

# ***Shrinking Public, Politics Melting into Air and Possibilities of a Way-out***

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## **Shrinking Public**

Since the late 1970s, we have been living under neo-liberal hegemony. The most obvious aspect of this globally influential hegemony is, inarguably, the constant and violent attack of the “private” on the “public.” Moreover, by exploiting the existing overlap between the terms “public” and “state,” or in other words, by activating available associations between the two terms, neo-liberal ideology is able to present its attacks on the “public” as if they target “state” and “state intervention.” By doing so, it manages to present itself as a sincere and loyal pursuer of the deep-rooted libertarian tradition of classical liberalism and, therefore, to conceal its special tie to the state, and at the same time corners its opponents right from the beginning, into a position of allegedly defending the “state” and “state intervention.”

All the adversities and afflictions caused by the “welfare state” in the West, “state socialism” in the East and the “anti-democratic state structures” in the Third World were employed as a pretext for destroying the “public” and turning its ruins into a game reserve for private enterprise. First, the “spiritual – “cultural,” “political” – presence of the “public” was targeted, then its “physical” – “social” – spaces were bombarded one by one.

In the course of the establishment and institutionalisation of neo-liberal hegemony, not only all kinds of – whether republican or socialist – positive (defined inclusively) notions of public space based on the idea of common good, that is the notion of a “public space declared to be the common property of everyone,” but also all kinds of negative notions (defined exclusively) of public space based on the idea that everyone is free to choose and live according to “their own private good,” that is the notion of a “public space declared to be no man’s land”, have come to be labelled obsolete, conservative, and even “reactionary”, and have been degraded as a result.

Neo-liberal hegemony could bear the adjective “collective” only when it denoted a corporate form; it would not and did not allow any space – especially one which “belongs to everyone or belongs to no one” – to stay out of its own gunshot range. Accordingly, “public space” not only fell from grace as an idea, but was also attacked physically. Avenues, streets and squares in cities ceased to be the public spaces of the citizen community and became glittering commercial showcases of the consumer community in a very short time. From then on, the pulse of the city started to beat not in “agoras,” or squares, but in agora-phobic shopping centres.

Streets used to remind those who live private lives in private homes, and work in offices built as fortresses of private property, of the “public” in every step they took. The very same streets which bear deep traces of a tormenting “common” history that made those private lives and the building of those fortresses possible eventually lost their public identities and became the private labyrinths of the “world of commodities.”

There are many significant consequences of the constant and violent attacks, or rather invasions of the “private” on “public space.” However, I maintain that the most important of these is what we can call “the melting of politics into air.” Here “melting into air” refers to two different but related conditions. The first is very clear: the shrinkage of “public space” naturally gives way to the distressful state where politics and political subjects are uprooted.

For one thing, as we mentioned before, city squares are ceasing to be the property of the “residents of the city.” This claim has one very material implication: we no longer have “squares,” or “agoras” as physical spaces where we can come together; or to say the least, they are decreasing in number. Spaces where citizens can gather, meet and encounter each other are rapidly melting into air.

We are well aware of the fact that this “melting into air” is actually a product of the all-encompassing “commodification” process. Therefore, speaking of a blatant “invasion” might be more appropriate. Squares are no longer the “empty” spaces for citizens to meet because now

they have owners. Now, there are many places you cannot stroll as a citizen. You would be admitted only if disguised, only with the identity of a consumer.

Without doubt, the physical structuring, or more precisely re-structuring processes in cities also tend to increasingly restrict public spaces. The residents of cities surrounded by intricate webs of highways and roads are no longer the pedestrians. They can become a part of the city only by means of and to the extent allowed by their cars.

This constitutes a grave problem, especially for opponent radical movements. In such kinds of privatized spaces, you can only organize a “pirate” demonstration with your citizen identity, which eventually is another indicator that citizens cannot go about in their own countries unless they are disguised. There is a growing tendency to sanction political demonstrations solely in “allocated” places, “reserved for this purpose”, and most often located somewhere “far” away from the city centre. These signal that politics has been banished from the “polis,” the real arena of politics, and exiled to the peripheries of cities.

Accordingly, demonstrations are becoming strangely *invisible*. You are going to have a demonstration, but in an “isolated” space; so, to whom are you going to demonstrate? Isn’t it the aforementioned process that turns political demonstrations into dull rituals, silent “shows” like football matches played in stadiums without spectators?

Inarguably, at this very moment it is possible to say that squares, streets and the like which have been invaded by the “private” were the traditional spaces of politics, but contemporary “public spaces” have taken on a novel and utterly different form, so now, especially today, it is more correct to speak of the expansion rather than shrinkage of “public space.” The argument is valid; as a matter of fact, the second condition implied by “melting into air” is related to this phenomenon.

We already know that nature dislikes absence! Naturally, the absence of city squares was rapidly replaced by something else. I think we can say that the media has claimed the former political function of “squares.” Of course, this not a simple replacement; it has dire political consequences. For one thing we can say without hesitation that even the presence of a political movement in real squares has come to depend on its visibility in the media in one way or another. I had read that the IRA used to postpone any bomb attacks, if they were not going to make the BBC primetime evening news. Is the conclusion that today this irony has become our daily reality, too far-fetched?

Some writers claim that “media-dominated” republics are transforming into “media democracies” and we have to reflect on this. I presume what it implies is that the media is becoming one of the main institutions of democratization for a significant part of present day societies. Parliaments and political parties – almost everywhere – have been subjected to a rapid and constant process whereby they have lost the confidence of their citizens. This, together with the above mentioned factors like the shrinkage and melting into air of “public spaces,” have radically transformed the main function of the media as *a medium of communication* between political institutions and citizens. Today, the media is no longer *a medium* of political communication; it has gradually become the main *location* where this communication takes place. In other words, today the media is not only the location where politics makes its presence, its debut; but it is also where politics takes place, and maybe to put it correctly, where politics is structured. Without doubt, the media is still where real public spaces are seen. However, in the absence or shortage of other means of visibility, and hence their ineffectiveness, the initiative of determining how and how much these spaces are going to be visible ceases to be an initiative and becomes de facto power. We can say that this power makes it possible for the media to become the *unique* “square” through which all squares can be seen, and this must be what is referred to by the phrase “media democracy.”

This, undoubtedly, has extremely complicated and significant consequences. It is impossible to touch upon all of them here. However, we can point to two issues related to the concept of

“structuring/organisation” noted above. First, like we said before, today politics has to reshape itself in relation to the gaze of the media. Real politics or professional politics put aside, even “amateur” political demonstrations are increasingly employing “temptation” strategies which will attract the media. The ‘cunningness’ of football spectators who carry the logo of the TV channel broadcasting the match to make sure that they will appear on TV is reflected in the behaviours and attitudes of political activists. Accordingly, political demonstrations are transformed into “shows;” and perhaps more dangerously, this is so because the media “formats” these demonstrations despite the intentions of the activists. And this is the second issue I would like to raise: media reshaping politics.

The issue concerning the “images” of real squares in the media is self-evident. Nevertheless, this second result, that the media reshapes politics, is much graver. Without doubt this is about the media becoming the only real square for politics. The transformation of politics into a commercial strategy; the reduction of political propaganda to a marketing strategy; and consequently the transformation of politics into a non-political business, a kind of “performance,” a kind of “showbiz”, I believe, are the trademarks of the reinvention of politics by media. Or let’s put it this way: this is the inevitable end of politics which plays ot not in the “squares” but to the “media” as a last resort...

### **Politics melting into air**

In order to find the key to politics playing out strictly on screens, we have to look away from the screens to the real world... For instance, Zygmund Bauman emphasizes: “The real powers that shape the conditions under which we all act these days flow in global space, while our institutions of political action remain by and large tied to the ground; they are, as before, local.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, here Bauman points to the paradox articulated by Manuel Castell: “increasingly local politics in a world structured by increasingly global processes.”<sup>2</sup>

This is a serious paradox indeed. Bauman writes: “Because they stay mainly local, political agencies operating in urban space tend to be fatally afflicted with an insufficiency of the power to act, and particularly to act effectively and in a sovereign manner, on the stage where the drama of politics is played.”<sup>3</sup> That is, according to Bauman our political organizations have remained outside “politics.” Yet, we may ask: outside which “politics”? The answer we can gather from what we have read so far will be, no doubt, outside the main “stage where the drama of politics is played.” However, Bauman continues: “Another result, though, is the dearth of politics in extraterritorial cyberspace, the playground of powers.” Therefore, we can conclude that our political institutions are not excluded from the political scene; rather, “the political stage” itself has been restructured; so to say, the thing called “politics” has been gradually depoliticized. I think this the reason why Bauman talks about “real powers” and “playground of power.” Now, we are face to face not with political powers in the classical sense, but with “naked” powers and forces, and this is the core issue. That is, politics has actually been transformed into a “show”; it is a screen business now not a square business.

In fact, at first sight, it seems like politics has been unleashed in the streets, but only like a bull unleashed in the streets of Madrid for show purposes... Bauman goes on: “Evicted from and barred access to cyberspace, politics fall backs and rebounds on affairs that are ‘within reach’, on local matters and neighborhood relations. For most of us and for most of the time, these seem to be the *only* issues we can ‘do something about’, influence, repair, improve, redirect. Only in local matters can our action or inaction ‘make a difference’, whereas for other admittedly ‘superlocal’ affairs there is (or so we are repeatedly told by our political leaders and all other ‘people in the know’) ‘no alternative’.”<sup>4</sup> “Our political leader and all other ‘people in the know’” interpret the

<sup>1</sup> Akışkan Aşk: İnsan İlişkilerinin Kırılganlığına Dair, trans. I. Ergüden, Versus Kitap, 2009.  
[Liquid love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds, Wiley-Blackwell, 2003, p. 100.]

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 101.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

“global” as “natural” and because of this, again in Bauman’s words, “Even matters with undoubtedly global, far away and recondite sources and causes enter the realm of political concerns solely through their local offshoots and repercussions. The global pollution of air and water supplies turns into a *political* matter when a dumping ground for toxic waste is allocated next door, in ‘our own backyard’, in frighteningly close, but also encouragingly ‘within reach proximity’ to our homeground.”<sup>5</sup> The sources and causes of all these matters are – undoubtedly! – *natural* and therefore outside the reach of politics. Undoubtedly, what we can conclude from this is rather obvious: since politics is assigned to find local solutions to global matters, it is only authorized to manage the insoluble. This is the role cut out for the politics in the restructured “political stage.”

It is apparent that this situation will lead politics to a serious legitimacy crisis: what would then be the function of political institutions and organisations which are “afflicted with an insufficiency of the power to act, and particularly to act effectively and in a sovereign manner, on the stage where the drama of politics is played”? And in whose name are they going to take over this function? When problems are naturalised and dragged out of the sphere of politics and therefore, insolubility is acknowledged, what will be the function of politics? Furthermore, as the notion of the “public” has been destroyed both spiritually and physically, who and what will give politics the legitimacy and the right to take over the responsibility of solving, or better, “managing” problems? These questions, undoubtedly, take us right to the core of the problem referred to as “crisis of representation.”

The prevalence of the attitude so-called “political cynicism” is evident almost everywhere in the world – whether “developed” or “underdeveloped,” “West” or “East,” “neo-liberal” or “post-communist.” A regime which reduced politics to a form of “management” both for those who govern and for those who are governed, and placed the notion of “citizenship,” and more importantly, its own presence and own promises inside quotation marks; elections turned into hollow rituals; decreasing voting rates; bizarre parties which do not have “partisans” or supporters and therefore try to win the floating votes in every election period; and a system that does not have a “left or right”... All these can be considered to be the manifestations of the phenomenon called “crisis of representation.”

Among the representatives, the “crisis of representation” leads to a condition where they “lose their foothold.” Thinking about the difference between classical parties that represent the interests of the “people”, or to make a narrower and more realistic definition, the interests of “classes,” and parties that have no concerns whatsoever other than seeking the “favour of the voters”, may help us to understand this “condition.”

“Interests” are relatively stable references of representation; on the other hand, “favours” are similar to speculative reference points which are too instable to make the “representation” relation possible; they may be said to be “metaphysical” in character. In such a system, parties do not represent the will behind the votes they receive, but they own it. The key to understanding the obviously cynical attitude of present day “voters” is maybe right here. Why would you take a system seriously if your only vote is no longer yours at the moment you cast it?

Then the following can be claimed: the manifestation of the “crisis of representation” within the context of those represented is a state of “groundlessness.” We could also say this is the the need of “belonging” not being fulfilled. Citizenship ceases to be a stable right and is reduced to a duty, an extremely instable “favour” you demonstrate in recurring elections. Thus, naturally you cannot feel “at home” within any party or organization, or even in the whole political system since you are excluded from the system in which you have to live in.

To sum up: “crisis of representation” is the name for the lost contact between parties, organizations and even systems without any foothold, and groundless citizens, or to put it correctly, people at large. And without doubt, this is a rather general crisis. That is, it is an all-

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pp. 100-101.

encompassing crisis impacting not only establishment parties and organizations but also and especially anti-establishment ones. For, within the present system, “having no foothold” is not an outrage but a blessing for establishment parties. It has an “extenuating” effect for them since when they lose their foothold they can ascend in the system. On the other hand, the opposite is true for anti-establishment parties and organizations. They experience the same thing as an increasing burden; when they lose their foothold they hit the rock bottom because they cannot reach the summit and are pushed to the margins of the system. Thus, I think we can make the following conclusion: the “crisis of representation” comes down to a matter of “management” for establishment parties and organizations; yet, it is an “existential” matter for anti-establishment parties and organizations.

We have mentioned before that the “crisis of representation” manifests itself as “legitimacy crisis” among the representatives whereas it manifests itself as an “identity crisis” among those represented. I presume now we can add the following: no doubt, the two crises are interrelated, and they mutually trigger each other, but, it is the *legitimacy crisis* for establishment parties and organisations and the *identity crisis* for anti-establishment parties and organizations that have more importance. In other words, it seems like for establishment parties and organisations the issue is to overcome, or defer the legitimacy crisis and for the others it is to overcome the identity crisis. I think we can even say provisionally that, the main concern for anti-establishment parties and organizations is to deepen the “legitimacy crisis” and thus to make it “unmanageable” for establishment parties and organizations; and on the other hand, to urgently do whatever is possible to overcome the “identity crisis,” to find ways of overcoming it before it is too late.

To explain the issue more clearly and to point to possibilities of a way out I would like to give three concrete examples: two of these are from Russia, and the third one is from Turkey. I believe these examples coincide with instances when the shrinking public took a breath and politics melting into air got a foothold even if momentarily. Accordingly, I maintain that we have to reflect on these examples at length and urgently imagine and implement similar ones... I will start with possibilities of a way out that emerged in Russia and finally I will finish by pointing to a possibility that momentarily appeared and disappeared in Turkey.

### **Possibilities of a way out**

Recently I have read a quite interesting article by Irina Aristarkhova that examines the manifestations of the crisis of representation in post-soviet Russia in 1990s. Aristarkhova points to the anti-representative attitude that is commonly observed among oppositional movements in post-soviet Russia. She quotes the following from an influential article published in 1998 by Anatoly Osmolovsky, who coined the name and was a forerunner of the political-artistic movement called *Moscow Actionism*: “The absence of a real world knowledge, the destruction of homogenous social structures and sub-cultures, and the impossibility of developing a reasonable behaviour make it inevitable that we deny one of the political principles of social government, namely the principle of representation.”

Aristarkhova claims that this anti-representative attitude or persistent avoidance from “speaking in the name of others,” which is commonly observed in especially the left-wing opposition, can be considered a product of an implicit reaction against the superficially “politically correct” behaviour of the West. However, without doubt, this attitude has many dimensions and goals that cannot be reduced to such a reaction. Anyway, Aristarkhova, makes this very clear when giving examples of political manoeuvres developed to overcome the crisis of representation.

Aristarkhova emphasises two examples. The first of these is the ironic election campaign, which was devised and implemented by the above-mentioned group, *Moscow Actionism*: a *Campaign Against All Parties*. The second is, the Union of the Committees of Soldiers’ Mothers of Russia, an organisation which resembles the Saturday Mothers who organized an influential protest campaign in Turkey.

Aristarkhova writes that the *Campaign against all Parties*, had an ironic contribution to the election process. The campaign let itself be heard mainly through street demonstrations, publications and exhibitions. In addition to these, it planned and managed to be a participant in the elections as a “side against all sides.” Hence, Russian voters had the option to vote “Against All Parties, Groups and Candidates” along with the existing options. The participation of this group in the elections had an ironic character because it had a serious aim quite distinct from the “cynical” attitude of not participating in elections, which is very common in Russia and in many other places. For one thing, according to the current election law in Russia, if other parties or candidates get fewer votes than the “Against All” party or if the party itself gets more than fifty percent of the total votes, elections are cancelled and all other parties and candidates lose their right to take part in the following election. Consequently, the preference to be “Against All” had literally positive outcomes as opposed to not voting or casting an invalid vote; this is the possibility of stating your preference actively by erasing all the other alternatives instead of stepping aside and staying silent .

Aristarkhova states that this campaign was not very successful in the early 1990s, but became increasingly influential during the years to come. Besides its success, it is clear that the campaign was able to generate the effect we previously mentioned, that is, it exacerbated the legitimacy crisis while assuaging the identity crisis. This presents a possibility for a form of organisation where people who feel they don't belong anywhere experience a feeling of belonging – even if only temporarily – and therefore the horizons opened by this form of action deserves to be examined thoroughly.

The second example Aristarkhova gives, as we have already stated, is the Union of the Committees of Soldiers' Mothers of Russia (CSM). Established in 1989, the Union works in domains related to military-political institutions and struggles to reshape them. It tries to supply the families of soldiers who died during their mandatory military service with financial and legal support; publishes data and information about death incidents in the military; conducts lobbying activities for amnesty legislation and military reforms in the Parliament; etc. CSM was one of the organizations in Russia which opposed the war on Chechnya actively, and was awarded the Dean McBride Peace Award in 1995 for their efforts.

All these set aside, what Aristarkhova writes about the political significance of this organization is extremely interesting and important. She maintains that the CSM manifested a rather authentic and interesting way of overcoming the identity crisis, which is worth commenting on. According to Aristarkhova, in an era where common goals and principles evaporate, differences of opinion become more and more visible, in a world where the “representation” claims of representatives are seriously challenged, when it is becoming all the more impossible for people to commit themselves to a cause, to a party, that is to devote all their energies to a common struggle in the name of the same ideals with their “comrade” party members, the CSM constitutes a concrete example for overcoming all these problems.

Aristarkhova thinks that belonging is a natural need directly related to the notion of “friendship,” to feelings of loyalty and friendship which divide the world into two camps: “friends” and “enemies.” Thus, she acknowledges that the lack of a clearly defined enemy can mean the absence of a base or support in terms of political struggle, and in order to confirm this once more, she quotes the words of Derrida in *The Politics of Friendship*, where he critically analyzes the famous, classical “friend-enemy” formulation of Carl Schmitt: “The loss of an enemy results in the loss of political ‘Self’.”

In an era, where “the enemy,” better to say, “the real enemy” is rather ambiguous, hence an addressee cannot be determined, this lack of an opponent/addressee would – naturally – lead to an inevitable state of “lack of direction” in the political sphere – and again would naturally erode the political subject itself in the first place: If I do not have an enemy, who is my friend, and more importantly, who am I?

The political alternative Derrida offers to this dazzling state is the construction of a new political understanding based on the reformulation of the notions of “friendship” and “fraternity” beyond the “friend-enemy” distinction. Aristarkhova, moving on from the CSM example, proposes a different alternative which can be called “motherhood based politics.” According to her, this political alternative goes beyond the dualistic logic of the “us-them” distinction. Consequently, as can be seen clearly in the CSM example, the absence of an “enemy” does not hinder the political activity based on the notion of motherhood because the CSM does not designate anybody as other. For one thing, people who can be designated as “enemies” also have mothers and CSM addresses not the “enemies,” but their mothers. Therefore, motherhood takes sides not through “exclusion” but through “inclusion.” Secondly, a mother’s interests and convictions do not need a Code or a Law. On the contrary, they are self-legitimizing and do not need to be legitimated by another source.

And finally, the CSM experience suspends the very idea of “representation,” so it is worth quoting Aristarkhova verbatim as her words are directly related to the issue we are addressing here: “When someone represents another person, he/she places himself/herself on the same level with the other person. Representation is founded on ‘sameness’ and the experience of difference usually deteriorates a politics based on representation. People think that as the resemblance between them and those they represent increases (in terms of class, sexual preference, gender, ethnical background, disability etc.), their right to representing them grows respectively. In the case of the *Soldiers’ Mothers* the issue is totally different. They do not represent other mothers who love their children; rather they represent people who are radically different from them. They represent every actual or potential soldier who connects them to each other via the symbol of motherhood.”

Aristarkhova still speaks of “representing,” but I presume we have to use the verb in quotation marks here since it seems that, if there is a “representation” in this case, it is not the representation of an entity, say of people, but the representation of a “value,” a human value called “motherhood.” After all, Aristarkova, too, with a reference to Levinas, stresses the altruism embodied in the notion of motherhood, which is an “existence not for itself, but for the other.” This makes it clear that we have entered a radically different domain of politics than politics based on representation.

Finally, the third example is from Turkey. I propose to take a closer look at the “social will” embodied in the crowd gathered on Halaskargazi Street on 19 January 2007, in the hours following the assassination of Hrant Dink, a journalist of Armenian origin and the editor-in-chief of *Agos* newspaper, who was shot behind the head in front of the offices of the newspaper on this street. What was the nature of the “social will,” the “social conscience” which appeared and disappeared there like a ghost?

First of all, it was defying darkness. It showed how an inconsolable and irreparable grief can bring people together. Of course, at the same time it showed how streets can regain their “public” character.

Secondly, it seems to me that, it was able to gather everybody together with one of the most radical slogans throughout the history of Turkey which explained the situation in a nutshell: “We are all Armenians!” No doubt, this slogan is loaded with infinite meanings which cannot be consumed through interpretation. Thus, we can list only a few of them here.

To begin with, this slogan was the expression of a political cry that had no “enemies.” The slogan itself is sure to have enemies, and it actually did. It even aroused an angry outcry. However, the slogan itself was not directed at any enemies, and as a result, it caused the enmity directed at it to inevitably miss its target and fall into void. For, in this slogan the phrase “we are all” was not a totalizing or “totalitarian” quantifier, like the word “every” in the slogan “Every Turk is born a soldier.” Namely, this “we” was not a comprehensive “we” meaning “we are speaking in the name of the others,” but a participatory “we” meaning “we all who endorse this slogan.” Therefore, when someone made an objection saying, “I am not an Armenian, I am essentially a

Türk!" it only meant "I don't agree with you," and this person naturally ceased to be the addressee of this "we."

Thirdly, most of the people who gathered there did not represent anyone or anything but was present there *personally*. I say most, not all, because certainly there were some people who came dressed in attire disclosing their ethnic background or carrying banners revealing their political identity. However, the majority, if I may say, came there bare-naked because the incident was too harrowing to become a pretext of something else. Therefore, what is called "politics" was mostly absent as a name, but the political character and attribute of everything was out in the open.

Jacques Rancière once said that the slogan "We are all Algerians!" voiced by French radicals in 1961 in Paris as a protest against the oppression of Algerian immigrants "by the French police in the name of the people of France" had nothing to do with a wish to *identify* themselves with Algerians. It could not even be interpreted as an attempt to empathize with them because this would not be possible in the first place.<sup>6</sup> According to him, rather than forming a prospective identification, this slogan was intended to break apart an existing one. Those who cried out the slogan, at that very moment, did not wish to be Algerians but rather wanted to express that they were ashamed of being French, more precisely, they were ashamed of the things done in their name. In other words, they did not want to take on another identity, and consequently have the right to speak for Algerians. On the contrary, they wanted to tear apart and get rid of their existing identity, and in Rancière's words, hoped to have the possibility to express themselves quietly in the "crack" or "fissure" between "two identities neither of which they could identify with."

This was what people did after Hrant Dink's assassination, and that "will," or "conscience" that seemed to appear momentarily illustrated that a participatory solidarity which is not based on representation but, on the contrary, threatens the legitimacy of "representation" was still possible. We know that this "state of solidarity" was ephemeral; still, it was encouraging. After all, even in the form of a rebellion against an identity, it created a possibility to satisfy the human need of belonging.

Translated from Turkish by Nalan Özsoy

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<sup>6</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Siyasalın Kıyısında* [Aux bords du politique], trans. A.U. Kılıç, Metis Yayınları, 2007.