



Intervention

Intervention: Engaging post-foundational political theory requires an ‘enmeshed’ approach

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A B S T R A C T

This intervention argues for renewed engagements with post-foundational political theory (PFPT) within political geography. We feel that post-foundational political geography may be on the cusp of becoming consolidated as a distinct and expansive approach to political geographic scholarship, but we argue that reductionist and binary caricatures of its central distinction between ‘politics’ and ‘the political’ must be avoided for it to reach its full potential. To this end, we suggest that ‘politics’ and ‘the political’ need to be considered as more ‘enmeshed’ than they have often been represented. We write as four political geographers and will, each in our own ways, highlight how an ‘enmeshed’ approach to PFPT can better translate its conceptual interventions into political geographic research whilst facilitating productive encounters with the broader worlds of critical geographic inquiry.

1. Introduction: For a post-foundational political geography beyond the political event

1.1. (Joe Blakey, Ruth Machen, Derek Ruez, Paula Medina García)

In this intervention, we argue for renewed engagements with post-foundational political theory (PFPT) within political geography. As we shortly detail, we find untapped potential in this novel group of theories that broadly assert that whilst there is no perfect way to order society, it nonetheless takes imperfect, contingent, and therefore contestable forms. To increase engagement with PFPT, we argue that its central distinction between ‘politics’ (as a mode of ordering society) and ‘the political’ (as the ever-present possibility for change) needs to be considered as more ‘enmeshed’ than it has often been represented by proponents and critics alike. We write as four political geographers and will, each in our own ways, highlight how an ‘enmeshed’ approach to PFPT can help to better translate the conceptual interventions of post-foundational theorising into political geographic research and more readily facilitate careful and productive encounters between post-foundational approaches and the broader worlds of critical geographic inquiry.

While political geographic scholarship has long incorporated insights from many of the traditions that PFPT tends to engage, we make this intervention at a moment when PFPT is receiving explicit and mounting disciplinary interest. References to post-foundationalism in the title, abstract and keywords of articles have almost trebled in the past decade¹, many of which have been authored by geographers. Meanwhile, Landau et al. (2021) have recently published an edited volume which intends to create a dialogue between PFPT and geographical thought. The explicit focus on this overlap is unsurprising because over the last decade geographers have been increasingly drawing upon post-foundational political thinkers – the likes of Chantal Mouffe or Jacques Rancière, whose work amongst others we will shortly explore. We feel, therefore, that post-foundational political geography may be on the cusp of becoming consolidated as a distinct approach to political geographic scholarship. The problems posed by and to this consolidation are, at least, two-fold. On the one hand, we are concerned that “typecast” and “caricatured” portrayals by some critics could cause some to misunderstand or dismiss the potential of this work (Dikeç, 2017, p. 49). On the other, we worry that the Eurocentric style of many engagements with post-foundational thinking risks isolating this approach from some of the most vital critical conversations happening

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in the discipline - for example, in Black, queer, and feminist geographies - and hampering its capacities to engage with some of the most pressing problems of political life across a plural and uneven world (Gökarksel et al., 2021; Oswin, 2020; Noxolo, 2022).

These outcomes would be deeply disappointing because, while we articulate distinct positions and emphases in this intervention, we all agree that careful post-foundational political geographic inquiry has much to offer. There is significant diversity among post-foundational approaches, but what we and many others find so compelling about this work is the way it can sensitise us to how power relations work to order spaces, places, identities, and hierarchies without losing sight of alternative possibilities (Blakey, 2021). Put differently, PFPT enables geographers to blend an appreciation for radical contingency with radical alterity, and it focuses attention on the spaces where order and its alternatives meet, and on the role of space in how orders endure or not (Dikeç, 2017). It rejects any idea that there could be a perfect way to organize society and space - as well as any possibility of an ordering being perfectly complete - and opens attention to what happens when such orderings are attempted. As such, this bundling of theoretical approaches can encourage a productive reflexivity toward any political ordering, including a healthy scepticism of any order that attempts to portray itself as 'all inclusive', by directing attention to orderings' inevitable exclusions and to the possibilities of radically different ways of organizing society and space.

Part of the way that PFPT does this is by developing the aforementioned distinction between *politics* and the *political*, which is often termed 'the political difference' (Marchart, 2007). Here, 'politics' relates to our conventions for organizing and managing society (think party politics, policymaking, orders of governance and so forth), whilst 'the political' marks those moments of contestation which reveal how there is no universally agreeable or ontologically-given way to do so. The distinction has a complicated intellectual trajectory in 20th century European philosophy and politics. It includes the left's attempts to respond to Carl Schmitt's ([1932] 2007) theorization of the irreducible antagonism of the political and to turn its challenge to liberal procedural politics toward ends radically different from Schmitt's own Nazi politics (Mouffe, 1999), as well as efforts to mobilize the Heideggerian account of ontic/ontological difference for understanding politics and the political (Marchart, 2007). Writing in response to the repressed 1956 uprising in Hungary, Paul Ricoeur (1957) made the influential distinction between an ideal sphere of 'the political' (*le politique*, often translated as polity) and 'politics' (*la politique*, the sphere of power and policy-making) while developing an account of how power operates in 'socialist regimes' and arguing for the relative autonomy of the political against economic determinism (Deslandes, 2012; Marchart, 2007). Across the Atlantic, Hannah Arendt (1998) developed an account of the simultaneously fragile and resilient appearance of the political against the differently depoliticizing forces of fascism, Soviet-style socialism, and liberal capitalist managerialism.

These problems and themes continued to be debated and developed across a wide swathe of engagements with Marxism, feminism, psychoanalysis, and the theoretical contributions and political claims of social movements. This work was often marked by a concern with theorising the possibilities of emancipatory democratic action beyond the cold war coordinates of liberal capitalism and Soviet-style state socialism, which is to say, for many theorists in the Euro-Atlantic world, beyond both the limits of liberal democratic politics-as-usual and anti-democratic attempts to foreclose political contestation (e.g. Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). Later concern with a distinct foreclosure of political

contestation implicit in the imagined 'triumph' of (neo)liberal capitalism would come to the foreground (Butler et al., 2000; Rancière, 1999)².

As Landau et al. (2021: 12) note, the sociologist Stephen Crook likely first introduced the term post-foundationalism into English language critical social theory in the early 1990s to "grasp gaps and paradoxes" in social foundations. Sparke (2005), meanwhile, was one of the first to make the case for a post-foundational *geography* in his work on the nation-state. It is the work of political theorist Marchart (2007), however, that has become the go-to reference point, and which first situated this strain of political thinking under the title of PFPT. A range of scholars, such as Dikeç (2005), Derickson (2017), Swyngedouw (2009), and Kenis (2019), have since developed disciplinary engagement with PFPT, but post-foundational political geography has yet to condense into a discernible sub-field. It is only very recently that Landau, Pohl and Roskamm's (2021) edited volume *[Un]grounding: Post-foundational Geographies* has revived this call, itself foregrounding the term (un)grounding as a fruitful means to capture the contingency and fragility of all socio-spatial orders.

It is toward this question of foundations that the politics/political difference continues to be posed, even as the conceptual meaning and practical implications drawn from this difference can vary across post-foundational projects. For us, the political indicates how there is no ultimate, ontological foundation upon which we can establish a social order, whereas politics acknowledges that foundations are nonetheless provisionally and partially established - and in ways that can often seem to occlude their provisionality and partialness (Butler, 1994, pp. 3–21; Marchart, 2007). This contrasts with foundationalism's search for ultimate foundations and anti-foundationalism's denial of *all* foundations. Instead, PFPT highlights politics' contingent, shaky and imperfect foundations and their lack of any basis in ontology - no matter how sturdy or 'natural' they seem. As such, no philosopher, political party, or socio-economic system holds *the* solution to managing difference in society. There will always be perspectives uncounted for - an "excess", a "supernumerary" or a "constitutive outside" to any order of politics (Mouffe, 2005, p. 53; Rancière, 1999, p. 58; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 40).

The constitutive outside can always bubble up in political moments, reordering orders of politics that have often become taken for granted. To name several examples that will appear in this intervention, think of Rosa Parks refusing the racist socio-spatial orderings of the Jim Crow-era United States in her practiced refusal to leave her bus seat; feminist strikes challenging the gendered and racialized ordering of (re)productive work; or abolitionist movements to end policing and prisons and the racial capitalist order they uphold. These examples all highlight the ineradicable opportunity for disagreement with prevailing orders and the way in which moments of 'political' action might reconfigure the norms of politics.

All contributors to this Interventions piece have been productively provoked by this call for a post-foundational political geography, but we argue we must work to avoid reductionist and binary caricatures of politics and the political for this scholarship to reach its full potential. Instead, we advocate seeing them as 'enmeshed'. Though each contributor to this Intervention advances their own interpretation of this call, by enmeshed we collectively signal a need to foreground how politics and the political hang together, rather than focusing on political events alone. Indeed, this is the conclusion that our co-authors and a range of other contributors reached in a 2019 *Royal Geographical Society with the Institute of British Geographers* (RGS-IBG) Annual International Conference session entitled *Making Space for Difference: Geography*,

² While often approached quite critically, the attention to the polarised coordinates of liberal capitalism and Soviet-style socialism could and often did occlude the colonial conditions of these conversations, while also eliding the problems and questions raised by anti-colonial movements and by other ways of thinking the political beyond 'Western' theory (Banerjee, 2021; Hesse, 2011).

Disagreement and the Political.

In the first response, Machen and Blakey argue that PFPT is at risk of being caricatured and dismissed out of hand. They suggest that these literatures are too frequently bundled under the banner of the ‘post-political literature’, and that this labelling has diverted attention away from some of the wider implications of this approach to thinking through change and difference. As such, they encourage political geographers to approach PFPT with a fresh and more holistic perspective. They argue that considering politics and the political as enmeshed should be a key take-home message for such scholars and, read in this light, that these theories are an expansionary way to think about difference that should encourage scholars to look beyond the political event alone. They find utility in PFPT’s ability to denaturalise pre-existing configurations of power and space, such that it ushers in a deep critical reflexivity, and suggest it offers a hopeful way to negotiate the challenge of post-truth without falling back on foundational claims surrounding objectivity.

In the second contribution, Ruez observes that whilst PFPT constitutes a break from our usual, perhaps overly deterministic, theories of politics they are not themselves beyond critique. Ruez outlines some of the key critiques of post-foundationalism as it enters geographic scholarship - in particular the tendency to focus on events of rupture at the expense of more ongoing and everyday forms of political action - and a tendency to draw upon Eurocentric perspectives and project them universally. It is in these regards that Ruez finds hope in more relational and processual approaches to the political difference and further suggests that we should, therefore, broaden this case for an enmeshed approach beyond the relation of politics and the political alone. Ruez advocates that post-foundationally inclined geographers also work towards an understanding of the ‘uneven geographies of knowledge production’ within which post-foundational theories and scholars are variously enmeshed. It is from this acknowledgement of geo-historical enmeshment that Ruez argues we can productively dislocate the question of what post-foundational geographies might yet become.

Finally, Medina García suggests that benefits can be had by bridging post-foundational political geography and feminist, post-colonial and decolonial thought, exemplifying this through Spain’s 8th March (8M) feminist strike. Medina García draws upon the feminist critique of boundaries that ‘cut in two’ and applies this to post-foundationalism’s politics and the political distinction, making the case for their enmeshment. In doing so, Medina García similarly problematises the focus on disruptive events as ‘discrete snapshots of time and space’ at the expense of those acts of solidarity that can themselves ground and sustain a new politics, alongside the ongoing, processual articulation between politics and the political. Both Ruez and Medina García suggest that moving beyond a binary reading can better enable productive cross-pollination with other parts of political geography.

Collectively, then, we find untapped potential in PFPT for political geography, and equally, agree that “there are many ways of being a post-foundationalist”, some of which are seldom portrayed as such (Fisker, 2021, p. 78). We make this intervention in the hope that post-foundational political geographies become a space in which the questions and problems of mobilizing post-foundational theorising in geographic research can be carefully explored, without isolating itself from broader critical currents within and beyond the discipline. As one step toward those ends, this intervention seeks to contest assertions that PFPT *necessarily* reduces our understanding of change down to rare political events alone on the basis of a dualistic conception of politics and the political. Instead, we advocate approaching its central notions of politics and the political as enmeshed, and, by doing so, we seek to invite broader consideration of its potential insights and contributions for political geographic research.

2. Parallax thinking: politics and the political

2.1. (Ruth Machen and Joe Blakey)

In joining this Intervention, we urge political geographers to explore PFPT with fresh eyes, arguing that it can be an expansionary means to think through difference and change. We assert that many critiques of geographical engagement with PFPT are not intrinsic to the underpinning approach. Whilst such critiques should be taken seriously in terms of how geographers mobilize PFPT, we contend that properly taking heed of these theories should extend and compliment political geographic thought. To aid a more holistic engagement, we echo this call for an enmeshed approach, which can help to foreground how politics and the political should be seen as bound together in a “form of *mélange*” (Marchart, 2011a, p. 132). Such a reading encourages political geographers to move beyond a narrow epistemological focus on political events alone whilst holding on to the conceptual distinction between politics and the political that we feel makes it such a radical approach. This is by no means to discount the examples of geographic scholarship that do this already, rather, it is to say that the popular, ‘soundbite’ versions of what PFPT is risk selling its potential short. Encouraging an enmeshed approach beckons a more holistic and faithful interpretation of PFPT that invites a wider political geographic engagement, works productively with difference, denaturalises existing configurations of power and space, and offers a hopeful way to navigate the challenges of ‘post-truth’ without falling back on a reassertion of foundational claims over truth or objectivity.

Over the last decade or so PFPT has gained traction in political geography following a range of interventions (c.f. Dikeç, 2005; Featherstone & Korf, 2012; Swyngedouw, 2009; Landau et al., 2021). Unfortunately, PFPT is at risk of being caricatured and dismissed out of hand (Dikeç, 2017). We suspect this is in part due to PFPT literature in geography centring on the *post-political*, which describe particular empirical scenarios where the ‘political’ has been repressed, disavowed or foreclosed, effectively locking in a given order of politics (Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2014). At the time of writing, a Scopus search returns 1051 articles with ‘post-political’ or its various permutations in the title, abstract or keywords, compared to only 352 for ‘post-foundationalism’. Problematically, we detect that disciplinary engagement with PFPT is frequently subsumed under ‘the post-political literature’ label – irrespective of whether it *actually* discusses the post-political. Terminology matters, for it tells passers-by what is of concern to the field. So, whilst the post-political is an important component of PFPT, its foregrounding might ironically obscure the full implications of its underpinning expansionary political ontology. We, therefore, encourage political geographers to step back and look at PFPT anew.

To move beyond the post-political focus and facilitate wider engagement with PFPT, we must work against reductionist and binary caricatures of politics and the political. Our point here is one of epistemology and framing. We are *not* arguing for adjusting the definitions of politics and the political. Rather, our point is to highlight how any order of politics necessarily takes place in the context of the political, and how any political event occurs within and against the spaces of politics. As Marchart (2018: 12) has argued, PFPT “compels us to develop a comprehensive political perspective on the social”. This is not to say that everything *is* political, but rather that orders of politics take place against myriad other possibilities that the political points to. As such, the political is always present in a hauntological sense (Landau & Pohl, 2021). We argue that politics and the political are, therefore, best considered in parallax.

We suggest that there are reciprocal benefits for a more holistic engagement with PFPT for the following reasons. First, PFPT provides a productive way to work with difference, and to understand and work through conflict in its diverse manifestations: from identity to territory. Whether through the taming of antagonism into agonism (Mouffe, 2005), or through facilitating the breaking and entering of disagreement

(Rancière, 1999), PFPT works with difference rather than against it, recognising that it is never fully resolvable. It therefore responds to Valentine's (2019) recent call that the discipline ought to interrogate what geographies of difference actually mean - particularly in the context of naïve hopes of cosmopolitanism (that through globalisation the 'problem' of difference would gradually be minimised). In highlighting that difference cannot be resolved in any given order, PFPT contributes to understanding what cosmopolitics could not: accounting for how the extreme right (in particular) reacted to exposure to difference, under conditions of structural inequality, as an existential threat. PFPT offers understanding of the way in which converging consensus-centric politics provides little scope for political choice, and this denial of legitimacy for alternative democratic expression prompts the repression and bubbling up of political passions, including through violent channels (Mouffe, 2005). In a context of increasing frontiers of conflict, there may be a sense in which PFPT's attention to working with, rather than against difference, has never been more needed.

Second, PFPT encourages political geographers to look beyond the political event alone. Historically the politics/political distinction has often been treated "as a Manichean division between spontaneous revolt and oppressing order" (Marchart, 2011a, p. 131), a charge shared by both critics and proponents. Barnett (2017), for instance, who is critical of the approach, has argued that PFPT reduces political moments to rare events that are both disruptive and transformative, narrowing how Geographers think about change. Meanwhile, Derickson and MacKinnon (2015) - proponents of the approach - have argued PFPT's focus on events of radical rupture can come at the cost of considering how spaces do, or do not, facilitate rupture. As indicated, we do not believe this tendency to 'reduce' our understanding of change to moments of rupture is endemic to PFPT. On the contrary, considering politics in the context of the political challenges perceptions of purity that could otherwise narrow thinking about change. As Dikeç (2007) suggests, PFPT is an intrinsically expansionary approach in which anyone can become a political subject and any matter political. An enmeshed understanding of politics and the political encourages us to seek out cracks, to question all-encompassing narratives, to interrogate contingent structures upholding our politics, and to search for alternative framings and subjectivities.

Rather than holding "the world still in order to look at it in cross-section" (Massey, 2005, p. 36) we need to look before and beyond the political event. For as Rancière has argued, political events rarely occur in a 'pure' fashion, instead involving "a history of events, inscriptions, and forms of [subjectivation], of promises, memories, repetitions, anticipations and anachronisms" (2011a: 5). A political event, in other words, is caught amidst temporalities interweaving and possibly clashing (Rancière, 2003: np). Take, for example, the actions of Rosa Parks, whose refusal to give up her bus seat is frequently given by post-foundational geographers as an example of a political event (Swyngedouw, 2021). Parks' success greatly benefited from previous events and preparation. She had attended a desegregation workshop and became involved with the *National Association for the Advancement of Colored People* (NAACP) who were actively seeking opportunities to challenge racial segregation laws and could rally support for the boycotts and demonstrations that took place after the bus event itself (Woodford, 2015, p. 817). Similarly, political acts later condense into orders of politics. Žižek (1999) gives the example of the East German crowds demonstrating against the Communist regime in the last days of the German Democratic Republic, who shouted *Wir sind das Volk!* ('We are the people') against their portrayal as 'hoodlums' which sought to discredit, marginalise and exclude them. At this point they occupied no 'proper' place in the Communist order, and yet they claimed to stand for 'all' in this act of resistance. Their slogan, however, later changed to *Wir sind ein Volk!* ('We are one people') as they became a part of the 'whole' of the capitalist order following the fall of the Berlin Wall, signifying the closure of the political opening and the onset of this reconfigured order of politics.

Third, PFPT encourages political geographers to denaturalise pre-existing configurations of power and space that organize difference, and foreground the ways in which space, while ordered by politics, can be infinitely transformed by the political. As such, PFPT enables geographers to take existing power relations seriously whilst also remaining radically open to alternatives (Blakey, 2021). This offers potential for bridging a frequent schism in political geographic focus, between, on the one hand, order, institutions, and power and, on the other, how these are lived and resisted. Compare, for instance, Foucauldian geography's focus on existing orders of power, and non-representational geographies' attunement to how life-as-lived exceeds our representational systems and the political potential therein (Barron, 2021). An enmeshed approach to PFPT offers possibilities for greater dialogue across these domains of political geographic thought without critiquing politics as inherently bad or seeing political events as inherently good (see Rancière, 2011b, ch. 13, p. 249). The point is to take politics seriously without taking it for granted - and herein lies PFPT's utility. An enmeshed PFPT approach encourages geographers to denaturalise, yet take seriously, those demarcations and conventions that we take for granted - whether party-politics, the delineations between different identities (Mouffe, 2014, pp. 17-29), or the imagined spatial boundaries of scales, cities or territories (Blakey, 2021; Davidson & Iveson, 2015; Kenis & Lievens, 2017). In this regard, keeping one eye on politics and the other on the political encourages deep critical reflexivity.

Finally, PFPT offers political geographies of science in particular (Lievens & Kenis, 2018), a way of navigating the challenges of 'post-truth' in ways that do not fall back on a reassertion of foundational claims over truth or objectivity. In the contemporary context of populist and post-truth politics, expectations for 'truth' have been eroded in both formal political discourse and forms of social resistance. Here, political geographers may find themselves in a bind; caught between extreme relativism and a reluctance to reassert the very foundations (over objective truth or rationality) that have taken great effort to contest. This might be seen most acutely in highly contested science-policy domains such as those on climate change or addressing COVID-19, where arguments against technocratic approaches to policy have suddenly found themselves adrift in a sea of misinformation and basing politics on science seems now like the lesser of two evils. In post-foundational approaches we find a hopeful way of navigating to this contemporary crisis over foundations, by looking agonistically at the way in which differences between groups are produced through expressions of the political that cannot be resolved rationally, in which both sides are necessarily open to contestation (Mouffe, 2005).

To conclude, we urge political geographers to explore PFPT as an expansionary means to think through difference and change. Doing so enables geographers to balance taking existing power relations seriously whilst remaining radically open to alternatives. However, focusing on the 'political' and 'politics' as two distinct spheres - and the consequent focus on political events - sells the approach short. If politics and the political are instead treated as enmeshed, then political events become a puncture point through which relations between temporality, space and the political, momentarily perhaps, break down. Understanding these moments requires that we look across space and time to understand how political change has (not) occurred. How might one space and time spark change in another? How did our present politics - which orders space and time - arise out of the political? We might ask, as Derickson and MacKinnon (2015) do, which spaces might facilitate political change? Or, how can existing capacities and institutional perspectives shine a light on contingency (Kullman, 2019)?

An 'enmeshed' view of politics and the political might challenge us to scout out the cracks and assumptions in our politics, even asking how we can work towards a politics that is for the political - creating relations of agonism or spaces open to the "breaking and entering" of political change (Rancière, 1999, p. 31). It will undoubtedly challenge us to explore how a politics "that accepts, even promotes, the absence of an ultimate ground" (Olsen, 2019: 994) might achieve legitimacy in

practice. Political geography's theoretical toolkit is well equipped for such tasks, and we hope that this intervention might inspire engagement in ways that could also advance PFPT.

3. Political difference in relation

3.1. (Derek Ruez)

Post-foundational political theorising offers provocative conceptualisations of the contingency of governing orders and facilitates a range of insights into possibilities for their radical transformation (Landau et al., 2021; Marchart, 2007). By distinguishing between the *politics-as-usual* of a particular order, and the contingent *political* disruptability of that order, these approaches seek to enact a conceptual break within theories of politics and often, from within that break, to understand and support efforts to disrupt unjust and undemocratic arrangements. Within geography, post-foundational theorisations articulating this distinction between politics and the political, or between politics and the police, have probably received the most explicit and sustained attention in a set of literatures and conceptual moves around the 'post-political', in which the disruptive and egalitarian potential of the political is understood to be increasingly submerged beneath the forces of technocratic or neoliberal consensus-making (e.g., Swyngedouw, 2011). While a broad understanding of the contingency of the political has long been an important aspect of much critical geographic scholarship, these recent mobilizations of the politics/political split in geography have been met with significant critique. In this piece, I highlight some of the key insights offered in these critiques, before showing how geographers who have continued to work with the political difference have sought to develop more relational and processual accounts, in which politics and the political can be seen as more enmeshed. While important and productive, I suggest the need to not only focus on the internal relations of the politics-political pairing but also on the geographies of knowledge production and the uneven world in which our theories and ourselves are all, differently, enmeshed.

To the extent that some may have imagined or implied a post-political age as an all-encompassing and ever-present diagnosis, it is vitally important that scholars have raised concerns about context, specificity, and difference across a plural and uneven world. However, rather than only a problematic or over-extended empirical diagnosis, many critics have raised important questions about the theorizations of politics underlying it. Mitchell et al. (2015: 2636), for example, argue that "the post-political hypothesis suffers from an overly limited definition of what counts as politics proper, as well as a failure to understand consent as fundamentally political". Such accounts point to the danger of an overly binary understanding of conflict and consensus and to the problems inherent to privileging a logic of disruption as singularly political - especially insofar as these lead to the conclusion that the political can only be found in isolated, exceptional events (Legacy et al., 2019; Leitner & Strunk, 2014) or in resistance that takes on specific forms, theoretically derived or prescribed in advance (Doucette, 2020; also see Hughes, 2020). While noting affinities with Rancière's thinking, Derickson (2017: 47) discusses the danger of a "fetishisation of a muscular kind of revolutionary rupture at the expense of appreciating the everyday forms of resistance". Further, in their emphasis on the event of disruption, some post-foundational engagements with the political difference risk reifying an otherwise undisrupted, static 'status quo' and, in so doing, seem to elide the insights of other, in many ways no less post-foundational, approaches that work precisely through highlighting instability, flux, and difference within prevailing orders. For example, consider Gibson-Graham's (2004) project of reading for difference against totalizing readings of capitalism or Simone's (2016: 184) account of 'the persistence of potentiality' in black urbanisms, where practices and relations that are excessive and illegible to dominant arrangements nevertheless endure in shaping how urban life unfolds. This reification risks, as well, reducing everyday actions and

experiences to simply the repetition of the same in ways that discount the hard won politicisation of the ordinary that has been central to feminist geographies and other critical approaches, where "small actions, challenges, and the experiments to which they give rise can lead to varied forms of contact and engagement that hold the potential to nudge established patterns of control and authority and to anticipate new political acts" (Staeheli et al., 2012, p. 630; also see Bayat, 2013).

These critiques incisively point toward ways that certain styles of engaging post-foundational political theorising can and do, at times, go awry. Nevertheless, many scholars continue engaging with these stands of political thinking, precisely because of their potential, as Dikeç (2017: 52) argues, for "expanding, rather than confining, spaces of politics", and they have done so in ways that are at least partially responsive to these critiques. Of particular importance are turns toward more processual and relational accounts. Here, uneven processes of politicisation and depoliticization come into view, and the relations between politics and the police are approached as specifically enmeshed or impure - and sometimes in more everyday registers (e.g., Bond et al., 2019; Karaliotas, 2021; Penny, 2020; Temenos, 2017). Instead of only rare interruptions of the political, one finds attention to political sequences and traditions of resistance (Swyngedouw, 2021), as well as work to 'de-dramatize' conceptions of disruption (Dikeç, 2015) and 'to advance an understanding that politics is actually all around' (Landau et al., 2021, p. 36). Such responses move in a productive direction, even as certain issues linger. Attention to political sequence, for example, can absolutely help to address the limits of an emphasis on exceptional, eventual moment. However, insofar as attention remains on a political sequence, in a singular and formally prescriptive sense, difficulties will remain in addressing a broader range of experiences that are less forms of organized resistance and instead more irregular, informal, or implicit acts of political assertion and engagement (Beveridge & Koch, 2019; Darling, 2014; Ehrkamp & Jacobsen, 2015; Hughes, 2022). Further, there is often an implicit assumption of - and sometimes explicit aspiration to - universality in invocations of the political difference that runs up against the decidedly Eurocentric cast of many of these conversations. This sidesteps many other traditions for defining, thinking and practicing politics, postfoundationally or otherwise, and it risks misrecognizing, and thus potentially reproducing, the colonial coordinates through which these particular forms of theorising politics developed (Banerjee, 2021).

Indeed, Hesse (2011) argues that the politics/the political split, while doing something important in its own context of enunciation, emerges largely within a more or less commensurable debate between 'Western' liberal and radical approaches. This is a conversation which has not been well equipped to understand - and has sometimes been actively hostile toward - the challenge to 'the Western political' offered in anti-colonial movements and Black radical traditions (Moten, 2018; Shulman, 2021). It is in this sense that a different kind of attention to relationality and enmeshment is needed - one that can effectively situate and understand postfoundational political theories, and their critical geographic mobilizations, in relation to the violently uneven landscape of geo-historical difference produced by racial capitalism, colonialism, and heteronormativity as they shape the world we seek to understand and the politics of knowledge production in which we are all differently enmeshed.

Glissant (1997), whose *Poetics of Relation* brings the difficult possibilities of relation into the foreground, offers one important avenue for just such an effort. Relation, for Glissant, becomes key both to understanding colonial rule and its ongoing instantiations and aftermaths and to thinking beyond its impoverished and impoverishing intellectual and political coordinates. Rather than merely a call for including a broader set of related thinkers and experiences in a more globally expansive theoretical project, Glissant's emphasis on the *opacity* inherent to relation can call forth more situated and careful forms of intellectual work - against the colonial transparency of theoretical mastery or empirical completeness. Glissant's (1997: 192) account of relation enacts and

exemplifies alternative ways of relating theory and that which is theorized, where “the thought of opacity distracts me from absolute truths whose guardian I might imagine myself to be” and where the situated nature of thought becomes the basis for its relation beyond itself. This work moves not from formalized ontological starting points, but rather, as Yountae (2014) notes, always from in ‘the middle’. That is to say, Glissant’s thought-in-relation emerges from ongoing experience in the world and, crucially, specifically from the ongoing experience of a black (non)world shaped by the unfathomable suffering of the middle passage and plantation political economies of the Americas and all that has reverberated from them, which is not at all reducible to that suffering, as McKittrick’s (2021: 31–34) writing on black livingness illustrates.

Movements to abolish prisons are one important site of just this kind of thought-in-relation. Abolitionists, such as Angela Davis (2005) and Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2022) and Mariame Kaba (2021), invite everyone to imagine, and so begin to enact (or to enact, and so begin to imagine), a world without prisons and cages. In a very real sense, then, abolitionist thought presupposes the contingency so central to the postfoundational theorising—that the world could be radically otherwise. There is also further shared ground in a tendency to highlight a distinction between actions affirming or disrupting an existing racial capitalist order. Nevertheless, there is much about abolitionist thought and practice that may not be well appreciated if approached with a dualistic theorization of politics and the political or through a top-down theoretical formalism. The projects of ‘non-reformist reforms’ pursued by many abolitionists and the practices of rehearsal and repair that tend to surface within abolitionist organizing do not readily lend themselves to a dualistic account of order and rupture linked to particular forms of struggle (Aslam, 2022; Berger et al., 2017; Gilmore, 2020). Indeed, Gilmore (2011) argues that “abolition is ... the context and content of struggle ... but it is not struggle’s form. To have form, we have to organize” (258). In this way, forms of political struggle emerge from a political praxis, rather than being ontologically worked out in advance. Further, abolitionist thought cannot really be understood outside its enmeshment within Black feminist-radical traditions and the critiques of racial capitalism, antiblackness, and racialized heteronormativity developed and debated there (Winston, 2021).

We all, necessarily and differently, live and think in relation to the colonial violences that produce the world in which we find ourselves unevenly situated. Reckoning with the specifics of this relation is an intellectual and political responsibility for each of us, and it would, as well, be an important task for a postfoundational political geography. Landau, Pohl, and Roskamm’s (2021: 30) important new edited collection on postfoundational geographies takes a useful step by acknowledging “how post-foundationalism might (implicitly) reproduce Eurocentrism” and suggesting that “the future development, enactment and theorization of post-foundational concepts can only flourish if we engage with and learn from non-Western epistemologies and ontologies” (30). Following from this opening, I want to emphasize that what is needed is not, primarily, a gesture of inclusion on the part of a post-foundational geographic project, whatever that has or will come to mean — but rather a recognition that elsewhere and otherwise is where much of the most exciting thinking is happening, and has been happening, whether or not it travels under a post-foundational label (King et al., 2020; Oswin, 2020).

This recognition *cannot* mean claiming this thinking for an already constituted post-foundational political geography - and here Roy’s (2020: 2) writing about ‘citationary alibis’ sounds an important warning, as does Hawthorne and Heitz’s (2018) important commentary on the limits of dialogue within a colonial discipline. Instead, it requires a willingness to learn and unlearn what is necessary to engage with this thinking. And it means risking the turbulence of encounters with other perspectives and experiences in ways that allow a project to change, or even be called into question (cf. Marchart, 2011b). Toward this end, Glissant (1997: 154) suggests a useful distinction between the ‘thought of the Other’ - an incorporative generosity toward alterity that does not

necessarily change one’s own position - and the ‘Other of thought’ where the encounter with another forces a change in one’s own thought. What exactly becomes of the political difference in the context of such encounters is difficult to know in advance - but my hope is that post-foundational geographies can be productively dislocated in the interest of taking forward what is best in its critique of governing orders and its insistence on the possibility of alternatives to those orders in ever more imaginative, incisive, and enmeshed ways.

4. The enmeshed character of politics and the political: Rethinking post-foundational tenets from an intersectional political geography

4.1. (Paula Medina García)

In this piece, I rethink PFPT’s central notion of the ‘political difference’ to move away from overly dichotomised interpretations, drawing from feminist, post-colonial and decolonial spatial theory. In doing so, I attempt to usher in a greater sensitivity to: i) the enmeshed character of politics and the political; ii) the multiple spatialities and temporalities of the political; and iii) an associative understanding of the political that goes beyond the idea of conflict as unavoidable. I argue that bridging intersectional feminist thought and post-foundational political geography opens new avenues to think through change and the political and exemplify this claim by analysing Spain’s 8th March (8M) Feminist Strike in 2018 – a 24-hour strike led by different feminist subjects at multiple scales.

As starting point, it is useful to consider how feminist, post-colonial and decolonial studies (cf. Barad, 2014; Fox Keller, 1995; Lander, 2000; Lugones, 2008; Rose, 1993) have problematised the epistemological tendency of setting boundaries that ‘cut into two’ (Barad, 2014, p. 168) antinomic realms (e.g. [time]-[space]; [mind]-[body]; [male]-[female]; [masculine]-[feminine]; [public]-[private]) that are defined in terms of their negativity (*one* and *not-one*), hierarchical and conflictual relation. This tendency is exactly what often appears in how scholars work with the political difference (political or not-political). How, then, can post-foundational political geography draw upon these critical epistemologies to move towards a more enmeshed approach to thinking with politics and the political?

As PFPT has already been introduced, I shall only briefly summarize what I consider to be its defining features. First, is the philosophical/theoretical notion of ‘political difference’, which defines two separated dimensions: politics (our social and institutional orders) and the political (the possibility for them to be changed). These correspond to the Heideggerian distinction between the ontic (what we can sense or measure) and the ontological (metaphysics) respectively (Landau et al., 2021; Marchart, 2007; Retamozo, 2009; Swyngedouw, 2021). Secondly, it asserts the impossibility of an absolute, final ground (an ontological rationale for how we order the social) and, paradoxically, the possibility of multiple foundations that need to be understood as always partial, contestable and contingent (Butler, 1992, p. 7). Thirdly, PFPT considers conflict, negativity and antagonism to be irresolvable and “a necessary component of all social events” (Landau et al., 2021, p. 22). Finally, there is an “evental nature of the political” (Marchart, 2007, p. 156), wherein political change is attached to radical breaks and moments of rupture (Landau et al., 2021; Marchart, 2007; Retamozo, 2009; Swyngedouw, 2021). PFPT is useful in that it enables scholars to question that which is taken for granted, but there are problematic by-products of the way the conceptual boundaries of the political difference are deployed, and it is to these that I now turn.

The conceptual divide between politics and the political has, for instance, mobilized the spatial trope of an “unbridgeable chasm” (Marchart, 2007, p. 8), a void between two dimensions that are seemingly mutually exclusive: [politics]-[the political], where the hyphen marks the so-called absence/void defining their separateness. This separating out of politics and the political echoes the *problematique*

feminist theorists have already faced regarding the ontology of intersectionality, namely the aporetic dilemma of separating categories (sex-gender, class, race, age, ability etc.) and regimes of power (heteropatriarchy, capitalism, racism, ageism, ableism, etc.) while highlighting their inseparability and mutually co-constitutive character (Brah & Phoenix, 2004; Gunnarsson, 2015; Rodó-de-Zárate, 2021; Yuval-Davis & Nira, 2006). Given this call to think through politics and the political as ‘enmeshed’, there is room for cross pollination between these two strands of thought.

An enmeshed understanding of politics and the political allows us to negotiate this separated-inseparable dilemma. This ‘enmeshed’ approach is not entirely new. On the contrary, this is often how PF thinkers have themselves pitched the politics/political distinction. However, political geographers have not always developed enmeshed approaches in practice, tending to focus on political events alone. Instead, a more processual account can follow the ungrounding and regrouping of orders over time (Landau et al., 2021; Marchart, 2007), better addressing how politics and the political are co-constitutive, intersecting (‘enmeshed’) dimensions in which the impossibility of a closed order is ever-present. This is a radical premise: no matter how stable the order of politics in which we live appears, there are always possibilities for ‘change’. But where and when does change take place? Is it possible to move beyond ‘the event’ of the political by addressing the temporalities and spatialities of politicisation processes? Finally, are negativity and conflict really the primary forces defining difference, social articulation, and socio-political change?

For instance, a focus on political events alone tends to locate and reduce change to discrete snapshots of time and space – neglecting any momentum or other underpinning spatial and temporal dynamics that have led to this seemingly singular disruptive event. In doing so, scholars risk neglecting the wider processes of articulation between politics and the political. In contrast, an enmeshed approach to politics and the political enables a recognition of the role of fleeting and often unnoticed changes (everyday ordinary practices often mistaken as mere routine), and disruptive, flagrant ones (more likely to be elevated and defined as ‘inaugural events’ such as what happened with the Feminist Strike in 2018). In doing so, there is also an opportunity to reassess the spaces of political change within these processes.

Considering this, I turn to the Feminist-inflected spatial and political thinking of the likes of Massey and Butler to address the questions aforementioned. Massey’s philosophy of politics of space/time embraces the idea that “space is not static, nor time spaceless [...], spatiality and temporality are different from each other but neither can be conceptualized as the absence of the other” (1993, p. 153). Thus, from a notion of space “rendered as [...] a necessary part, of the generation [...] of the new” (Massey, 1999, p. 10), politics and the political can be thought as part of a trialectic comprising sociality, spatiality and temporality (Soja, 1989). In fact, in capturing difference, openness, possibility, contingency and change, Massey already conveyed what one might consider to be a post-foundational definition of space as: the product of interrelations; the sphere of difference – the “*n*-dimensionality of things” –; and an ongoing process opened up to the future (Massey, 1993, 1999, 2005). This is a definition in which space and time articulate to transform our politics and social orders. Space/time thus becomes the medium through which scholars can consider the never-ending movement between event(s) of the political and the spatialities of politics.

The debate over what *really* constitutes a political event risks ironically erasing the broader and ongoing understanding of change that an enmeshed approach to politics and the political can bring. Politicisation must instead be thought as radically open in time/space and scholars should not pin down what is, is not, could, and could not be, political. Following Butler and Athanasiou (2013, p. 140), but adding the spatial coordinate to their statement, “to open the political to unprefigurable future significations is to always allow for a performative excess of social temporality [and spatiality] that resists being totalized and captured by the authoritative forces of signification”.

In offering this enmeshed approach to PFPT, I would also like to counter the tendency in post-foundational thinking “to reify conflict as the foundational characteristic of the political” (Featherstone, 2008, p. 6). In this sense, I contend that human relations, social and political processes of contingent creation cannot be reduced to opposition, negativity, antagonism and conflict. Feminist thinkers have troubled the exclusivity of conflict as the necessary force to provoke socio-political change, highlighting numerous other “ways in which multiple spatialities and temporalities of contestation have shaped articulations of the political” (Featherstone & Korf, 2012, p. 663). Consider, for instance: the affective turn; the reassertion of generative solidarities, forms of co-operation and mutual support; the conceptualisation of power as ‘power *with*’, collective agency and ‘performativity *in* plurality’ (Allen, 1999; Arendt, 2018; Butler & Athanasiou, 2013; Hooks, 1984; Massey, 1993), as well as the everyday practices that are at the core of feminist movements and repertoires of action.

In these regards, intersectional feminism has highlighted a plethora of ways in which we can better organize our politics against the backdrop of the political, such that change can occur (political or otherwise) without restoring to conflict. This is tempered by a post-foundational acknowledgement that there is no final ground because intersectionality recognises different subjects, experiences, positionalities and demands without reifying the conflictual dimension of the political change. In sum, bringing together intersectional feminism and an enmeshed approach to politics and the political points to the relational possibility of *both* conflict and solidarity as entangled generative forces.

To exemplify, I shall draw upon the example of the 8M Feminist Strike that *took place* in Spain in 2018 – a groundbreaking mobilisation which is irreducible to a single inaugural day or political ‘event’. On the contrary, it is best apprehended through an enmeshed approach to politics and the political, as it is part of a far-reaching process that goes before and beyond 8th March 2018 and Spain itself. In other words, the spatialities and temporalities of 8M cannot be understood without attending to the historical and transnational cartographies of the feminist movement – being particularly noteworthy the Latin American feminist movement *Ni Una Menos* in 2015 and the International Women’s Day demonstrations all around the world since 2016 (Cabezas & Brochner, 2019; García et al., 2018).

From women, to queer, workers, migrants and racialized subjects, multiple voices comprised this struggle, drawing upon a plethora of forms of agency, discourses and tactics. Sometimes these tactics were disputed within the movement itself. It was this that spurred political change in the way difference was negotiated within the movement. For example, whilst the *Comisión 8M* (the face of the organized action at national scale) set an agenda for the Feminist Strike, the movement was far greater than it alone, involving a radical plurality of voices. If the subject of feminism “is neither a ground nor a product, but the permanent possibility of a certain resignifying process” (Butler, 1992, p. 13), then the 8M in Spain showed that any kind of process of subjectivation and politicisation is also a site of encounter and a negotiation of different subjectivities, demands and experiences.

In 2018, *Afrofeminas*, a feminist and anti-racist organisation of afrodescendant women, demonstrated this when they refused to join the 8M Feminist Strike because “despite the so-so attempts of the Manifesto for being inclusive, actions speaks louder than words, the invisibilization of racialized women in this movement is practically absolute” (Afrofeminas, 2018, np). However, even though they did not follow the ‘main’ agenda, they were active political subjects – disputing the hegemony within the feminist movement itself.

From a temporal and spatial perspective, the 8M was irreducible to a singular event or place as the movement unfolded through a range of polymorphic and spatially scattered actions (demonstrations, street and square occupations, stoppage of caring at home, absence of women in workplaces, activism in digital spaces etc.). Thereby, the 8M proved to have a multi-scalar spatial character (by involving the body, the home, the city, the State and the transnational) and an open temporality (if we

think about the resonances of those practices and the continuity of much of them in our ordinary life). In sum, by calling to stop waged work, education, care and consumption, this feminist mobilisation demonstrated the multilayered effects of these actions within productive and reproductive work, and public and private spheres, across the world.

Taking a more processual approach to this example of the 8M serves to decentre ‘the event’ and evidence the enmeshed character of politics and the political. Such an approach to PFPT emphasizes the process of subjectivation, the possibilities of collective and plural agency, and the multiple temporalities and spatialities invoked. It not only shows how a feminist politics that is for the political is possible, but it also addresses the potential of intersectionality as a way to recognise difference and articulate plurality (*n*-demands) to generate an expansionary socio-political change. Ultimately, bringing post-foundationalism and feminism together is, above all, a way to address the intersectional and enmeshed character of the separated and the inseparable, time and space, politics and the political.

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