political renewal and reconfiguration.

Spaces of disarticulation

A second thread in our papers points to the interstices of social life in which politics can emerge. Here, rather than understanding political action as a coherent

process of struggle between clearly defined groups of actors with coherent visions of change, we observe how political struggle often entails creative negotiations between profoundly different worlds across multiple scales. Here, we point out that politics often entails the work of defining and redefining the terms upon which struggle takes place. As negotiations, conflicts, and equivocations occur, so, too, do new possibilities for articulation and transformation.

In the Bolivian case described by Nancy Postero and Nicole Fabricant, for example, indigenous activists have argued that indigenous *cosmovisions* offer revolutionary alternatives to capitalist extraction. Under the current Morales government, however, the state has articulated a new discourse, linking extractive capitalism and development with indigeneity through the idea of economic liberation. It is the incompatibility of these visions that leaves spaces for actors to manage, improvise, and debate. Postero and Fabricant show how Guaraní politicians have found ways to smuggle in their long-held demands for autonomy into the "spaces in-between" different political parties and state institutions. Yet, these gaps may reveal deeper schisms. Blaser describes how the Yshiro indigenous people of Paraguay and the development NGOs who work with them have radically different ontological understandings of the relations between human and non-human beings. He argues that the misunderstandings, or "equivocations" (following Viveiros de Castro, 2004) that emerge may allow "subversive" indigenous logics to interrupt ongoing forms of capitalist development.

Just as often, however, such gaps can be left open for unequal distributions of power and ever-greater inequalities. Keith McNeal describes how sexual rights are increasingly included into the global human rights framework. The result is a new form of post-politics, in which some (acceptable) queer subjects are incorporated into the nation-state through various forms of legal recognition, such as gay marriage, and, in the case he describes, political asylum. He describes how queer refugees from Trinidad and Tobago who try to take advantage of these new forms of humanitarian inclusion are caught in the spaces between the ideal bourgeois gay subject (who performs a neoliberal subject position) and the emancipated queer actor (who contests the exclusions gay and transpeople suffer in many parts of the world). Although McNeal demonstrates how asylum seekers are incorporated by the post-political humanitarian order, he also shows the ways in which they use their position to wage backstage struggles in an effort to reconstruct political possibilities for themselves and others.

A fundamental challenge for ethnographers and anthropologists working in these gaps is making sense of a politics that is itself composed of differences and disagreements that are multi-scalar and often nested inside one another. Yet, we argue that one of the strengths of an ethnographic approach to politics is an ability to look across and between scales, finding links from struggles taking place at the level of the household to the nation-state and the global sphere. Eli Elinoff's paper shows how disputes between slum networks in Thailand reflected national disagreements over the boundaries of the political, even as they often interlaced to produce new movements for social rights and housing on the ground. The messy

compositions of politics inside politics was interpreted by Thai middle-class and elite conservatives as a kind of pathology of democracy, even as the embrace of disagreement enabled the urban poor to re-imagine themselves as legitimate political subjects. The same conflicting readings of democratic politics that produced and fractured the local coalitions that Elinoff describes also underscore national political shifts and form the heart of the contestations behind the rise of authoritarian military governance in Thailand.

Here, even in the accretion of apparent political failures, new possibilities emerge in the spaces between modes of governance, state projects, and activist coalitions. By paying attention to the way disagreements extend "all the way down," anthropologies of politics can make sense of what appears insensible, offering us a chance to engage with the emergent, unpredictable creativity inherent in politics and to anticipate emergent formulations of the political in the making.

Struggles for the "otherwise"

We have argued here for a definition of politics as a practice of world-making that proceeds through critique and conflict, emphasizing that it is a product of disagreement and difference. The notion of world-making draws attention to an imagined future, of lives lived "otherwise" (see Povinelli, 2012). This is what Blaser calls "worlding" (2010), meaning the bringing into being of alternative ontologies or, as he describes it in his contribution here, making visible the many different "life projects" present in the pluriverse. The papers in our collection draw on a variety of understandings of what those imagined futures might look like.

Some draw inspiration from Rancière and from the ontological turn (see Blaser, 2010; De la Cadena, 2015), locating politics in epistemological, aesthetic, and affective dimensions. Blaser, for instance, argues that the ontologically distinct notions of development held by indigenous people—what he calls "a-human politics"—offers a chance to disrupt human-centered politics and the dangerous practices shaping global environmental change. Postero and Fabricant also describe indigenous actors' efforts to create a world otherwise based on local forms of sovereignty that challenge Western liberalism. Others refuse a clear definition of what the political is, arguing that the political exists in multiple sites, including those not yet defined. Hankins's paper reflects this possibility, showing how the lines of the political are themselves subject to a rethinking and a remaking in their ethnographic context—allowing for politics to cut through moments that otherwise might be characterized as spaces of apolitical humanitarian sympathy or ethics. Thus, he argues for an ethnographic approach that allows for an investigation of politics without predetermining the field of engagement.

A second approach emphasizes the role of anthropology as political critique, reflecting on the ways that worlds are made in relation to existing conceptual political apparatuses. By focusing on actors' relations to classic political notions such as law, sovereignty, citizenship, capitalism, democracy, and rights, these

scholars not only provide a description of their ethnographic scenes but also eval-
uate such formulations as they mutate and reform in specific conjunctures.
Holston's piece rethinks the notion of citizenship in the Global South, arguing
for a new kind of insurgent citizenship based on residence in—and the making of—
cities, rather than nation-states. Li demonstrates how the ravages of capitalism on
Indonesia's frontier have dramatically undermined people's abilities to organize
together. Elinoff considers how even as the poor in Thailand are relegated to a
certain form of limited citizenship, they continue to organize and disagree with one
another, their activist collaborators, and state agents in ways that aim to make
good on democracy's promise, even when that promise has been deeply eroded by
successive rounds of military governance. For these scholars, descriptions of frac-
tured processes of worlding require sustained cultural, social, and political critique
of the uneven power structures, embedded discourses, embodied performances,
and entrenched inequalities that they unseat and reproduce.

These are not contradictory approaches, and in fact several papers engage them
both simultaneously. We see this as a very productive possibility for future scholars.
Critique itself is a practice inextricably linked with making and unmaking meaning in
the world. Thus, we see these as complementary perspectives. Descriptions of
worlding processes illuminate the way situated actors—including non-human
actors—generate new possibilities and reframe old debates. Our studies make clear
the stakes of those possibilities by grounding them in histories of power, violence, race,
class, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity. The merging of these two practices highlights
one of the most significant contributions of contemporary political anthropology: the
possibility of finding ways to critique existing formulations while drawing attention to
emergent openings that portend future politics still to come.

Conclusion: ethnography in a moment of danger

As the time of managerial governance sputters and authoritarian claims to sover-
eign violence emerge, we see this moment as one fraught with both danger and
possibility. In his "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Walter Benjamin
describes what it means to write in such a moment. He says,

> To articulate what is past does not mean to recognize "how it really was.". . .It means
> to seize hold of a memory, as it flashes up at *a moment of danger*. The danger affects
> both the content and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming
> a tool of the ruling classes. Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark
> of hope in the past, who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from
> the enemy, if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious. (1968: 255;
> emphasis added)

Taking Benjamin's challenge to heart, we argue that a final goal of political
anthropology is to preserve the future memory of present politics in all of its
disagreement and incompleteness. If the present is always a product of

contestation, riddled with gaps and unevenness, then it presents the possibility of being made different, even, and perhaps especially, while it remains open to its own obliteration. This is a time where danger and possibility abut. To write politics in this time is to write in the face of danger, for the possibility for a different present and a future otherwise.

The task set for anthropologists in this moment, then, is never simply descriptive. Rendering these worlds in the making in their fullness and complexity gives difference and disagreement room to breathe, opening possibilities for future transformation. Documenting the substantive lines of dispute and making sense of their structural implications reminds us that anthropologists are themselves a part of the worlds they study. First, as Blaser makes clear in his contribution, if part of this world-making practice involves "naming" disagreements (i.e. making the "wrong" evident), then the (pluriversalist) political anthropologist's first task should be to remain aware of the provincialism of her/his own standing categories, to allow us to see disagreements that are invisible to us due to our own positioning within the political order. Second, tracing disagreement can and should lead anthropologists further into scenes of world-making themselves.

Anthropological engagements can describe alternative modes of being, opening possibilities for new commons, and new un-commons to emerge and gain traction in the world. They can, as Keith McNeal's and Joe Hankins's chapters show, also participate in the process of composing political scenes even as they make sense of such encounters. McNeal served as a "country expert" for asylum seekers, documenting the ambiguous situation in the countries they fled. As he observes, anthropologists cannot always resolve the ambivalences they see in the spaces of politics they study. But they can seek to clarify them as clues to underlying tensions and contradictions: "Doing so not only helps identify the politics obscured by the ostensibly post-political, but also excavates the logics through which the post-political operates." Moreover, as Blaser explains in his piece, when ethnographers observe our collaborators in the field carrying out political acts that evidence the wrongs of exclusion, our writings can serve as "acts of fidelity" to their "performative staging" of equality, helping to unfold the political sequences Rancière suggests are necessary for these egalitarian acts to serve as politics. Such positions recast the possibilities of anthropology in this contentious moment and they return us to fundamental and ongoing discussions about method, decolonization, and power (i.e. Simpson, 2014; Smith, 1999). Such questions are beyond the scope of what we aim to do here, but nevertheless require careful future attention.

Finally, the act of writing disagreement itself is political. It produces the possibility for public debate. It preserves struggles, both actual and possible. It rearticulates, makes sense of, and offers new interpretations of contestations that are frequently dismissed as ill-conceived, irrational, or beyond the pale. It helps us make sense of moments in which change seems unimaginable. Such a work is necessary, but also partial and potentially fraught. Yet, the writing of politics not only enhances the possibilities for publics to engage with themselves on their

own difficult and disjunctive terms, but also forges visions of publics organized otherwise, producing sparks for political fires to burn anew.

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