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Resist like a plant! On the Vegetal Life of Political Movements

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RESIST LIKE A PLANT! ON THE VEGETABLE LIFE OF POLITICAL MOVEMENTS

Abstract

This brief article is an initial attempt at conceptualizing the idea of political movement not on the basis of the traditional animal model but, rather, following the lessons drawn from vegetal life. I argue that the spatial politics of the Occupy movement largely conforms to the unique ontology of plants and point toward the possibility of a plant-human republic emerging from it.

According to an old dialectical adage, it is futile to try to comprehend the present as present; once understanding has grasped what is going on, its object gets immediately relegated to the re-presented past, affording us but a glimpse, as it were, through a rear-view mirror of history. I must thus confess, in these initial lines, to a temptation (which is, no doubt, conservative and Hegelian) to withhold for the time being a philosophical commentary of events that are not only recent and fresh but are still under way, to suspend judgment of a political movement or movements still breathing with infinite possibilities, still lacking as much as a commonly agreed upon name, let alone a coherent program. While any interpretation must veer on the side of

determinacy and delimitation, discarding countless plausible alternatives to its preferred take on whatever is interpreted, the side effects of such unavoidable hermeneutical violence are much more pernicious when it runs the risk of interfering with the internal unfolding of an ongoing, hugely promising, and exponentially growing political action. But is it even assured, at this point, that what is going on under the most diverse names—the Occupy protests, or the 99% movement; the movements of the *indignados* (the outraged) or the *acampadas* (camp-city) protests in Spain; *Geração à Rasca* (the Desperate Generation) movement in Portugal, to mention but a few examples I am familiar with first-hand—is both *political* and an *action*? And, more broadly, what if the very meaning and possibility of politics and collective action are at stake in these and related collective phenomena today?

This—at least, in my view—is the only sound counter-argument to the conservative desire rather not to interpret actuality: instead of merely understanding events as objects and, hence, relegating them to the past, it behooves philosophers to assist those directly involved in them to achieve a more vibrant self-understanding, a self-interpretation enhancing the possibility of a more just future. Through this route, philosophy will finally abandon the gloom-filled historical dusk when the owl of Minerva spreads its wings, without, at the same time, imposing decontextualized and purportedly ahistorical normative constraints on whoever cares to listen to philosophical ramblings. All we can attempt to do is amplify, bring into sharper relief, and sometimes problematize the meanings of what is already stated or done by the social actors themselves, that is to say, assist them in the critical project of self-interpretation. Philosophy, then, to borrow the expression of the Portuguese seventeenth-century Jesuit preacher António Vieira, as a “history of the future.”

At the same time, the popular protests of 2011 are also a part of the recent political history, including the civil disobedience and civil rights movements of the 1960s. The occupations of various public and institutional spaces today have an air of embodied citations or enacted references back to that promising political moment, for which many feel an intense nostalgia. Now, like then, the rhetoric of non-violence is prevalent. Camping in public parks and on city squares can hardly evoke images of rioting or looting; sitting on the ground in a human chain with interlocked limbs surely does not convey the intention to engage in a physical confrontation with the police. What is most subversive about the recent protests, though, is not political action conventionally understood but a kind of lingering, being in a place on an ongoing basis, bodily occupying it, being physically there. Existence in its mere presence undergoes a thorough politicization. Freedom of expression and freedom of assembly merge into one: physical presence (or, rather, co-presence) expresses, without representing anything, in the most embodied sense of expression imaginable, the demand for a different world-order.

By and large, the politics of the Occupy movement is the politics of space, not of time, and it extends its reach by replicating itself in different locales around the world, not by formalizing its program in an effort to attain a stable temporal identity. While it continues to resort to the traditional tactics of marches, support for labor unions on picket lines, and demonstrations, the core of the Occupy movement is made of the determination to dwell in the uninhabitable, to inhabit a previously depersonalized, depopulated, abandoned, but highly symbolic and central place in the public sphere. Its staying power is bound to the protesters’ staying in their chosen gathering place, their defiant perseverance in a locale.¹

The politics of space, privileging the sedentary component of bodies largely exposed to the elements (tents are a poor protection from rain and cold) and gaining increasing visibility thanks to this exposure, is, I would argue, one we have learned from vegetal life. Standing for non-violence *par excellence*, the plant has been identified in the history of Western thought with a living icon of peace, a non-oppositional being, wholly included in the place wherein it grows, to the point of merging with the milieu. As Hegel notes in his *Philosophy of Nature*, unlike an animal, who opposes itself to its place, insofar as it is able to dislocate and to find itself elsewhere, the plant is shackled to its environment, which is not at all “other” to it. The plant is all about a visible extension without interiority (Hegel 2004: 308), a phenomenal, utterly exposed, self-referential surface, a living sign of itself. When environmental activists chain themselves to trees that are about to be felled, they replicate, to some extent, the mode of being of these vegetal beings: confined to a place, bodily manifesting their bond... And when protesters pitch tents in parks or on city squares, they reinvent the strange modern rootedness in the uprooted world of the metropolis, existentially signifying their discontent by merely being there.

A common-sense objection to this thesis will accentuate the unsurpassable limits to the mimetic capacity of human beings, the capacity arguably definitive of their very humanness. After all, dissimilar to plants, we are able to choose our place and, subsequently, to dwell by making the place our own, which is something the Occupy protesters have done in a self-conscious and highly creative fashion. The plant’s relation to its milieu is, precisely, non-appropriative; it does not possess its world, even though it may indirectly effect certain changes in its environment. Humans cannot literally become plants. Purely vegetal beings do not protest, do not set themselves against anything, do not negate—symbolically or otherwise—what is. But if we act *as though* we were them, following a useful theoretical and practical fiction grounded in the vegetal heritage of the human, we would need to follow a non-possessive, non-appropriative way of being, resonating, at once, with the conclusions of botany and with the image of post-metaphysical ethical subjectivity. We would, consequently, repudiate the ideal of sovereign and decisive action, directed by a rational, conscious or self-conscious, individual or collective subject and, instead, nurture the horizontally and an-archically growing grassroots that crop up wherever protest tents are pitched in the shadow of skyscrapers.

Levinas’s “passivity more passive than all passivity” (1996: 121) is a distant echo of what Hegel calls the “powerlessness,” *Ohnmacht*, of plants (1979: 420) that in their being are propelled to the hither side of ontology and its basic economy of violence, where to be is already to dispossess others, to take away their place. The *flower power* of the sixties thrived on a juxtaposition of peaceful protests and armed police—flowers on (or in) the one hand and guns on (or in) the other. The “power” of non-violence was meant to overwhelm the brute military force of repression, not the least by modeling the protesters’ mode of being on that of the plants themselves.² And yet, the cutting of the flower, the disruption of its organic connection to the soil, was not considered to be violent, perhaps because it paled in comparison to the violence of the war, against which proponents of *flower power* rallied, and that of the riot police who confronted them. Impotent to resist its culling, the flower could be easily sacrificed to the political cause, so as to be reborn in the realm of Spirit, endowing those who utilized it as a symbol with its peculiar brand of powerless power. Residual violence against non-human beings was ineliminable.

A similar paradox is unfolding before our eyes today. Occupation, as a rhetorical trope and a concrete strategy, already connotes a significant degree of violence, which is either ontological or purely political, either built into existence itself imperialistically asserting its own right to a place, which is then denied to the other, or borrowed from the very phenomena the protesters find so objectionable: military occupations, colonial projects, and so forth. For Levinas, who implicitly follows Nietzsche's idea that plants are the vegetal expressions of the will-to-power, ontological violence is inseparable from their growth, asserting, most unethically and indifferently, their "place under the sun." As the French philosopher asks in *Difficult Freedom*, "What is an individual, a solitary individual, if not a tree that grows without regard for everything it suppresses and breaks, grabbing all the nourishment, air and sun, a being that is fully justified in its nature and its being? What is an individual if not a usurper?" (1997: 100) But is the "usurpation" of resources by a tree equivalent, in its magnitude, to their appropriation by the avatars of possessive individuality? The tree actually gives back much more than it takes, in that it converts carbon dioxide into oxygen, not to mention the fact that it does not lay claim to the non-resource infinitely available to all, namely the sunlight on which it depends. In much the same fashion, the occupations of public spaces by protesters are not of one piece with the arrogation of wealth and resources by the richest one percent of the population. Plants do not occupy anything even if they cover vast extensions of the planet's surface; the generous compensation for their ontological violence (if any) is the gift of pure air, of a more fertile soil, of life itself they bestow upon other creatures. Participants in the Occupy movement also do not occupy anything; their being in a given locale is intended to reconstitute the possibility of dwelling to others, while the tents unequivocally bespeak their displacement, an irrecusable refugee status.

Analogous to plants, the protesters' being-in-a-place is far from what Levinas would call "the imperialism of the same," for it is tantamount to the irruption of otherness from the fissured, if not altogether broken, hegemony of neoliberalism. Regardless of the numerical majority of vegetal beings among those living on the planet and regardless of the protesters' performative self-identification with "the 99%" who get more impoverished by the day, both represent instances of the subaltern, exploited without raising their voice against their oppression. Admittedly, plants neither speak, nor shriek, nor squeal, nor screech, nor cry out in pain when they are chopped down. But this absolute silence is not at all symptomatic of the absence of suffering; even if vegetal beings do not have a nervous system, they are prone to distress, expressed at the biochemical level, due to drought, extreme cold, or, in some cases, the presence of a predator in their environment. Subjected to violence in absolute, unbreakable silence, they are absolutely subaltern, and neither human nor animal liberation can come to pass without the liberation of plants that would dispense to them their ownmost ontological possibilities.

Human beings, on the contrary, are capable of organizing, speaking out against, and protesting economic and political injustices. But when they resist on the basis of radical passivity (an attitude in excess of the opposition between the active and the passive compartments), when they are so motivated that every expression of their life, such as the physical position of their bodies and the place they inhabit, attains a political character, they do not limit "politics" and "action" to a conscious collective orientation and sovereign decision-making. This is not to say that the protests are somehow irrational. Quite the opposite is the case: they are much more reasonable

than the purported rationality of the deranged political-economic system they resist, even as they implicitly question the hierarchy of the faculties and the anthropocentric view of politics as such.

The modern idea of a political *movement* has already glimpsed the kind of dynamic action that overflows the rigid confines of a conscious organization, but it has done so with reference to animal metaphors, reducing movement to mobility, or locomotion. Inspired by the organismic model of an animal, it has, in crucial moments of the twentieth century, lapsed into fascism, with its goal to recreate this living totality at the political level. And it has all but forgotten the lessons of Aristotelian philosophy, where movement refers not only to locomotion but also to growth, decay, and change of state (*De Anima* 406a, 14-17). Plants obviously partake of these capacities and it is high time for political movements to become attuned to a more ample definition of “movement,” to learn from plants much more than the rhetoric of the “grassroots” would allow, to discover what it takes to grow, to decay, and to be plastic enough to metamorphose into a different state. And this is not even to mention externally induced movement, by an element such as the wind disturbing branches of the tree or stalks of rye, the movement most readily associated with plants. The zoo-centric bias of philosophy must give way to a wholly de-centered phytological approach, for a human being is, in the first instance, not a political animal, as Aristotle has it, but a political plant, not ζῷον πολιτικόν but φυτὸν πολιτικόν.

The non-violent resistance tactics of the Occupy movement are a step in the right direction, if the movement’s rigorously an-archic, highly mobile, and, at the same time, sedentary structure is a trustworthy indication. It resonates with Ulrich Beck’s recent enunciation of his ideal of European citizens in mixed vegetal-animal terms: at once having roots and wings.³ From the standpoint of the political authorities, however, there is no such thing as a non-violent protest because any sustained contestation of the status quo immediately takes the form of a threat to the hegemonic order, already weakened by the ongoing global crisis. In this respect, it is essential to follow the finer divisions within the general economy of violence, to distinguish between acts of institutionalized theft, such as the bailouts of financial institutions that have left countless people destitute thanks to the draconian austerity measures compensating for these expenditures, close range pepper spraying of protesters, and ontological violence coextensive with mere being. Politics necessarily entails pitting violence against violence, especially where the standoff is asymmetrical and, perhaps, foredoomed. When the legitimacy of a regime is put in question by the sheer bodily presence of the protesters who claim the right to occupy the regime’s most emblematic places, existential-ontological violence without power, or at least, without reliance on physical force, opposes itself to the violence inherent in the self-perpetuation of unjust institutions. A “peaceful protest” is nothing but an oxymoron, as the cut flowers, too, silently testify.

Despite their philosophical and poetic coding as figures of pure innocence and non-oppositionality, plants often protect themselves by releasing toxic or venomous substances, by prickling, or by other means. Still, their “self-defense” is unique, because they have no intimate inner self to defend, at least no self that would emerge in opposition to the other. To resist like a plant is not to protest for the sake of a ground to be gained; the program of a limited re-distribution of wealth from the richest one percent to the rest (a minor adjustment, to which many billionaires have, actually, consented by signing petitions for an increased taxation of their incomes) is pointless if it leaves the principle of appropriation intact. Just as the protests flourish

from the sense of radical dispossession prompting its participants to leave their homes, those embodiments of interiority and privacy, so the aspirations of the movement would come to fruition only in the total negation of private property and of the possessive model of subjectivity associated with it. Communism, inconceivable in the absence of this radical demand, is vegetal in its rejection of the appropriative model of subjectivity, whose basic unit is an individual separated from all others and constituted around a coherent core—the dimension of inner psychic depth and the capacity to own property essential to personhood.

What would it mean to occupy public space without appropriating it? To manifest a multiplicity of bodies in a locale without asserting a sovereign right over it? Would it not imply being in a place without laying claim to it, being there for others?

In response to these questions, let us attempt to sketch the outlines of the correlation between various types of movement typical of vegetal beings and the emergent political movements. I have already mentioned the an-archic component of the Occupy movement, which seems to reinvent the political form on the basis of vegetal ontology. As I argue in *Plant-Thinking*,⁴ each plant in its singularity is a collective being, a loose and disorganized assemblage, and, hence, a community of plants that do not comprise a unified whole, do not constitute either an individual or an organism. In vegetal beings, life is de-centered—not, as some might think, concentrated in the vital “organ,” the root, but dispersed and disseminated throughout the body of plant communities. The same applies to the recent protests devoid of a unified central structure, a leader, or a global organization. The new political movements are vegetal, considering that they are acephalic, headless, and, therefore, obdurately an-archic, lacking an *arkhē*, an organizing principle or origin. They grow by “superfluous” additions or reiterations from this enabling lack. Growth as such is always dispersed, from the beginning it does not have; to move in tune with it, following its peculiar rhythms is to accept this dispersion.

The new protest movements proliferate in much the same fashion, by vegetal iteration, not by reproducing an ideal standard in multiple empirical copies. It is, in fact, difficult to say what the “original,” incipient moment for the Occupy movement has been: Occupy Wall Street, or the Spanish *acampadas*? The events of Tahrir Square in Cairo, the Ukrainian *Maidan* encampments, or the student occupations of American university campuses in the 1960s? The displacement of the origin, its dissemination and decimation, is in touch with the logic of plant life, where the seed is not the first cause but an infinitely deferred point of recommencement, the chance of a new beginning.

It is this absence of an essential and essentially simple origin that frees today’s political movements for experiments in self-reinvention, whence the most unlikely strategic alliances emerge. More importantly, what they seem to have learned from plants is how to move by metamorphosis, or change of state. Unlike animal *Gestalt*, vegetal form is not pre-given in the embryonic state; it shifts and changes, sometimes dramatically, as the growing plant extends its surface, capturing solar energy. Now, the form of the protest movement, too, is far from being predetermined by the movement’s beginnings—themselves obscure and irreducible to a single point in space and time—as its growth often branches off in surprising directions. In capturing political energy, it avoids the animal-like hoarding of its power in the recesses of the organism and, instead, channels this energy toward solutions of the most urgent social problems, such as

homelessness. (The occupations of vacant buildings in Seattle, Boston, and Atlanta are the case in point here.) There is no telling where such immediate externalization would lead in the long or, even, in the short run. One thing is certain, however: no movement can hope to maintain its vitality, after having abdicated the power of metamorphosis, for instance, by turning itself into a political party. In itself, this transformation spells out an extreme possibility of metamorphosis: a change that puts an end to any further changes of state. If it is to preserve itself *qua* movement, the loose network of the Occupy protests must not keep itself intact, must fight against the temptation to remain in its current form, rendered perfectible in the animal manner by inner differentiation and specialization of functions within an organismic totality. On the contrary, and perhaps paradoxically, in order to keep itself, a movement must lose itself and re-compose itself each time anew, in a completely different, unrecognizable form. The term for this meta-metamorphosis is “plasticity.”

Plasticity, arguably much more pronounced in plants than in animals (cf. Hallé 2002), involves, at the political level, the capacity for adaptation that has the potential to withstand the most repressive police actions, evictions, and uprootings: to be, at the same time, pliable and rigid, like an ivy disturbed by gusts of wind: to know how to hold one’s ground without miming the immobility of a rock. The silent seated student protest, to which the Chancellor of the University of California, Davis was treated on her “walk of shame,” was a plastic, vegetal reinvention (better yet, a reiteration) of the movement broken up by the campus police a few days earlier. It stood for the exact inversion of the experience *Émile* Cioran described in *De l’Inconvénient d’Être Né*: “To walk in a forest between two rows of ferns transformed by the autumn, that is triumph. What is that next to approbation and ovation?” (211) And it facilitated the uprooted group’s self-reconfiguration, much like a stem cutting that, planted in soil, recovers the cellular differentiation at both extremes, shooting new roots and buds. Hence, the slogan, following the logic of plant life that regenerates thanks to pruning: “Occupy will never die; Evict us, we multiply!”

The subtle vegetal movement of decay holds yet another promise for contemporary political practices. It is no secret that the same plant can wither and flourish at the same time, die in parts and continue to live in other parts, so that life and death literally get dispersed on its body. It can accomplish this feat thanks to the fact that it is not an organism, obeying the logic of an internally differentiated living whole, but a loose assemblage of quasi-independent members. An an-archic political movement repeats the achievement of the plant, in that it, too, may have parts that decay while others thrive, rendering the absolute terms of “victory” and “defeat” irrelevant. This is why the ongoing evictions of the Occupy camps are not really effective: lacking a single vital center—the heart or the head—and thus diverging from the model of an animal-like organism, this political movement can afford to lose intensity in some of its branches without compromising its vitality. In defiance of formal logic and the principle of non-contradiction, it can die and live at the same time.

Given the rapprochement of the current political events and plant ontology, it would not be far-fetched to think of the Occupy movement as the possible prolegomenon to a liberation that would exceed its human scope, experimenting, among other things, with a respectful approach to plants and permitting us to imagine the outlines of what I would like to term “a vegetal-human republic,” the stuff out of which philosophy as the history of the future is made. It is noteworthy

that on November 8, 2011, Occupy Wall Street hosted “Guerrilla Gardening,” a group whose goal it is to occupy “ill-used land to support the communities and ecosystems to which that land rightfully belongs.”⁵ As this short description makes obvious, Guerrilla Gardening does not subscribe to a total instrumentalization of plants in the name of subsistence agriculture and self-sufficiency. It aims, instead, to reconstitute to the vegetal members of ecosystems, as much as to human communities, their right to exist, to grow, and to flourish. Skeptics will doubt the possibility of a peaceful coexistence there where some members of an ecosystem devour the others. But, for those who interpret existence existentially, in terms of its possibilities and processes rather than objective outcomes, the difference in attitude will make all the difference. When human beings grow *along with* plants, accompany their growth, acknowledge and respect their ontological possibilities (including but not limited to the possibility of becoming a source of nourishment) and rights, then we no longer consume vegetal beings as though they were nothing but storehouses of caloric energy, sources of biofuel or heating, fabrics not yet woven, construction materials not yet chopped down, blank supports for writing and printing... To resist like plants, on a common front, which does not amount to a confrontation, we would need to learn from them, to be and to live with them, to let something of them flourish in us.

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Endnotes

¹ Consider, for instance, the following telling statement: “For our movement to grow we need new, outdoor space.” <http://occupywallst.org/article/ows-hunger-strike-new-outdoor-occupation/> Or, as an Occupy DC protester, Michael Patterson, put it: “We are not just going to march for two or three hours.”

We are here to stay 'cause the system needs to change."

http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/occupy-dc-protesters-arrested-in-standoff-over-makeshift-shelter-at-mcpherson-sq/2011/12/04/gIQAEld9TO_story_1.html

² The same is true for Portugal's 1974 "Carnation Revolution," when these red flowers were placed inside the barrels of guns to symbolize a peaceful end of the dictatorship, and, for Georgia's 2003 "Rose Revolution," among others. I thank Patricia Vieira for this reference.

³ Ulrich Beck offered this formulation at a public lecture "What Europe do We Want?" organized by Ikerbasque (Basque Foundation for Science) in Bilbao on December 1, 2011.

⁴ *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* is forthcoming from Columbia University Press in 2012.

⁵ Cf. <http://occupywallst.org/article/planting-real-seeds-change-guerrilla-gardening-and/> and <http://www.guerrillagardening.org/>