



COUNTERFUTURES

Left thought & practice Aotearoa

Ideas, Politics, Movements

Interview with Simon Tormey

SIMON TORMEY IS a political theorist in the School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Sydney. He has authored numerous books, including *Ágnes Heller: Socialism, Autonomy and the Postmodern*, *Anti-Capitalism*, and *Key Thinkers from Critical Theory to Post-Marxism*.¹ And he has published articles in journals such as *Radical Philosophy*, *Thesis Eleven*, *The Journal of Political Ideologies*, *Political Studies*, and *Historical Materialism*.

Counterfutures

*Professor Tormey, can you tell us briefly about your background?
What led you to turn to political activism and theoretical enquiry?
Did one lead to the other?*

Simon Tormey

My background is I think important in understanding my work. I grew up as the child of an immigrant single mother, and for most of my childhood we lived in a council flat at the back of Kings Cross station in London, which is a pretty rough neighbourhood. But I wasn't 'working class' either – my mother was an artist and we always had plenty of interesting people around. It was just that we had no money, no roots, no identity with anyone or anything. But I think this kind of nomadic, lumpen-intelligentsia childhood meant that I always had a kind of scepticism towards people in power that is a defining characteristic of these kinds of communities. 'Politics' was something that happened on telly. It was middle class, and involved posh people talking about all the great things they were going to do for us 'the People'. I remember being very irritated at an early age at things like the Queen's Christmas Broadcast, which back in the 1970s was quite popular. I don't have a strong sense of class myself, but I do have a strong sense that those who would represent or speak for others tend to be the educated, the well off, and those who have had privilege poured upon them. I was the first in my family to attend university, and that university was pretty modest. But it was also a good experience, and the sheer freedom from having to scrape a living was one of the things that meant that I very much enjoyed my time at university and wanted to extend it. I seem to have become determined never to leave the University. Out there was 'work'; inside was ideas, books, interesting lectures.

I don't really think of myself as a political activist, or if I am to be thought of as an activist it would be in ways that perhaps a culture like France would understand. This is to say that I tend to engage through observation and writing about what

1 Simon Tormey, *Ágnes Heller*, Manchester 2001; *Key Thinkers from Critical Theory to Post-Marxism*, 2006; *Anti-Capitalism*, Oxford 2013.

I see, as opposed to spending a lot of time on marches, protests or demonstrations which in the Anglo-Saxon world tends to be the mark of 'the political activist'. The exception to that was trade union activity which I engaged with whilst in UK universities. I was also briefly a member of the Labor Party in the early 1980s, but resigned pretty quickly thereafter due to the extremely dysfunctional nature of that organisation. Being a student in South Wales during the miners' strike I was very susceptible to the critique of the line of Neil Kinnock and the Labour Party leadership which clearly alienated many of the Labour Party's proudest supporters and followers. But then a very brief dalliance with the Trotskyite Militant Tendency convinced me that political parties were not really for me at all, and that I had better just get my head down in terms of observing, watching and writing about politics. If 'doing politics' meant sitting around all day in committees, or trying to sell a paper no one wanted to read, then I would be better off reading and writing about politics at my own pace.

Where I suppose I get my reputation as having something to say to political activists is from *Anti-capitalism* written in the wake of the Seattle protests, and the wave of 'anti-systemic' protests it inspired. But equally important were phenomena such as the emergence of the Zapatistas, the World Social Forum, and generally a wave of activist struggles that sought to contest global politics. That book led to a lot of invitations to address activist audiences, which I've always very much enjoyed. This is not to say that I don't enjoy academic audiences as well, it is just that the dynamic is always quite different when you're talking with activists than when you're talking in an academic seminar. I think the thing for me is that engaging with activists, talking to activists, is really learning as far as I'm concerned – as opposed to defending say a thesis or paper.

One of the key issues that I have sought to write about in the last decade or so is the ways in which activism is changing, the nature of the organisations that people are seeking to set up, and the kinds of motivations that underpinned those who put themselves in harm's way. I have got a great deal of admiration for political activists and I think this probably comes through in my texts, which in turn means that I tend to get read by activists and this too helps the dissemination and discussion. Engaging

closely with activists means that this informs your own theoretical position, and vice versa. I think that social movement studies and political theory can often be too abstracted from the empirical world in which activism takes place, and so it's been one of the areas where I think I have been able to make a contribution. It's also for this reason that I feel a great deal of affinity with the work of writers like James Scott, who combines a strong theoretically driven approach with ethnography. I can't claim anything like his erudition or influence, but I like his style and approach.

CF

You've written books on totalitarianism, anti-capitalism, critical theory, Ágnes Heller, and the crisis of democracy. Can you talk a little about the unifying themes of these works, and the ways they connect with your theoretical and political orientations?

ST

You're right to point out that I have got quite eclectic interests, and that some explanation as to how they link together is certainly in order. I think the overarching theme is what we might call *the transformative power of politics*. The issue that really grabbed me as a student was the way in which through mobilising people behind an idea or an ideology the world could be transformed. So my very first work on the concept of totalitarianism was framed in these terms. I wanted to get at the nature of radical politics, both of the right and also of the left. How does it work? What makes transformation such an exciting and also terrifying prospect?

It was this latter question that led me to admire greatly the work of Central and East European intellectuals who were subjected to the full force of transformative politics in the wake of the communist takeover of power in that region. I was gripped by the writings of Václav Havel, Leszek Kołakowski, and of course Ágnes Heller about whom I wrote my second book. What informs their writings is very much a fear of the transformative power of politics, and the sense in which those with power can do unspeakable things

in the name of an abstract ideology. However, it was also partly in reaction to the often bleak scepticism or pessimism of such writers that in a sense the global events of 1999 became an important corrective for me and one that I wished to examine further. Is transformative politics always and inevitably a bad politics, or can we think of transformation along more positive lines, that is along lines that doesn't instantly form itself into something negative, threatening, violent?

More recently, I was inspired by 15M in Spain to examine once again this question of the relationship between politics and transformation. The particular slogan that caught my eye in this case was *Real Democracia Ya - Real Democracy Now*. If we don't have the democracy that we want or need, what is it that we should be doing in order to transform it, and to make democracy something authentic or something that speaks to our deeper needs and desires? And this is what led to the book about the crisis of representative politics. Representation is clearly at one level a kind of containment of the excess of politics, of emotion, of participation, and possibility. Early theorists of representation like JS Mill had this very much in mind when they came to make a case for representative politics. So for those of us interested in transformative politics, and in that democratic excess, a *confrontation with* representation and its practices in the contemporary political arena is almost inevitable.

So I think all of these different themes that you mention in your question can be unified, but it's a very elliptical form of unification if I can put it that way. I think my interests map quite closely onto the excessive power of politics, and I have always been interested in whether politics has to have that character and, if it does, whether it can be captured or used for the greater good as opposed to the greater ill. So for me politics has this curious Ying and Yang quality to it, lightness and darkness, force, power but also possibility.

CF

We are interested in your reading of newer Left movements, such as alternative-globalization and Occupy. Do you think these movements are signals of an emerging new global Left? If something

like this is in formation, what are its distinguishing and notable characteristics?

ST

Yes, I spend a lot of time looking at what you call the newer left movements (I quite like that phrase!). And one of the features that really caught my eye when I was looking at them in detail for the anti-capitalism book was the sense that they were seeking to *resist* something, as opposed to *build* something. So this is very much in contrast with the classical movements that we see emerging over the course of the 19th and early 20th centuries which got their impetus and energy from the desire to create a new world – as opposed to resisting the existing one. From this point of view I do think that Jean-François Lyotard captured something important when he used the phrase ‘the exhaustion of metanarratives’ to describe the emerging condition. What I like less is the sense in which all this became annexed to yet another ideology, post-modernism, which then became emblematic of a form of resignation and indeed capitulation of the kind that led the way to the hegemony of the neoconservatives.

I take my cue from the analysis of theorists of reflexive modernity such as Ulrich Beck and Zygmunt Bauman to emphasise the growing sense of risk, hazard and danger underpinning the contemporary imaginary. From this point of view many of the emerging movements such as environmentalism are inspired less by the thought of an alternative world, but more by the thought of trying to save the world that we already have. And many of the movements that have emerged over the past 20 or so years have this kind of defensive quality. They seek to defend welfare rights, democracy, indigenous rights, the environment, the standard of living, civilised values, and so on and so forth. In addition many of these movements are haunted by the spectre of the failure of the traditional left, whether it be in the form of communism, or more utopian visions of socialism which people used to be very attached to in the interwar period. There’s a real sense now of politics having to evolve along quite a different axiom from the traditional model. And the reason for that is as much to do with organisational form as it is to do with the perils of ideology of the kind articulated by Lyotard. We have turned a corner as far as the possibility of

constructing a left on what might be termed a vertical basis. We no longer have faith in an overarching ideology, we are sceptical about the leaders and would-be leaders. We no longer seek to implement a program created elsewhere. So something that we used to associate with 'horizontals' is actually now a description of political mobilisation and participation *tout court* it seems to me. Not only are we sceptical about metanarratives, we are also sceptical about authority, hierarchy, and the kind of privileged insight that the term 'intellectual' tries to encapsulate. We no longer believe in intellectuals, and those with special insight. Or if we do then that marks out as in some sense 'fundamentalists'. So what does this mean for the left?

If it is still meaningful to talk about the left as some sort of identifiable identity or property, then it is in terms of holding certain value positions we associate with progressive movements and beliefs. The new terrain is about values, the value of equality, freedom, of human rights, of the capacity to exercise some power over lives becoming ensnared by capitalism. How all those values express themselves seems to me to be a very open question, able to be articulated in all sorts of different ways depending on the context and the particular challenges that confront those who uphold them. The other game changer I think as far as the evolution of political contestation is concerned is the technological means with which people are able to communicate with each other. So another driver of a different kind of politics is our ability to find others, join with others, far more easily than used to be the case before the advent of tools like Twitter or Facebook.

All this offers the prospect of a different kind of 'left' emerging. What we are now interested in exploring is the greatly increased capacity of activists to coalesce, to come together, to protest; but we do so in almost inevitably evanescent ways. It's this evanescence which I find so interesting about today's social movements. 15M in Spain, which I have spent a lot of time discussing with Spanish activists, is an important example of the kind of politics and I think we will see a great deal more of it in the years ahead. This is a kind of eruption-event that brings together people with all kinds of different convictions who happened to share a particular instinct at a particular moment in time. Because of the power of being able to bring them together these tools open

new possibilities, and new horizons appear in a manner which was previously impossible. Confronted with the force of evanescence many activists have now paradoxically adopted a kind of post-political party as a mechanism to advance their aims. So 15M turns into 24M (the Municipal elections in Spain 2015) – which in turn returns a raft of ‘post-politicians’ to power in Barcelona, Madrid and elsewhere. So whereas about three years ago I would have been strongly predicting the death of the political party due to the lack of identity or the sense of common purpose or interest, now that scenario has changed remarkably. In Spain 500 new parties have emerged since 15M... What are they doing? What do they want? Some of them want more independence for particular regions or towns. Some of them are focused on the corruption of elites. Others have quite fantastical plans for environmental sustainability, often transforming a particular town through the extension of cycling, walking, and so on. But what the new parties show is the possibility of transforming evanescent energies into quasi-solid structures, but of a new-old type: pop up parties that offer ‘post-representative’ movement participation.

So this is something that I’ve looked at a lot in my recent work, and in particular the book that came out last year, *The End of Representative Politics*.² I’m very interested in how these new tools transform the outlook and prospects for the left, for citizens wanting to connect with others, and in connecting with others to transform the kinds of political possibility that they see in front of themselves. Certainly new things that we see emerging in citizen activism are around what we have been calling ‘connective politics’. This is a kind of overturning of asymmetric, hierarchical styles of politics in favour of a politics of networks, of participation, of real engagement to push back the elites who otherwise have enjoyed the power of representative politics for themselves. But politics is changing very rapidly now – and it’s thus immensely difficult to second guess what ‘the Left’ could be, might be. And this is before we start talking about broader challenges such as ISIS, resource depletion, financialised capitalism etc. Given these huge challenges, it’s perhaps better, for the moment, to follow the Spanish lead, and to think also about the scale of politics. Perhaps, as seems apparent there, the City is the best site for a left politics, as opposed to the nation state, or continent? Who knows today?

2 Simon Tormey, *The End of Representative Politics*, Cambridge 2015.

CF

You have done work around some of the major theoretical voices of the contemporary Left – Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Ernesto Laclau, Slavoj Žižek, Alain Badiou, for instance. How might these voices be useful TO the Left today?

ST

Well, as a political theorist, I of course take a lot of interest in what figures like these offer by way of analysis of the contemporary condition. And there is still a lot to admire and learn from their work. On the other hand, my own work has perhaps become more sociological in recent years, and less concerned with the work of other theorists and explaining them to a diversity of audiences which is what I did until quite recently – and certainly what I taught until quite recently. It also means that I tend now to read less political theory and more evidence-based analysis of the major trends and tendencies of contemporary society. So yes I still read Žižek for example, and I still try to keep up with quite a lot of the commentary in and around the post-Marxian or neo-Marxian left, but less in order to clarify it or engage with it directly, and more because I am trying myself to explain contemporary political phenomena. I have virtually no time at all now for normative political theory, and really can't bare all that kind of post-Rawlsian navel gazing that passes for theorizing in conferences etc. I'd actually rather sit and talk about politics with activists – but then going back to an earlier point, I've probably always had that no doubt faintly hypocritical contempt for the output of the academy!

I also think that we are in a period of amazing change, which is in turn making many of the cherished nostrums of the neo-Marxian left either redundant or rather antique-sounding within a relatively short space of time. Just to take a couple of concerns, I think the challenge of environmental degradation is less prominent in the work of these theorists for the obvious reason that they were less cognisant of the rate of depletion of the atmosphere and its impacts on the environment than we are becoming today. There still is a kind of Enlightenment optimism underpinning these neo-Marxist works that 'it'll be all right in the end' if only we can

develop adequate political systems whether it be communism or the Commons governed by the multitude, or whatever. This isn't to say that these models aren't important in their own way, and of course there will always be debates over the nature of equality, governance, democracy and so forth. It's just that I think environmental concerns are probably becoming more important as the must-do in terms of the political demands here today.

Another area which I think is really impacting us in a major way is digital disruption. This of course has both negative and positive consequences, but again my feeling reading back on some of these texts is that, if not redundant, then there is a lot of updating and rethinking to be done in the wake of the profound transformations underway. This could be in a way of thinking about the nature of the state, and what it is that state power means after Snowden's revelations. It might also be about the nature of production and exchange after the death of 'work'. I'm also very interested in how digital technologies change the nature of mobilisation amongst political activists, and also the forms of organisation that they create in order to advance specific claims, resist existing regimes, and develop repertoires for acting and participating. It was so fascinating to see in Spain the proliferation of different iterations of left strategy, partly in response to the challenge and opportunity of social media platforms. So Podemos, for example, is as we know very strongly influenced by the work of Laclau and Mouffe, and everything they say about the task in hand in Spain is really informed by an idea of contesting hegemony. But try as they might to colonise the arena of progressive politics in Spain, the evidence shows that actually digitally enabled activism has the upper hand as far as its reach and influence. They still have this very state-centric view of politics as all about capturing power, and using it for the common good. Whereas the new political forces seem to conform to a very different ideal of politics involving connection and networks, as opposed to power over, a power as articulated by small groups acting in the name of the interests of a larger group.

So again, this is one of the issues that animates my recent work. I have been very interested in what 'the end of representative politics' means, which of course immediately poses the question of 'well if not representative politics, then what kind of politics?'. And

it's clear escaping the legacy of representative politics is not going to be easy. We cannot just leap into a deliberative or participatory democracy even if we wanted to, and of course citizens differ in their engagement with politics and desire to participate. But what we are seeing is the ease with which activists, who would formerly have confined themselves to street politics, are becoming interested in making headway in electoral terms, if only to transform elections and electoral politics itself. I've learned a lot in recent years from figures like John Keane, Pierre Rosanvallon, and Colin Hay, and many others who are trying to make sense of contemporary developments like these. And of course I still find time to read figures like Žižek, who is an important figure even if you disagree with him, indeed especially if you disagree with him. Because then the onus is on one pointing out where the errors are made, and by doing so we make further progress.

On the other hand, it's difficult to see new figures on the horizon coming along to challenge some of these rather now canonical figures. I think one of the issues underpinning all of this is the growing professionalisation and specialisation of university academics, which means less time, energy and impetus to develop novel theories of contemporary society. It would also be great to see more theorists coming out of the Global South. I'm sure there must be very interesting work going on in China, Japan, Latin America, and Africa, but I just haven't exposed to very much of it. The globalisation of ideas is in this sense a very one-sided process. Much of the rest of the world has to take its cue from the great Western or northern figures, before we will listen to them or engage with them. It would be great to imagine that there is a raft of new postcolonial, post Western centric theory which will be unleashed upon us, in order to put some of these other theories in their necessary perspective. I'm sure it's out there. We just need to find it, listen, engage, and invite more folks in who might not make it otherwise, and so on.

CF

You've been in Australia for a number of years. How would you characterise the situation of the Antipodes? Do you think Antipodean specifics such as settler capitalism and indigenous politics mean

specifically Antipodean forms of theory and/or action? How do you view the Left political and intellectual scene in the Antipodes, compared to that of Europe? Are there distinctive tendencies here that you might want to speculate upon?

ST

Well it's true that I have now been in Australia for seven years, but in many respects it still feels quite foreign to me. As for Aotearoa, I'm certainly not qualified to comment given that I have made one visit only in my time down under. However, I am of course happy to give a few impressions about Antipodean theory and politics for your purposes.

Several things strike one as a European coming to this part of the world. Firstly, if you live in a city like Sydney, Melbourne or Brisbane one first impression is that this is a very wealthy part of the world. There are very few people sleeping out in the manner familiar in Europe or North America. The standard of living seems to be very high, and most of the cities are pretty white, though becoming multicultural as particularly the Chinese and South Asians arrive in good numbers. On the other hand, one can go for many days without seeing an Aboriginal face, or someone who outwardly seems indigenous. Of course you learn that you cannot judge a country like Australia by its urban environments. Australia is composed of concentric circles with an urban component, then the suburban, the regional and finally the remote. One can go for months and years without encountering others from some other part of the concentric circle.

This means it's incredibly difficult to generalise about how people live in Australia, because how people live is very much determined by geography, race, culture, and so on which varies enormously from place to place. I suspect that the issues that animate people in my part of Australia, the Inner West of Sydney, are quite different to those that animate folks in regional New South Wales, let alone remote Australia. It's this lack of contiguity and affinity that can become quite disabling in political terms. There doesn't seem to be a core narrative or set of concerns that animate all citizens or good numbers of them. Another way of

putting it is that there doesn't seem to be a *demos* in the classic sense of a people unified by a shared perception of destiny. There is a concocted past that seems all too easily to rotate around iconic events such as Gallipoli – but nothing that ties everyone together in common concern.

So a key feature of politics in Australia is dislocation of civil society combined with a centralisation of political, police and military power in Canberra. This doesn't mean to say that cities like Sydney and Melbourne don't exercise important powers at the local level, they do. But Australia's federalism is quite weak, and most policies of any note emanate from the federal level. But an important correlate of this centralised state power with weak and disbursed civil society is a political culture that demonstrates authoritarian tendencies. This is reinforced by the withdrawal of many citizens from everyday politics. So whilst voting is compulsory in Australia, the vast majority of the population does not take part in politics as a daily activity. Membership of political parties here is in freefall, with around 1% of the population now counting themselves as members of a political party. Our politics is curiously similar to other authoritarian regimes around the rest of the Asia-Pacific region, which is to say weak, disorganised, and based around particular interests or policies that irritate a local populace. There is no national politics of inequality, exclusion, sustainability, et cetera. When citizens do get organised it is to defend their local patch. So in my area of Sydney, there is quite a lot of local activism going on, but it is very much in this reactive mode of resisting large-scale developments, roadbuilding, and other projects that are unwelcome to the local population. Very little of this, it seems to me, seeks to develop the kind of alliances or affinities that you would see in such cases in Europe. There is, as it were, a micro-politics of resistance to large-scale development, but very little else.

Symbolic to me of this relatively weak civil society and activist base was the ease with which authorities dealt with Occupy in 2011. Without rehearsing all the details, the Occupy movements in the two major cities, Sydney and Melbourne, were both broken up in the middle of the night with the personal possessions of all those involved thrown into the back of police vans and taken off to some unnamed destination. In short, the authorities simply did not permit Occupy to exist beyond a very token gesture. If these

actions had taken place in China there would have been the most enormous uproar, with calls to boycott Chinese goods, withdrawal of ambassadors, and all the rest of it. But this didn't happen in China, it happened in Australia. So one must also recognize that activism faces a lot of obstacles: public indifference, and occasionally hostility, aggressive policing, lack of affinity and coalitions and so on. In short, Australia is a tricky place to be an activist.

As for theory, I'm sure there must be some 'local' theory, but if there is I'm not very aware of it. Universities have lost a lot of local flavor and become part of the transnational higher education industry – for good or ill, mainly for good I think. But it does mean that the sense of there being 'indigenous' theory is pretty sparse, certainly in Australia. Much theory here could be an almost exact replica of the kinds of theory we find in Europe and North America – whether it be critical and heterodox or mainstream and 'Anglo-American'. There are of course interesting applications of theory, and certain kinds of theory certainly resonate strongly here – post-colonial, 'settler' theories as you suggest, but that would be about it. But there's very good theoretical work going on, and much interest in how theories help us to explain the present and future nature of the region. I'm particularly looking forward to welcoming more Chinese theorists, theorists from South Asia and so on, as we broaden our horizons from the Global North to the Asia-Pacific.

If you like what you have read, please
subscribe or donate.



COUNTERFUTURES

Left thought & practice Aotearoa