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Yet to Come? Globality and the Sound of an Infant Politics

David Oswell

Introduction

The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, in his *Homo Sacer* [1], presents the image of a suffering Rwandan child as the object of humanitarian aid and assistance, as a form of bare life that is caught in the grip of modern political demands. But this image is one that is disseminated outside the bounds of philosophy. The infant, literally the child unable to articulate their demands through the powers of organised speech, presents itself as an image: one that requires the assistance of those who stand not simply as witnesses but as helpers and one that circulates freely, across different media platforms and aesthetic forms, in a contemporary globalised world. The war-child is seen, by an immense global multitude, to stand alone. A humanitarian response is cut with the blade of contemporary politics. The dawning of new hopes with the new presidency of Barack Obama gives rise to demands from voices both old and new. But, although the 'war on terror' now looks to be finally losing its commanding position on geo-political space, the space of the geo-political as

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[1] G. Agamben (1998) *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford: Sanford University Press.

the primary space of the political remains to be questioned and challenged. I say this not to question the aspirations of new international promises, but, for two reasons: to unhinge the axis of political thought that sees the geo-political to the exclusion of the domestic and the familiar and to embed the geo-political in the concrete assemblies of heard and spoken political expression.

This short essay looks to one of the toughest cases of radical politics today, not least because it questions one of the major fault lines of political subjectivity, action, and organisation: namely, it questions politics as determined by maturity and humanity. This essay briefly considers the obverse of politics – inasmuch as politics might be seen as the endeavour of responsible, rational political agents – through turning to the question of infancy. How might politics address itself to those who seem so absolutely excluded from political life, to those who seem to be defined only by virtue of their naked existence, their demands and needs, their purely bodily life? Such beings (because despite having an existence, there is also a big question as to whether they are 'individuals' as such, their pre-individuated life being so evidently caught up with the lives of others) are seen only able to utter sounds and noises, let alone able to speak with clarity, expressing rational political ideas. And yet, infancy, inasmuch as it stands before the political subject, poses the biggest question of all about the forms and modes of political expression and about the articulation of politics. It is my supposition that political expression and political articulation need to be understood in the context of the realpolitik of

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sound and sense: namely, that politics in one of its primary forms is not only about the content of what is said, but about 'sounding' as a cultural and physical articulation, such that sounding is figured as materially enduring resonance across people, things, technologies, and nature.

Infancy and Political Speech

Let me start close to home. Contemporary sociology and social theory has argued that we are witnessing significant changes to the structure of authority and speech within 'the family' [2]. There has been talk of a 'democratisation of the family'. Children are said to have more say in the household as to what decisions are made (whether that be in terms of shopping for food or clothes or whether in terms of schooling and education). This can be seen alongside a recognition of the family as actualised through different forms and structures and to a questioning of the normativitity of any heterosexual lifestyle. Children's voice in the family is made possible not by the strength of their

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[2] U. Beck (1992) 'Democratization of the family', *Childhood*, 4, 2. A. Giddens (1998) *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy*, Cambridge: Polity Press. C. Smart, B. Neale, and A. Wade (2001) *The Changing Experience of Childhood: Families and Divorce*, Cambridge: Polity.

voice alone nor by the shifting relations of power and authority within the family, but through the realignments across family members and the new forms of expertise and professional authority that have emerged and developed from the nineteenth century onward. Family members are now almost all, rather than only the father as the *pater familias*, seen as individuals; almost all have sovereignty (i.e. ownership of themselves and rights to, in some form and in some fora, political speech). Children's voices are increasingly audible outside of the home. They are heard now in local, national and international government. They are heard in schools. They are heard in consumer culture. And they are heard in civil society generally. But children are not just heard, they are heard as active participants. Organisations as diverse as UNICEF or Children's Express or Casa Alianza in Central America facilitate children's and young people's social, cultural and political expression through different forms and media, from committee meetings to pamphlets to newspaper articles and so on. Traditional media, such as broadcast television, have given a platform to expressions of children's culture. Networked communication technologies make possible the production, distribution and consumption of expression that was previously undreamt. Social networking sites, for example, provide the technological and cultural means through which young people can express themselves, organise, mobilise, mess about, create fear, have fun, produce identities, connect and disconnect.

One context for understanding modern transformations in social and political speech can be traced back to the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle. In the *Politics* Aristotle[3] makes a distinction between voice (*phōnē*) and speech (or language) (*logos*) inasmuch as voice is the noise of animals and speech is the articulation of reason by men within an organised political unit, namely the *polis*. Unlike bees, or guinea pigs even, which are able to express signals as to whether they are in pain or pleasure, men have speech (and not voice alone) and are able to articulate rights and wrongs, the good and the bad, and the safe and the harmful. This distinction, in the *Politics*, is part of an initial discussion of different forms of social association, concerning the household, village and state, and their teleological progression within the 'natural' ordering of things. The management of the household (*oikos*), which for Aristotle, is concerned with reproduction is qualitatively different from the organisation and management of the state (*polis*). Voice is that which resides in the household, but it is speech that is heard on the stage of masculine adult politics. Contemporary discourse about geo-politics tends similarly both to become a 'boys game' (men in war-zones doing dangerous things, men in bars talking about those dangerous experiences) and to ignore systematically the question of reproduction or generation, such that, for example, real violence is seen to be the violence of global terror and not the abuse of children in the home. In such gendered and generational formulations, infants become the

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[3] Aristotle (1932) *Politics*, Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press.

object of sympathy as a systematic consequence of war and global conflict. In such discourse, infants, and those who are infantilised, have voice, but no political speech, no organised political expression.

Agamben, in his writings on infancy and experience, pursues Aristotle's thought and articulates it in the context of structuralist and post-structuralist theory. He argues that in contrast to animals that are always inside language (a 'pure language', prior to discourse and the semantic), man, because he has infancy, 'by preceding speech, splits this single language and, in order to speak, has to constitute himself as a subject of language – he has to say *I*' [4]. It is this division between infancy and maturity and this splitting of language between *langue* and *parole* (or, in Benveniste, between language and discourse) that 'opens the space of history'[5]. As distinct from Aristotle and the ancients, Agamben argues that human beings are not those animals with speech and hence politics, but those who are 'deprived of language' in infancy and thus 'obliged to receive it from outside' themselves [6]. In his later writing

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[4] G. Agamben (2007) *Infancy and History: On the Destruction of Experience*, London: Verso, p59.

[5] G. Agamben (2007) Infancy and History: On the Destruction of Experience, London: Verso, p60.

[6] G. Agamben (2007) *Infancy and History: On the Destruction of Experience*, London: Verso, p65.

on sovereignty and bare life, Agamben[7] returns to Aristotle's *Politics.* In the opening pages of *Homo Sacer*, he reads Aristotle's comments about the household (*oikos*) and its teleological relation to the state (*polis*) in the context of a distinction between *zoe* (simple life) and *bios* (a way of life) and he says: 'simple natural life is excluded from the *polis* in the strict sense, and remains confined – as merely reproductive life – to the sphere of the *oikos*, "home"' [8]. The head of the estate and the family is concerned with different matters and forms of governance than the statesman. Agamben reads Aristotle such that the exclusion, but also conservation, of bare life in the state is equivalent to the exclusion and conservation of voice in the collectively organised city-state: 'There is politics because man is the living being who, in language, separates and opposes himself to his own bare life and, at the same time, maintains himself in relation to that bare life in an inclusive exclusion.' [9]. Whereas Agamben reads this in such a way that it is able to provide an argument about the ancient history and philosophy of contemporary biopolitics, inasmuch as modern forms of the biopolitical are genealogically

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[7] Agamben, Giorgio (1998) *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford: Sanford University Press.

[8] Agamben, Giorgio (1998) *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford: Sanford University Press, p 2.

[9] Agamben, Giorgio (1998) *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford: Sanford University Press, p8.

linked to the formation of sovereignty and the political realm, others, not necessarily critical of this reading, might also want to argue that fundamental to such sovereignty is the exclusion of some life on the grounds of gender and generation. The Aristotelian model constitutes bare life, as it were, as reproductive life. Alongside the question of gender (and I don't want here to rehearse longstanding debates on the gendering of the political, important as they are), the relationship between voice and infancy, on the one hand, and political speech and maturity, on the other is central to grasping the present geo-political context inasmuch as it includes the infant and the domestic as an 'inclusive exclusion' and inasmuch as such thought must be questioned and challenged. The suffering and tragedy of dislocation, the violence of poverty, and the trauma of war are not the consequences of military action, not simply that which disrupt and violate the domestic and the smooth consistency of bio-political reproduction; they are the means and media through which war is waged. The war-child is more than simply the effect of war and the object of suffering. The infant is part of that context, connected to those actions and events; but their voice is, and has been, consistently 'disarticulated'. The infant is not simply without voice; they are made to be without speech; they are the disarticulated child.

Sound and the Physical Culture of Democracy

That said, if infancy in classical terms is the constitutive outside of political speech – if, that is, infancy names both the condition for political speech and that which lies outside of the domain of political speech – then it becomes an important point of reflection for questioning both who (what kind of person or being) is able to be constituted as a political subject and what forms of expression are able to be taken as political speech. It is the second that I want briefly to discuss now. Political speech is often thought as symbolic speech. It is an idea of speech as a string of ideas. Radical democratic theory, for example, has to an exclusive extent conceived of political speech in terms of a notion of discourse as meaning production. What has been important in this political theory has been <u>what</u> is said. In the hegemony theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe [10], for example, what is important is the articulation of meanings that are able to mobilise and to constitute political identities as effects of that discursive mobilisation. Certainly meaning is understood to have an outside, but only inasmuch as that outside presents itself as a necessary point of antagonism that is itself formed as the surplus of discursive relations of meaning. I don't want here to go into the problems with such theoretical propositions, but merely to suggest that the sound of politics is in itself significant, that is, over and above its presentation of meaning. Again, I should say here that in saying this I am not suggesting that we think of the 'whatness', or the 'thingness', of the sound of political speech as necessarily radical or irruptive of a masculine symbolic order. In that sense,

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[10] E. Laclau and C. Mouffe (1985) *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, London: Verso.

although writers such as Julia Kristeva in their formulation of a dialectical relation between the symbolic and the body of semiotics (*le sémiotique*) in order to present the revolutionary potential of pre-symbolic poetic ululating sound are certainly suggestive, their construction of a psychoanalytical and structural place for infancy in the context of political speech leads them to focus on the sounds of an essentialised body, instead of the concrete manifestations of distributed and dispersed bodies (human and non-human). I am much more interested in, to twist Agamben's phrase, 'the experience of the thing of language' and in the political architectures of sound and space and time.

If we focus then on the physicality of discourse and on the fact that language is sensed as something 'immediate' and is itself a physical connection between oneself and a world of objects, peoples, sounds, technologies, creatures, and others, then we might wonder whether language, as an immediate mediation, is not simply something that makes sense nor something which is itself only sensed by some of the 'five senses', but something that itself requires a sense of its own to be sensible. And yet, a sense of language would make little sense on its own. As with all senses, as Aristotle suggests (although with some contention and disagreement even within his own writings) a single sense makes sense only through its synaesthetic relation to other senses and through its translation in a common sense (*common sensorium*). Is, then, the sensing of language important in the sensing of democracy, in its soundings?

And is the sensing of sounds (namely, the touching of sounds through the physicality of sound as a medium), rather than their comprehension or understanding (namely sounds attached, and understood only inasmuch as they are attached, to 'content'), connected to our infancy, a form of hearing and listening that is not yet mature, a sensing that stands before (and grasps our attention) our ability to reason? There is a growing body of research in the social sciences and beyond that might help us to begin to think through the question of sound. We can draw on the novel insights from thinkers such as the French composer Pierre Schaeffer's phenomenological notion of the 'acousmatic' (namely the idea of the sound object in itself) or R. Murray Schafer's [11] hugely influential notion of the 'soundscape' or the work of Jacques Attali on noise or Jean-Luc Nancy's recent post-phenomenological writing on sound or Barry Blesser and Linda-Ruth Salter's work on 'acoustic architectures' or the work of the Centre for Research on Sonic Space and the Environment (CRESSON) (based in Grenoble) in producing a taxonomy of 'sound effects' or, in the field of anthropology, the research of Steven Feld on 'acoustic ecologies' or the work of Les Back in the sociology of listening. We need, I think, to take account of the physicality of sound, the concrete sites in which it resonates, and the cultural and social scenes and settings when thinking about and considering the different forms and materialities of political expression.

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[11] R. M. Schafer (1994) The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World, Vermont: Destiny Books.

For my thinking on infancy and voice, it would mean taking into account the sounds of children as sound, considering the attractions and repulsions, the associations and disassociations, and the patterns and structures of those sounds with respect not simply to those that utter the sounds but also other sounds within fields of interaction and other materialities, objects, technologies and subjects. Do, for example, infant sounds (if we can initially designate sounds as such and, of course, there is a question as to whether we can or should) have an attraction to particular technologies (televisions) and objects (dolls and teddy bears)? But what other sounds, subjects and objects may also be assembled and gathered around such sound spaces? Democracy is figured through the modalities of speaking and listening within different parliaments or assemblies of mouths and ears (but also eyes that see the words sounded in the mouth of another or skin that feels the vibrations of an argument that rolls out across a room). Although there has been a politicisation of sound in the context of the burden of noise in conditions of modernity and a mobilisation of political actors in the campaigns against particular forms of noise (e.g. traffic, aircraft, etc), there has been little attempt to understand sound as itself part of the substance and fabric of political relationality: namely, to consider the physical cultures of sound as significant in our understanding of the ontologically diverse modalities of political expression. Such an understanding needs importantly also to consider the architectonics of sound in the context of particular political

demands. Thus, what kind of space is able to facilitate what kinds of voice in relation to what other kinds of voices or sounds. This may be imagined in terms of thinking about what kind of room is able to make possible voices that can be heard with clarity (i.e. what kind of building would make a good parliamentary assembly?). But equally what kind of space could facilitate a multiplicity of voices speaking at the same time, but such that the volume of voices does not militate against any democracy of that space? How, for example, can an increasingly global multitude speak? And what kind of physical cultural and architectural space would make such a speaking possible?

Contemporary formations of children's and young people's political expression are radically different from that of the past. But also the sounds of children are heard now and heard differently than they have been in the past. The sounds associated with children and young people now are not only the sounds of rational and reasonable discussion and dialogue. They are also the sounds of noise and disturbance. The sounds of young people gathering on the streets and in parks at different times of the day. The sounds of children in shops and restaurants. The sounds of babies crying. The noise of voices, clatter, music, and cacophonies is not heard as reasonable expression, but as disturbance to be curbed. And yet the sound of disturbance, the noise of children and young people, has perhaps not always been heard, or at least heard as such. For example and somewhat anecdotally, research on local by-

laws relating to noise disturbances in Basel, Switzerland suggest that town residents only started to become concerned about (or only started to hear) children's noise in the early twentieth century. Although in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries there were local by-laws covering singing, shouting, noise at night, dogs barking, woodworking industry, and such like, there was only recorded legislation with regard to the noise of children in 1914 and 1927 (Schafer, 1994: 190).

The noise of children and young people cannot be distinguished from their speech on the basis of the physical sounds alone, only on the basis of who is making them, the context in which they are made, who is hearing them, and how they are heard. Voices become political speech only through the alliances and networks with others. Children don't speak on their own. But equally the translation of the babble of voice to organised political speech is dependent on the architectonics of audible spaces. In order for voices to become political speech and in order for political communities to form around those voices, there need to be spaces in which those voices can be not simply articulated but also sounded in an environment in which they might be heard and listened. There are, then, important questions as to the architectonics (to the political acoustic-architectures) of infant voices. The transition from voice to speech thus rests, not on a qualitative difference from infant to adult, but on the organisation of the sounds emitted and heard and the contexts in which such speaking and listening is situated. If (and I say 'if' because this may have

always been the case) infants are now not only heard but listened to in the home, then this is not in the first instance because infants or parents have changed, but because the relations of sound (of sonority) have changed. If there is difference between listening to infant voices in the home and the absence of listening to infancy in a parliamentary assembly, then it is not simply due to masculine adult bias, but to the broader organisation and architectonics of such a speaking and listening chamber. Of course, to paint too rosy a picture would be to tell a lie. Political language has been given to, or taken by, some children, but it has not been owned or given value in a manner conducive to the accumulation of children's collective authority. In the marketplace of language (as Bourdieu would say) the accumulation of political speech and the value of that accumulated speech is certainly uneven. Children are in many places not heard. They are passed over, ignored, downtrodden, left silent.

Returning to the Global and the Necessary Infancy of the Political

The question of infancy and politics is not only a question of the exclusion of those with insufficient political capital and voice. It is also importantly about the lie that politics is about maturity, that politics comes at the end of reason and growth. In contrast, let us foreground a notion of politics as necessarily the space of contestation, not only a contestation over the meaning of what is

said, but over the physicality of the saying and the sounding of sounds. Let us hold onto a notion that politics is a space of the conjunction of experience, such that that experience is diverse and heterogeneous. There are settlements, certainly, but those settlements are the outcome of a sea of dialogue. In this sense, the space of politics is processual, a process of experiment. At the level of political expression, politics is *experimentum linguae*; but it is so only in the sense that language is conceived as the formation of contiguous elements that address particular constituencies of others in the context of materially bounded spaces. It is the figure of infancy that defines that experimentation and that moment of hesitancy of expression. Infancy stands before politics as a pause, an inaudible sounding that breaks speech. The infant is always before language and always on its cusp. It is nearly articulate, but not quite. Once politics is stripped of its hubris we might be able to hear and listen to those voices not properly organised, not quite speech. Those voices and those noises that support politics in terms of how things might become are not the repressed rumbling underbelly of politics; they are its generative and generational core. To foreground the infancy of politics, thus, raises two fundamental issues concerning what society is now and how it might become something different.

You might rightly argue that my use of 'infancy' slips across actual infants, children, young people, and adults. Yes, but that is the point. Infancy names the relation between voice and political speech, body and symbolic,

disconnected and connected. Moreover, it would be tempting to dismiss all this as naive twaddle were it not for the fact that children and young people are constructing sound spaces with each other and with adults in ways that would never have been possible only a few years ago. Irrespective of whether adults give credibility to such voices on the cusp of political organisation, such voices are not reduced to the 'disarticulated voice of infancy'. In an important respect, the fixing of children to the local (to the home and to the local community) and the restrictions on young people's movement and mobility is changing. The curfews in the UK that police young people with respect to their trespassing on adult spaces outside of their limited domestic terrain in many ways are symptomatic of a wider anxiety about children's escape from the confines of the local. This is a politics beyond the purely discursive. This is a politics of occupation and inhabitation. Similarly with sound, the physicality of connection is centrally important. What is significant, then, is not that what is being said is different (although that is certainly the case), but that the physicality of collective sound spaces is changing, the acoustic architectures of political assemblies are changing. In such auditory spaces infants are certainly to a large extent not offered the capacities for contributing to that assembly, but there is certainly much talk among adults and children about making that possible. The time for the Rwandan child to talk back is certainly now; but the real issue also concerns through what global assembly might their voice be heard as speech?

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