

**Siting and Sounding a Democratic Politics: An Interview with
Nick Couldry (Goldsmiths, University of London)**

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Rafico Ruiz: This year's issue of *Seachange* focuses on the theme of "talk." In particular, it will examine how the production, locales, audiences, media and ultimate circulation of speech acts, taken as broadly conceived and embodied as we might be willing, have all increasingly come under contestable forms of economic, political and social control. Talking today, in a very material sense, still matters. And I don't mean this necessarily with the ideal of co-presence and coordinated action in mind, rather talk, in going beyond critical discourse, can be thought of as a gathering social process that is grounded in such societal structures as labour practices, educational contexts, amongst a host of other instances that address what sorts of shapes these eventual happenings of talk take and what consequences they engender. Your recent book, *Why Voice Matters: Culture and Politics after Neoliberalism*, is a response to the 2008 financial "crisis." You propose that new semantic and social meanings of the concept of voice, that you see as an active, quasi-agential process that includes "giving an account of oneself and what affects one's life," following Judith Butler, need to come forward to confront the voiding of accountability, and an authentic, personal form of self-representation at the threshold with the political that this "crisis" has historically conditioned and brought about. In order to do some of this work, you recognize that you are addressing a nearly omnipresent neoliberal context from a particular geographic and political situation, that of Britain.

So what I'd like to investigate with you this afternoon is how in the past five years or so this context for voice is changing. What new emergent sites

for voice as “value,” as you deem it, might be coming about? It may be helpful for you to redefine voice as a value for this particular present, and perhaps offer a reminder of its historical genealogy that you lay out in the book. Basically, what I’m curious to hear more about are those gaps between thought, writing and publication-reception, and those ever-mobile real world events. It’s a question of reaction times, and one that picks up on Butler’s understanding of “materialization.”

Nick Couldry: I think it’s interesting that we’re discussing this, and it’s great to have this conversation in the context of your special issue on “talk” because while talk can just be chatter, inconsequential talk, we can’t disguise the fact that there’s something very consequential about talk, that if we were muted, as people in many circumstances of life are, this is a fundamental attack on their status as human beings. Now I think Paul Ricoeur captures that in a quote that I mention at the beginning of the book, which is “we have no idea what a culture would be where no one any longer knew what it meant to narrate things.” Narrating is possibly more or different from talking, but one of the main points of talking is to tell each other what’s happened today, what are you going to do tomorrow, how’s this feeling, in this new job, at this new university, at this stage of your life, we’re constantly giving accounts of ourselves to each other, we’re constantly implicating our accounts with the accounts that others give of us and give of themselves, and that’s not accidental, an accidental function, a side-effect of some other force moving us. It’s essential to the embodied nature of our being. As Charles Taylor says, we are story giving animals. It’s inherent to what we are. And stating that doesn’t depend, necessarily, on some old-fashioned universalist, humanistic perspective. It’s perfectly possible to think this in a post- or pre-structuralist

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perspective. And yet it's undeniably a part of what humans do. Without which all of us would feel disabled, profoundly disabled.

So, moving to the history of the *Voice* book and why I felt the need to write about it. I guess about 2007 I was in the middle of a book on media, bringing my media theory together, a book that's finally come out as *Media, Society, World* just now, and I was getting stuck with it, and I also had a sense that there were other much more important things to write about. In other words, what was going to be the place in the book on media theory for the anger I felt, of disenfranchisement in a country like Britain where there appeared to be a working democracy, appeared to be choices between political parties, and yet there was no place to go for citizens who wanted to contest the neoliberal consensus. There was absolutely no point on the political spectrum which even recognized those positions as valid political opinions, as starting points for discussion. There was the anger I felt about that, along with so many people around me, and also about the fact that at that stage cultural studies, as I saw it, a subject I had felt a lot of loyalty towards, seemed to be silent, with some exceptions, and I in particular emphasize as an exception Larry Grossberg's fundamental work. His book *Caught in the Crossfire* from 2005 is an excellent attempt to interrupt this silence. But on the whole, cultural studies, a critical project that aimed to interrupt power and ask difficult questions, change our framings of how power was working around us and to rethink them in a more productive way, seemed to be silent on this fundamental closing down of politics, and this silence had to be addressed in some way. I went to the Cultural Studies Now conference in 2007 at the University of East London, where there was a discussion on cultural studies and the future of cultural studies, and that was the initiative of Jeremy Gilbert. But to my mind we didn't really get to the heart of the issues about power

because many people wanted to sidestep the actual things that were going on politically, and so were closing down the possibility of the critical project we were theoretically discussing. And this seemed to me the urgent thing that had to be talked about.

So I set myself the task of trying to gather what for me would be the resources to think beyond this impasse that the subject and I myself seemed to be in. And I deliberately moved beyond media studies and cultural studies, and just tried to look across a much wider range of theoretical perspectives. Partly with the idea that if one were going to build a larger argument against neoliberalism it would be necessary to have a lot of establishment theory on board. And the more I looked, there was critical economics, and I'm obviously no expert in economics, but I found there were these extraordinary and powerful debates around Sen's work, and other people, who pointed to the human gaps in the market machine, the massive costs and the irrationalities that flow from that. And then if you go deeper into Sen's work, there was that sense that the very notion of rationality and market liberalism is profoundly contradictory. So I started to get the sense that it was possible to build a bigger project.

Butler, who you've already mentioned, was very important as an inspiration for trying to build new types of debates from positions that seem closed off. But I was writing, as you said, in the situation of a depressed Britain in 2007 and 8, the last months of the Blair era, which had been so deforming of politics in Britain. The minimal hope of a new labour regime, which didn't go very far with Bush still being in power. Then, I was trying to have the book take off in 2008 when I was based in America during Obama's presidential campaign, and the book stalled again there because at that point it seemed as if maybe some new hope was dawning in some sense, maybe voice *was* being

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articulated, and so maybe this negative, depressive position from Britain was going to end up being unhelpful when I tried to publish it in 2009 or 10. But I decided to keep going with it because as the financial crisis of September 2008 onwards developed it became clear that the problems that the economy posed for democracy were absolutely profound, and as we got into 2009 it became clear that neoliberalism was not dead, although many people insisted it was, although its official slogans had been exposed for the empty slogans that they were. But the practice of neoliberalism, the *culture* of neoliberalism was very much alive and was involved in the repair work that was necessary for governments to recover from the immediate shock of the 2008 crisis.

So again after thinking that maybe the book should be abandoned in early 2009, I decided precisely to continue it, and my immediate target was to make some sort of intervention into the election that was definitely coming in Britain in May of 2010, which was the endpoint of the New Labour experiment in government. As it happened, I got the book out in time, indeed I forced the ending so that it would meet that production schedule, but I had no influence on the debates during or after that election. It came out just afterwards. The most I achieved was a leaflet circulated at the Compass conference, which is one of the main arenas for left-of-centre discussion within the Labour party.

But no one picked up the book politically or journalistically, and I didn't really expect to influence debates because it was too theoretical a level. And at that point we hadn't yet reached the Arab Spring, we hadn't yet reached the massive and obvious explosion of social media as a dimension of politics that became completely clear from the end of 2010 onwards, and it was only during the course of 2011 that I realized both that the book remained still relevant, that it actually had a purpose much wider than the British election of 2010,

which held very little interest for most people apart from those living in Britain, but that it might have something to say to the more obvious crisis of democratic politics coming out of the renewed, or perhaps continued, financial crisis of 2011 with the euro and also the massive popular challenges to the governments from Greece, Spain and Portugal to New York's Zuccotti Park, and so many other places across the world. So there's been a strange arc to the book in that I was trying to make a broader intervention, it got locked into a rather specific reference point at the time which didn't go so far, but now it seems even more worth my while for having written it. I'm very glad that I did, and I suppose it's the most personal book that I've written. It's the only book I've written that came from a personal *cri de coeur* rather than a sense that I need to add this or that to the arguments in the field. It's a book I felt personally necessary to write, and I hope in the time that's now developing that it will gradually be taken up and people will see it as some sort of contribution, albeit a partial one from Britain, to this wider global crisis of reforming and rethinking what the purposes and means of democracy are.

R.R.: This genesis of the book that you describe shows how that particular category known as "academic labour," nebulous as it is, can contribute in a way that takes, or makes, its own contextual time. It also shows how every project comes from somewhere, and you have certain goals in mind when realizing it, whether political, social or cultural, amongst others, and you're trying to mobilize those, but it's nice to see how you can indeed intervene in a timely way even though it wasn't necessarily in the debate you had originally set out to intervene in.

I want to pick up on your observation that cultural studies as a project didn't address the financial crisis in a timely or directed or as positioned a way

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as you might have wanted. When I think of this “crisis,” in a lexical sense, it makes me go back to the book *Policing the Crisis*. It’s interesting to recall how that book project was an instance of collaborative authorship, an intervention, and came to be timely in its own way. The authors construct what a “crisis” is in the following way: “when the official reaction to a person, groups of persons or series of events is out of all proportion to the actual threat offered, when experts in the form of police chiefs, the judiciary, politicians and editors perceive the threat in all but identical terms, and appear to talk with one voice of rates, diagnoses, prognoses and solutions, when the media representations universally stress sudden and dramatic increases in numbers involved or events, and novelty above and beyond that which sober, realistic appraisal could sustain, then we believe it is appropriate to speak of the beginnings of a moral panic or crisis” (1978: 16). There are many resonances here with the ongoing sense of “financial crisis” and how it’s all pervasive, and how the longevity of it maybe speaks to the broader question of the relevance of your book because clearly if a crisis is continual and continuous it’s continuously concealing those exact sorts of valuations of personal freedom, however you want to conceive of it. Does that social construction of “crisis” resonate with you?

N.C.: I think it’s a good link because it reminds us that cultural studies has done fundamental work in the past. *Policing the Crisis* is an extraordinary achievement. It was a collective project bringing together 6 or 8 researchers who took a very urgent practical policy problem in Britain, that was being massively distorted in the media coverage, with the media coverage almost being part of, if not *the* problem, to be unpicked. They developed the tools for unpicking it, drawing on the latest theory of the day to do so, and explaining

that with extraordinary clarity. And they came up with policy interventions and a very practically-oriented analysis. It's a remarkable achievement. But then you could ask the question: could we imagine any group of people in British or Canadian or American cultural studies having done something similar in relation to the crisis of neoliberalism? Well, they haven't, but maybe not anyway because the crisis that *Policing the Crisis* was dealing with was a specific one about the coverage of crime by young adults in Britain at a particular time with the particular forces at play. Whereas the crisis we're dealing with is almost at the second order level, or even higher, in terms of whether we think the aims and means of democracy are no longer achievable aims or are in direct conflict with other aims that we're required to fulfill, and the means that we'd normally recognize for democracy are no longer working; are no longer producing choice, are no longer producing recognition for citizens, outcomes that citizens can recognize as reflecting their will in any way. So we've got a fundamental conflict about the practice of democracy which isn't coming about through conspiracy or bad will or stupidity, it's happening because there is a direct conflict between the requirements of the global economic system and the demands it makes of national economies and the only ways in which democracy can work which is by some process that recognizes the will of citizens in some way. And this conflict is now acute. It wasn't quite as acute in 2007 and 8 where it seemed to take the form of certain neoliberal politicians voicing democracy in a way that was unacceptable and actually closed it down. That was a travesty of what democracy could be. Now we're facing a much broader problem where it's not clear how democracy can go on operating in a way that we thought it should operate and still be consistent with the global financial system on which we all rely to buy our plane tickets, to get from country to country, to fund the universities, and so

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on. There is no one who has the answer to these problems. So that in a sense broadens and opens out the problems in an interesting way. No one has expertise in solving this level of problem. We can't run away from it.

Perhaps not surprisingly no one has come up with a snappy research project which will get to the heart of this. On the other hand, it does bring out the fact that this is a collective problem we need to be thinking about urgently. I saw the book as, in a sense, coming *after* cultural studies. I didn't any longer recognize cultural studies as a particularly useful label for what I was doing because none of the work going on within cultural studies, apart from Angela McRobbie's, Larry Grossberg's, and Henry Giroux's, none of it really seemed to be resonating with what I was concerned with. But it at least comes after cultural studies because it's very much inspired by Raymond Williams' sense that there's a problem with democracy and it needs an academic subject to grapple with this, which needs to be a subject that's informed by cultural analysis. If we see the book as coming after cultural studies, it was an attempt to renew the philosophical resources on which it could rely, the disciplinary resources, and also to attach that post-cultural studies will to be critical with, particularly, what sociology could do in studying voice and the closing down of voice, and how voice operates in the real world. And maybe that's something that you're interested in, in terms of the institutional settings for the closure of voice.

R.R.: That makes me think of the context of the emergence of cultural studies in the 1950s and 60s in relation to how you yourself situate voice, and the various processes that go into making it an agent of change, and how those processes have very particular histories, very particular times and

places. How would you see those voices of cultural studies ageing, whether at a cultural, political or social level?

N.C.: The first thing I was trying to do in the book was to complicate the starting point because a reaction I sometimes got when I told people I was writing a book on voice was “Why do we need that? It’s obvious. We all want voice. More and more we’re getting voice. Look at all those places we can go on-line and write a blog or do a tweet or make a comment, and so on. Voice seems to be everywhere in the world and obviously it’s a good, so what is there to write about?” I did think there were more things to be said about voice as a process and how it can be closed down, and I’ll come back to those in a moment because at the institutional level they’re very complicated, but as I thought about it I realized the problem that I saw that led me to write the book, and the problem was with Bush’s politics, Blair’s politics, and so on. In Bush’s case an obviously anti-democratic approach, informed in part by the religious right, in Blair’s case an apparently democratic approach that claimed to be listening and to be participatory and to voice certain notions of popular politics and yet was profoundly anti-democratic as all of its instincts were to close down debate and to ally with corporate capital. Identifying those sorts of problems didn’t get themselves clear the possible starting point for thinking beyond them. And I decided therefore to talk about voice as a value, which is the idea that not only do we have the potential for voice, and that many of us have what appears to be voice, but we need to operate in societies, we need to be in the middle of ways of organizing things, which value voice, which take voice into account, which work hard at allowing voice to stick somewhere, to make a difference, for actions later to be adjusted in the light of what someone has said. We’re all familiar with the everyday consultation exercise where we

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go down, maybe have a passionate discussion about why this road should not be built or why this curriculum should not be changed, and then halfway through the meeting we get the impression that “hang on, maybe they’ve already decided this,” maybe nothing I say, however relevant, is going to make any difference. And that impression is not counteracted and the result is profoundly anti-democratic even though on the face of it there’s been some “voice” offered in exercise. That’s a very familiar situation, there’s been a long history of that in the late part of the New Labour regime in Britain where they’ve been very concerned with their form of legitimacy as a government and they agonized over this. There was a report called the *Power Enquiry* that actually looked at how no one trusted government in Britain anymore, no one felt listened to, and they decided to experiment with participatory budgets as we have in Porto Allegre, actually directly borrowing from Porto Allegre into Britain (it’s never led to anything, but in theory there was an experiment). And again, this wasn’t working. So what was the problem here? The problem, I concluded, at least to put it in concrete terms, and this being the beginning of the discussion, was in terms of voice not being valued. There being no way of registering within an institutional architecture the need to value voice, to give it a weight, to make the really quite difficult adjustments for governments that come from actually valuing voice, from actually caring about what people are saying, and then in turn caring that the signal is sent to those people that they have been listened to, that some adjustment has been made. If you think about how little institutions offer in terms of valuing voice you realize that there is something to be said about that. And then thinking about voice as a value was also a way of pointing to the dark heart of neoliberal discourse, market economics that because of its absolute prioritization of market function over and above all other conceivable values,

including human happiness and human good - bizarrely, as Sen points out, and rather incoherent for a science of the human good - and this was the beginnings of an argument against neoliberalism as a value, the market as a value, to say there are counter-values which should but do not trump market function. That counter-value is voice, and attempts in some way to organize things so that voice can count for something. We can give an account of ourselves, voice as process must be possible, so that our giving that account will itself be taken into account. At another level, it would be valued. So I started to see the two as linked and the attack on neoliberalism as not just being locked to the problem of not enough people having voice, because then one is in the position of any politician saying "Hey, there are more people that want to speak," Sarah Palin was saying "There are these people in Alaska and all around America who need voice, they are not being listened to by big government." An argument for voice as process is absolutely the norm, but it is voice as value that is something that Sarah Palin absolutely did not agree with; reorganizing markets so that people could have real voice was not something she would ever commit to for very good reasons. That's why I had to have both together. But as you say the problems that come from thinking about voice as a process on a collective scale are very complex, and we'll need to come back to those later in the discussion.

R.R.: We will, certainly. In the Introduction to *Policing Crisis*, the co-authors cite Oscar Wilde: "It is an outrage for reformers to spend time asking what can be done to ease the lot of the poor, or to make the poor bear their condition with greater dignity, when the only remedy is to abolish the condition of poverty itself." In a way, this "market crisis" could, to a degree, entail a similar sort of consideration. Obviously the abolishment of markets

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would create very particular conditions that we might not want to contemplate [shared laughter], yet your description of a socio-political future in the book stays within institutional structures that we have and know now, even though it is a reforming voice of critique, how would you see it fitting into the current conjuncture in Britain?

N.C.: That's a fair point. This goes back to your first question. Things do now look a little bit different. The position I decided to take in 2007, 8 and 9 when I was finishing the book (I finished writing in September of 2009), was that it was absolutely impossible for me to try and rethink the future of capitalism, what could come after capitalism, for the very good reason that for three decades all the best intellectuals on the left failed to find any answers to this problem. So it was absurd to think that I could do that in this book: I did face one challenge when I was discussing an early draft of bits of the book, why wasn't I getting to the real issue which was capitalism? Jason Toynebee, whom I admire very much, he teaches at the Open University, made that point, and it's a valid point, but one that can't be answered at this stage in the argument. I think, in a sense, what's happened in the year or two afterwards has almost reinforced that. That the problems which not just capitalism in general but global capitalism, its extended financial market structures and the colossal levels of mutual interdependence they require and involve, have means that everyone, or many people, know something else needs to be planned and thought through but it's obvious that no one has any clear answers. Some of them because they have a vested interest in things remaining the same, but many others because they want things to change but it's not at all clear what those institutional structures should be. We could defer my book until the new millennium but then we wouldn't be addressing

the problem *now* which is that voice is being closed down *now* by forces using a culture of oppression, of neoliberalism, to do so, and we need to interrupt that if we're to have any hope of a wider debate. I was explicit in the book that I wasn't trying to say anything about the future of capitalism, or even claim I could. How would one write the book now? One would have to acknowledge we're at the beginning of a massive collective discussion about rethinking market societies which tries to salvage a place for democratic process, which is informed by the almost collapse of democratic process in the past two, three years, directly because of the interventions of markets. So we're at the beginning, and we now can't avoid that debate. And voice is at least a clarification of the reference points for that debate. But it doesn't begin to solve or make proposals for the resolution of that debate. But then I don't see anyone else doing that either. I am planning a new book called *Democracy as if People Mattered*, which if I get the time I would like to write as a shorter, polemical book which might say a little bit more about the starting points for that.

I just finished reading a very interesting book by Pierre Rosanvallon, *Democratic Legitimacy*. It's a tough read, and I can't summarize his argument simply because it is very elaborate, but one of the things Rosanvallon points out is that, from the beginning, although it's been for a long time disguised, there have been two sorts of contradictions in the way democracy works. One is that democracy appears to be about the voice of the people but operated through an election mechanism which only gave power to a majority, and the majority is not the people. And the second problem is one of temporality: the moment when the rationale of democracy was crystallized was the moment of elections, which is just one moment in time, leaving uncovered, except on the basis of trust, everything in between the elections. In relation to temporality

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Rosanvallon points out that governments may be inadequate to what “the people” are thinking but it’s impossible for governments to be fully reflexive. So there need to be mechanisms to enable a better process of consultation. Otherwise democracy is empty. Ronsanvallon doesn’t talk very much about neoliberalism, he regards it as a sort of aggravating factor on deeper institutional weakenings of the basis of democracy (a challenge to the legitimacy of institutions and the very notion of bureaucracies, an individualization making any type of collective discourse difficult). So neoliberalism for him is just an aggravating factor, but again he would have written this book in about 2010, and it came it out in 2011. If we look back now to 2010 we realize that it wasn’t quite clear then, as it is now, that the constant commentary in bond markets and money markets on economic change means that whatever governments do, however responsive they are to their “people,” on any scale, they will always be inadequate to the demands of markets on one day or the next day, as happened with Spain this week; in the morning it was fine but by the afternoon it was no longer fine [shared laughter], there was an immediate mismatch between what democracy at some complex level had approved and what markets thought was adequate. And this means that the temporality of markets, which is instant and constantly changing, is now continuously interrupting the temporality of decision-making and the basis, any basis, on which we could think of democracy as a way of putting into practice some form of general will, some version, however complex, of what people want. And this is a really deep problem. It means that there is no basis for squaring the circle between markets and democracy. And yet we can’t do without markets. I am explicit in the book that the book is not against markets. I agree with Amartya Sen that there’s nothing wrong with markets as such, we all enjoy using markets for

various purposes, and it is a very effective way of passing information and enabling certain types of exchange that wouldn't happen through planning: no one's going back to Soviet-planning that I'm aware of. And yet global markets, with the trillions of dollars that are able to move within a few minutes and their force and ability to intervene in any democratic mechanism, that raises a rather different question from being in favour or against markets. And yet we as citizens depend on those global markets too because they fund the travel companies that we rely on, they fund the universities indirectly by enabling us to move across the world and to take up courses, they, indirectly, enable governments to create the research funds that enable our research, none of us can claim to be immune from the benefits, if they are benefits, of global financial markets.

So where does this lead us? I think it means that, first of all, very simply, we have to get more and more used to naming the fact that we live in democracies that aren't working democracies. They're better than fascist states for sure, they're better than states where even the most basic personal liberties are taken away, of course, but they are not working as democracies, they are not working by any of the normal criteria that we thought we could apply as being distinctive to democracies. And this is a problem that we can't run away from. Unless we name the problem, again and again, in our academic writing, in our life as citizens, there's no hope of solving it. Secondly, we need to acknowledge that the conflicts between different institutional axes of the world, political and economic, are now grinding against each other with such force that we may have to experiment with ways of thinking about organizing things differently. We can't go from not having any answers to suddenly collectively developing a plan on a societal, let alone a global, level that will suddenly fix the problem, that's obviously absurd. The problem is so huge and

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multidimensional that even to see the size of the problem is beyond virtually anyone, but that's where experiment becomes important. And that's why I think the Occupy movement is really of profound significance because, read properly, it was much more than a protest, a protest against a singular thing in a singular place: it was a lateral movement which went on expanding because it was so obviously right in its starting points; it said we need to think differently together about the problem, that any instinct of justice about how money should be distributed is not being matched by what happens with the banks, and that any desire to have some democratic control of the economy is immediately trumped by market forces, so our democracies *cannot* work. How do we think about that problem? where do we think about it? who do we think with? In Occupy there was the idea of gathering together, in a sort of liminal space, alongside power but somehow normatively separate from it where nothing was off the table in terms of ideas, no violence equally was on the table. It was about collective thinking. It was a very powerful practice as well as a metaphor. I, in one short piece, described it as being a way to experiment with new ways of forming the general will. Pierre Rosanvallon, in his earlier book *Counter-Democracy*, argues that we've lost the habit of experiencing the general will, we don't know what it is to be in a democracy where what we think somehow resonates with what is done. We're living all the time the experience of dislocation because the institutional contexts for working on the general will don't exist. We don't have many public meetings, big rallies. America is a slight counter-example, but not so much in the end; there they can be more spectacles than serious debates. When we try to protest against local government we don't get anywhere. When we try to protest against national government, there's no hope of influence. So we've lost that habit of experiencing the general will and because of that absence the Occupy

movement started to do things in a different way and had an enormous impact as a result. It pointed in a new direction. Not in the direction of the ultimate answers; people sometimes criticize the Occupy movement for not coming up with the solution to the next state of human organization after capitalism, as if they could, as if anyone could! But it was pointing at a new way of thinking together, a new way of doing collective thought through experiment. And I think experimentation is actually what's needed now. That changes the starting point for discussing the book for sure, because it's a discovery since I finished the book in 2009. No one had thought of the Occupy movement at that point. Although there were some predecessors of course.

To go a long way back to your original question, the starting points have changed. We're no closer to a final answer or a new model but I feel that there's a sense that more and more we're at the very beginnings of a road away from the past towards something different, with no clear sense of the direction but with the sense that we're moving and that there's a will to move, a will to start to find a direction. I don't know whether you have the same sense that something has shifted in the past two years.

R.R.: This shifting context makes me think of the work of J.K. Gibson-Graham. With these evolving markets, non-institutional actors, such as Occupy, and the ways in which what you described as its lateral movements have been circulating, well these all fall in with the way in which Gibson-Graham also rely on Althusser's understanding of the concept of overdetermination, which, according to their reading, "presumes that each site and process is constituted at the intersection of all others and is thus fundamentally an emptiness complexly constituted by what is not without an enduring core or essence" (2006: xxx). This is obviously a somewhat

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problematic ground to formulate a democratic politics, but makes some room for the ways in which non-institutional actors can offer a voiced critique of our current conjuncture, that you just contextualized so well. Would you describe British academia as a non-institutional actor? Do you think that position of critique is still open to it in a genuine way?

N.C.: Just about, I would say. There are lots of forces closing it down. Another reason I wrote the *Voice* book was protesting against the attempt to instrumentalize our research, and to insist that our work has impact. I've written a few essays around the problems that creates and will continue to create, but in the British system there's enough time in the teaching schedule at some institutions and there's enough internal legitimacy for academics at some institutions for them to write and work critically, other places it's tougher. For now, yes it is possible. On the other hand, the British public sphere is a large, complex and highly contested one, where academics, especially those from media and cultural studies and sociology, are not very high up the hierarchy in their speaking positions. So it's not easy at all. I'm realistic about the chances of having any direct impact there. But I think one has to believe in the practice of thinking critically and writing critically, one has to believe that it is an embodied practice that we're engaged in now, in this conversation; if you stop believing in that then you undercut the very reason for being an academic and that's a mistake, so one shouldn't confuse the macro with the micro. The micro is a very important way of sustaining things, of keeping things going while we wait for better opportunities to be heard. So I believe at that basic level that the seminar room remains an important place.

But you mentioned J.K. Gibson-Graham and that book is very important. In that book [*A Post-Capitalist Politics*] they say that the key is to turn the

economy again into a site of decision making, by people, and this is the fundamental point. They were of course massive pioneers in thinking that way, way ahead of most of the debate, and that's clearly right, to contest the idea that people, citizens, don't have any valid locus standi, any status, to intervene and comment on the economy. We've lived for a long time as if it were true, that people had no right to comment. And how did that work? It worked through metaphors of "this is the way it is," "this is the way modernity works," "this is progress," "this is natural," "you can't buck the market," and so somewhere a new language of human agency has to be devised that says, ok, there are such forces, but there are other ways of building things that do not submit people's way of life to the violent interruption of market forces. And they need to be built and they need to be found.

Also inspiring for me before the Occupy movement, was the Transition movement. It does, strangely enough, have a North American origin in some of the debates around peak oil in parts of the United States. It's an educational movement that came out of these debates around peak oil, and Rob Hopkins was its popularizer in Britain. It developed a very simple idea of political pedagogy, not so different from Occupy in many ways. Which was to say, we have a deep problem about energy resources, they're running out, they're going to run out even within our lifetimes conceivably: how do we collectively think about the problems for the economy which won't be sustained by lorries carrying food around; we may need to grow more food closer to home, you may need to grow it with people sitting right next to you in this room, you're going to have to work it out together; how do you start from the fact that we don't know how to think about these things? Not trying to, in a top down way, say "this is what you need to learn," but rather saying "learn it together, think about it together", having identified the problem. So Transition was

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another way of pointing to the problem and the need for collective solutions in this town and in that town and so on. They had the idea that towns that wanted to get involved in this could name themselves “Transition towns” and have these debates and use the logo to nourish the debate and encourage a network to build. And what struck me as really smart about this was that it was pedagogical, it was based on mutual pedagogy, so not so far from Paulo Freire and *Conscientization* from the 1970s; it was based around political ideas developing from the bottom up not from the top down, in fact government had no role in this planned political change at all, except to respond and try and implement what people decided seem to work. It would also involve some withdrawal of the state and some types of intervention to stop people from *not* being able to do things. So it seemed to me an amazing step forward in ideas. Again, not so dissimilar from the idea that you need to break down and reform the general will in some similar way that the Occupy movement offered a year or two later.

R.R.: That reminds me that at the beginning of the book you ask a provocative question: “Can we go further and find starting-points for a new politics in a view of human life as inherently oriented both to social exchange and the form of life we have called voice?” It’s a question that makes me think of John Dewey’s understanding of communication as a medium for the sharing of meanings. For Dewey, communication could be a dynamic form of community-building, it could enliven debate, assure social cohesion, and reignite the deadening forms of the physical transmission of meanings. People, and the American polity in particular for Dewey, would be gathered in and by communication. In a divided world of capital and labour, with “variety” a catch-all term for entertaining abundance as well as the impoverished social

spectrum, the “ideal of communication,” as Dewey put it, could “stand[] as a norm of shared understanding and mutually beneficial self-activity” (Barnett 2003: 60). It was the reconstitution and reorientation of an industrially produced society that was at stake. Given our current, and complicated, postindustrial conjuncture, how do you see labour settings, those places and strictures of work, affecting the forms of social exchange that can take place? Can “communication,” in Dewey’s understanding of the process, still take (its) place?

N.C.: I think you raise a really deep point, which is relevant to a lot of academic ideas. We are lucky to have the institutional freedom to exchange ideas, we’re not subject to targets all the time, the bottom-line of profit, we’re not. At least for the moment. Or, at least under certain dimensions we’re not. And that’s an enormous privilege. And we often forget it and don’t take it seriously enough how great that privilege is, how few people have that. Most people work in situations where they’re not free to speak about life generally, about the economy, about politics, let alone about the objectives of the corporation they’re working for; they’re not free to speak, unless they’re contributing ideas that seem supportive of leadership. They also don’t have the time to speak working under such intense pressure to hit very temporally specific targets, that there is no time for reflection. This is true in journalism and in all lines of business. So the space for politics, the space for reflection, is, on the one hand, inflated and opened up by the Internet. On the other hand, in the actual daily conditions that most people have, it is closed down. So again we have another contradiction, if you like. If you add to that the fact that we have very few metaphors that would frame a debate in society on such an issue, then you’ve really got a lot of practical forces which are against

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democratization at the moment. I think we need to be careful to separate out, on the one hand, certain opportunities and pressures that are forcing an opening up of a certain type of discussion, on the face of it democratization, and, on the other hand (Charles Tilly puts it this way), the “de-democratizing” forces which are closing down democracy at the same time which may prove more powerful: the anti-democratic culture of most workplaces; the fake democracy of consumerism, where we appear to have voice in the development of products but very rarely is that actually the case and the capture by consumerist-type logics, so democratic debate becomes coopted for other ends.

Rosanvallon actually talks about another thing which is that even when people’s stories do get into the media, and more and more spectacular stories have to be taken into account as part of everyday media practice and political practice, often they don’t lead anywhere, they’re just a spectacle: people have been given some money, they’ve been heard, it’s done. There’s no process, there’s no follow-up. So even a spectacular democracy that appears to give voice can actually often deliver the exact opposite and create the very effective illusion that voice is being offered but not the reality. And there’s nowhere for that correction to be made because things have moved on, “the debate has moved on,” as is often said.

So I think the site of voice is a really key question that you raise. Sadly, workplaces don’t operate in democratic ways and that’s why Dewey’s thought remains very, very stimulating. Because Dewey was concerned with the contribution of *communication* to democracy, what it is to actually share knowledge and share ideas and share opinions, what are the material processes that make that possible; he had a determination not to go down the route of elite democracy, not to give up on communication. And he also was quite innovative in thinking of new places for that work. In his book *Art as*

Experience, he was interested in art as a site of craft, people recognizing themselves in a more enriched way, and also talking about change through the metaphor or through the alternative site of art. I think maybe we need to experiment with new sites of talking about change, and find new ways of recognizing each other as able to speak in these new sites. And the university could be such a site. We're free to do that at the moment if we want to. If we can find the energy and the time in the calendar to do this. Do you think that might be worth exploring from the Canadian perspective?

R.R.: Well, that valuing of a very superficial democratization of voice within the institutional setting of many Canadian universities has been almost entirely coopted by administrations that adopt a "Town Hall" model of public consultation as an interface between a supposedly no longer faceless administration and a concrete site where you can have your concerns, and your voice, heard. In the Canadian context at the institutional level of the university, thought about as a space of mobilization, I think things like listservs, face-to-face encounters, and the events that move out of student politicization in a broad sense, make for semi non-institutionalized arenas to think about what sorts of extra-institutional sites for voice can exist. Actually, that reminds me a quote from Rancière that you cite in your book, it revolves around his understanding of oligarchy, "the compulsion to get rid of people and politics," as what neoliberal thought really wants to evacuate. To me this is a provocative understanding of oligarchy as a distribution of power.

N.C.: It's part of the project of naming the problem of democracy. It's saying, we live in democracies that aren't democracies. We live an oxymoron: neoliberal democracies. We then maybe have to find another language.

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Oligopoly is an older language before the notion of democracy was renewed in the 18th century. Oligopoly: that is, rule by the few. Political theory had been endlessly debating it, the virtues of oligopoly versus democracy. Democracy at the time of its renewal was regarded as a rather chaotic thing of casting votes, sudden whims for this or that, going to war, for instance, then not going to war. There was a big debate around whether democracy was a stable form of politics, as Aristotle discusses in his *Politics*.

So oligopoly was once a recognized form of governance, and we're not at all far from that at the moment given that the elites of the business world seem to be utterly immune from any pressure including from those lower down within the business world. Shareholders seem to have very little chance of influencing pay packages. Another term popular a few decades ago was "cleptocracy," used in Latin America where certain elites came in and literally stole the resources. Obviously contemporary Russia is a form of cleptocracy, which operated under the guise of the collapse of the Soviet state. Some states in Africa are clearly cleptocracies. But I think it's appropriate also to say that Britain is a cleptocracy, and America is a cleptocracy, because the levels of inequality we have now in Britain and America are absolutely without precedent. Even at the very beginning of the twentieth century they weren't close to what they are now. And these are resources that are collective resources, assets of companies, assets of government, being coopted and commandeered for private purposes. So it's pretty close to a form of theft even though it operates under the aegis of the law for certain purposes. So it's not technically theft, but I think it has to be named for what it is from the point of view of justice; that is theft, hence cleptocracy.

A new type of language of political criticism is probably useful, but the difficulty is linking up all the different sites. So we have the Quebec student

protests now. Two years ago we had the protests in Britain against the new university reforms, but there was limited resonance in other countries, because of the intensely pressurized battles we all conduct, and because of the lack of a connective language which has come with the collapse of utopian political discourses and then their replacement by different collective languages that the market has brought about. We have yet to develop an alternative collective language which enables us to reach across and see that if the current problem is pretty much the same as the one two years ago in Britain, these organisations should link up to join forces. It's not easy, even though the practical means now exist with the Internet. It tends not to happen because there isn't the political occasion, there's no sense it would make a difference, there's no sense there's any political entity within which new claims could be made as a result of that alliance: who would listen? There's no sense that there's a wider movement going on that this could be part of. But maybe these are things that will gradually come out of the links that get made around particular campaigns, so I don't know whether you found in Quebec there's been any support from Britain or Europe or America, probably not, and we may be at fault for not giving some form of solidarity with what's been happening in Quebec.

R.R.: I think on an activist level there were solidarity rallies in places like New York as well as a few other European cities. But not a great deal more than that, that I know of, in terms of enabling longer lasting forms of activist association.

I'd like to ask one final question on this issue of connective democratic languages. This past weekend in *The Guardian* I was reading an obituary written by Margaret Atwood for Ray Bradbury. In the obituary, Atwood

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describes how she's in the Hilton Hotel in Chicago staying in the same hotel suite where President Obama received the results and news of his election victory. And Atwood has this wonderful description of herself looking into the suite's various mirrors and seeing, in a very Bradburyesque fashion, this dystopian reflection of another presence in the suite—displaced optimism, hopes for another future from the past, Obama awaiting those results. This is a tangential way to help us think about the reevaluation of that optimism and how, over the intervening four years, it has come with a renewal of a certain realism. I think Karen Barad's understanding of "agential realism" in *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, might offer a useful starting point, albeit one rooted in a science studies context, to account for realism and how we can devise better ways of describing the world. She takes issue with the linguistic construction of various types of "objects of inquiry," and what she's trying to complicate is how matter (in her terminology, mattering through intra-action) produces the material and the immaterial on the same plane, in the same quasi-biological evolutionary phase. With this in mind, what sort of materials, in a very concrete sense that may go beyond connective communication technologies, would allow us to supplement the linguistic co-construction of these democratic voices of critique? What sort of material basis, as in infrastructure, does such a movement as Occupy rely on? In this respect, I think the protests that took place in Oakland, from the point of view of actively shaping where spaces of contestation can take place, were both more problematic and more interesting than those that were made manifest in Manhattan.

N.C.: I'm not all that familiar with Karen Barad's work, and it sounds like I should read it. It sounds like she is trying to explore a new materialist language of action in the world which is informed more rigorously by recent

discoveries in science, for example, quantum physics, and I certainly do think the humanities and critical social sciences do need to enrich their language of description and theory, mid-range theorization, I've thought that for a while, and I'm sure that brain science is one place to look. We have here at Goldsmiths a topology unit which is thinking about manifolds and other concepts from topology, thinking of very complex orders and how they change.

Clearly we can't have everything driven by the language of intentionality and the language that we've been historically comfortable with as human agents, that's not enough because we're now dealing with collectivities and flows which involve myriad inputs. Non-linear dynamics is used as the usual metaphor. A concrete, specific language, that is what we need. So I'm very interested in that and I do think it's important, and in relation to voice I do have a small part of the book where I talk about voice for larger organisations and the problem of how, while each individual might know what it is to have a voice and have that voice valued, they don't know what it is to be an organisation where this could be followed through and implemented on a regular basis. Because you have to organize all sorts of sites of speaking and listening in a way that they match up, and you have to organize the temporalities so that they match up too, so that you might have a great discussion today but what happens next year, does it reflect back, how does that happen, how does the response work. So there's a little bit in the book about that but I'm sure a lot more could be added and these are very difficult problems.

There are no easy answers to what infrastructure we need or what material resources for voice beyond the effective use of digital tools. I think what we need more of is a new type of practically-oriented, normative

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discourse about what institutions need if they are to even *begin* to be voice-oriented in their operations. I do have a chapter in the book about the sociology of voice, but it's programmatic, I'm sure there's a lot more to do to apply those principles, to think about how organisations work or fail to work to deliver voice even as they claim they're offering voice. I think there's a lot more to do in developing that sort of language. That language is itself an infrastructure, it is a resource because it provides a way of pointing at something that's not working and taking it apart and enabling us to re-describe it so that we can move on. The absence of that language is a big problem, when added to a political context which says that there's no issue here, markets override that concern. We still have to build the middle order concepts and the everyday language to describe the absence of voice, the failure of voice, and to describe what will be the new configurations. And we're talking about quite complex configurations in space and time that would begin to be an answer to those problems. So we're right at the beginning of finding a language, as you point out in your first question, there is a risk that, from a utopian moment (the sense that we are beginning to imagine something different), power interests or just sheer inertia or the failure to grasp and deal with the issues will lead to a dystopia where we seem locked in a room with no way out, knowing there are no solutions and with no beginnings of a pathway to find them; "we just have to accept it," "whether we like it or not it's going to be forced upon us." The position of Greece today is a case in point. What can one say about that situation? I think we have to stay with the power of imagination.

An inspiring series of books for me at the time I was writing the *Voice* book, were the novels of Jose Saramago, the Portuguese novelist. A radical, politically, but also a remarkable novelist. Saramago wrote two books that

really influenced me. *Blindness*, on what happens when we lose the capacity for sight and we are literally vulnerable to each other in a way that is deranging, that we cannot deal with, so we have no defenses from each other, and asks how is a new ethics and morality built up in these circumstances? But the book that particularly struck me was a book called *Seeing*, which was in fact mainly about not seeing. How, politically, we spend so much time going through the motions of politics and not talking about the very thing that is political. And interestingly, Saramago wrote his book shortly after the announcement of the Iraq war in 2003 in a country, that is Portugal, where (with Spain nearby, whose government strongly supported the war) there was tremendous debate about the rightness or wrongness of the Iraq war. And the story in the book is, basically, that there's an election, an ordinary election, and the only difference is that no one votes. And they don't vote, or rather they do vote, but most of the votes they cast are blank, not because there's a conspiracy or there's a campaign, but because no one thinks it's worth it. And they all make their choice independently that it's not worth voting anymore. The government is profoundly destabilized, they have to reschedule the election: there must be some mistake, there are some dark forces at work, and the same thing recurs because people have concluded that there is no point in voting anymore. Then the government starts to get violent, and send out an investigator, the main narrator, and a spiral of violence develops. The government cannot deal with that "no," the absolute refusal of the legitimacy to govern. Now there's a novel which is imagining a way beyond an absolute impasse. It doesn't end particularly happily, but at least it names the problem in a way that imaginative literature can do, or art occasionally can. But by operating with metaphor and imagining liminal possibilities, as for example Ray Bradbury did, fiction or science fiction that can name the problem, that

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isn't afraid of making connections to actuality, may have a lot to offer right now. And again the university is a place where those imaginative horizons can be made explicit, can be explored collectively, and then built upon and linked to actual processes. So yes we still have to have hope that universities are those types of places, remain such sites for change. And I, for the moment, still believe in that.

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