INTRODUCTION

Dissensus: borderlands @ 10

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This is the tenth anniversary of the journal borderlands: congratulations are definitely in order. The journal has, without doubt, lived up to its manifesto, set out by Anthony Burke in November 2001—to provide ‘a partial, yet globally accessible, opening’ against the hostility posed by ‘the epistemic power-politics of modern public life’. This has been made possible by the various contributions from a multitude of individuals in numerous capacities: as authors, reviewers, editors, editorial board members, readers, and friends. The collective energy and power of the multitude that make up the borderlands community is sizeable. There are so many people to thank that any attempt to do so would fall short: thus a collective shout-out to all in appreciation!

The collective energy is also powerful in another sense: the debates, issues and concerns that have been part of the journal’s history testify to the veracity and robustness with which the journal tackles and deals with the prescient and pressing concerns that animate the world we live in. The issues it critically explores—war on terror, sovereignty and indigenous rights, violence and international relations, freedom, justice and responsibility, democracy and the state of exception, nonviolence and modernity, religion and sexuality, whiteness studies, and many more—seek to expose the violences of what Jacques Rancière (2010, p. 36) calls police. The police, for Rancière, ‘is not a social function but a symbolic constitution of the social. The essence of the police is neither repression nor even control over the living. Its essence is a certain manner of partitioning the sensible’ (2010, p. 36). It is, in other words, about the cutting up, division of the social, ‘of the world (de monde) and of people (du monde), the nemeïn upon which the nomoi of the community are founded’ (Rancière 2010, p. 36). The partition of the sensible thus both excludes and separates and at the same time determines participation. It is a force of power that ‘presupposes a distribution of what is visible and what not, of what
can be heard and what cannot’ (Rancière 2010, p. 36). It is a force of power that regulates and determines what can be said, done and seen—the structured rhythm and flow of society in which everything has its place, its ordered location. Police, thus, is ‘characterized by the absence of a void and of supplement: society is here made up of groups tied to specific modes of doing, to places in which these occupations are exercised, and to modes of being corresponding to these occupations and these places. In this matching of functions, places and ways of being, there is no place for any void’ (Rancière 2010, p. 36). The absence of void, the supplement, marks the absence of dissensus or the possibility of dissensus precisely because the void, or supplement, challenges the forms of distribution in place. This is precisely what borderlands has been concerned with since its inception a decade ago: interrogating the violence of ‘exclusions at work’ (May 2008, p. 48).

The ten-year history of the journal can also be situated in another way: this is a journal that embarked on its critical commitments to respond to important issues of our social world at very troubling times. As Burke (2002) in the editorial to the first issue writes, this is:

a time of sovereignty asserted and diffused, of borders transgressed, questioned and enforced, of violence that is exercised with uncertain justice and legal foundation, but is exercised nonetheless. A time, a world where states assert their own law, criminalise, deter and detain, and in so doing infringe international law and universal human rights. A world where capital flows across borders with rapidity and impunity but the flow of people is the subject of increasing anxiety and control. The world after September 11, of the second Palestinian Intifada, of Operations ‘Enduring Freedom’ and ‘Defensive Shield’, a world of homeland security, border protection and anti-terror. A world where terror is met with terror, where security is premised on insecurity, where the politics of fear and the inevitability of conflict—not freedom or justice—seem the only thing.

We could say, in other words, that the journal responded to what Giorgio Agamben names as the state of exception. Tracing the concept of state of exception and its relationship to sovereignty, Agamben suggests that the state of exception is ‘the dominant paradigm of government in contemporary politics’ (2005, p. 2). Drawing on the immediacy of the global war on terror, Agamben argues that ‘the transformation of a provisional and exceptional measure [the creation of a state of emergency or exception] into a technique of government threatens radically to alter … the structure and meaning of the traditional distinction between constitutional forms [democracy and absolutism]’ (2005, p. 2). In other words, the state of exception has become a permanent feature of democratic societies, manifest most explicitly in the USA Patriot Act, ‘which authorized the “indefinite detention” and trial by “military commissions” … of noncitizens suspected of involvement in terrorist activities’ (Agamben 2005, p. 3). The creation of a permanent state of exception signals not the rule of a specific law, or ‘a special kind of law (like the law of war);
rather ... it is a suspension of the juridical order itself' (Agamben 2005, pp. 3-4). The suspension of the juridical order does not then mean that the sovereign power, built upon a set of juridical orders and structures, is under threat. Rather, it consolidates and ensures the survival of sovereign power precisely because the state of exception opens the possibility for the production and institution of law-preserving, sovereignty affirming measures that ‘lie outside the sphere of law’ (Kruger 2005, p. 341). That is to say, the state of exception—a space devoid of law, a zone of anomies, in which all legal determinants ... are deactivated’ (Agamben 2005, p. 50)—produces the very conditions for the use of extra-legal measures to ensure the survival of sovereign power. This is precisely how and when “the juridico-political system transforms itself into a “killing machine” (Agamben 2005, p. 86), where rights, equality, democracy can be diminished, superseded and rejected in the process of claiming this extension of power by a government. None of this should come as much of a surprise when the state of exception, as Agamben puts it, ‘has today reached its maximum worldwide deployment’ (2005, p. 87).

Quite sadly, ten years after Burke announced the arrival of borderlands, the impetus, the need for the journal remains unabated: this is an indictment of the world we live in for it means that the violences, the police order and the state of exception continue. At the same time the presence of borderlands is recognition of the interruptive power of a committed, critical and radical community seeking to push boundaries, attack thresholds, and reconfigure accepted institutions, practices, social, cultural and economic forms, with the aim of articulating another biopolitical possibility; or more precisely, other biopolitical possibilities. In other words, the issues that make up borderlands also do something else. They also, and perhaps more importantly, seek to expose, make visible, and articulate the void or supplement in the sensible that is always-already constitutive of a police order. As Todd May points out, in The Political Thought of Jacques Rancière, as much as police order conceals the supplement, ‘there is no police order without the participation of the people, those people who are politically invisible, each in her proper place. There is something in the sensible, then, that can, by expressing itself, disrupt the sensible that it partially constitutes’ (2008, pp. 48-9). Put another way, the dangerous supplement is always-already constituted within a police order; its expression interrupts the silencing, marginalisation, rendering invisible that which takes place through the partition of the sensible. This is what politics is about: it ‘stands in distinct opposition to the police’ (Rancière 2010, p. 36), it is ‘before all else ... an intervention in the visible and the sayable’ (2010, p. 37), and whose ‘essence ... is dissensus’ (2010, p. 38). Dissensus is not simply a conflict of opinions or interests; it is more precisely ‘a dispute over what is given and about the frame within which we sense something is given’ (2010, p. 69). It is, in other words, about producing a space, a possibility, for both the included and excluded to co-exist, reconfiguring ‘the nemein upon which the nomoi of the community are founded’ so that those constituted differently by the partition of the sensible can unite, refuse the consensus upon which police order is
arranged and distributed. In his review of Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics, May (2010) frames Rancière’s notion of politics and dissensus in this way:

For Rancière, politics is not a matter of what people receive or demand. It is not a matter of the institutional creation of just social arrangements. Rather, it is a matter of what people do, and in particular what they do that challenges the hierarchical order of a given set of social arrangements. To challenge such a hierarchical order is to act under the presupposition of one's own equality. Such action, if it is political, is going to be collective rather than individual. It will concern a group of people (or a subset of that group) who have been presupposed unequal by a particular hierarchical order, as well as those in solidarity with them, acting as though they were indeed equal to those above them in the order, and thus disrupting the social order itself. What are disrupted are not only the power arrangements of the social order, but, and more deeply, the perceptual and epistemic underpinnings of that order, the obviousness and naturalness that attaches to the order. Such a disruption is what Rancière calls a dissensus ... A dissensus is not merely a disagreement about the justice of particular social arrangements, although it is that as well. It is also the revelation of the contingency of the entire perceptual and conceptual order in which such arrangements are embedded, the contingency of what Rancière calls le partage du sensible, the partition or distribution of the sensible.

A quick survey of the various issues of the journal such as ‘Borderphobias’ (2002), ‘On What Grounds’ (2002), ‘Unassumable Responsibility’ (2004), ‘Strange Democracies’ (2005), ‘Regimes of Terror’ (2005), ‘States of Exception’ (2006), ‘Postcolonial Politics’ (2007), ‘Indigenous Bodies’ (2008), and ‘Rethinking Politics’ (2009), to name a few, demonstrate that they engage in dissensus, disputing the constitution of regimes of power, interrupting the terms upon which political subjects are named, created and perpetuated, and opening new spaces and possibilities of enunciation. These previous contributions, as well as the ones on offer in this present issue, do something, they perform an action that begins with, and presupposes the idea of equality (which is already an interruption into police order which presupposes inequality). So, for instance, interrogations into the war on terror in a number of issues begin with the presupposition that the dominant construction of the figure of the terrorist is reductive for it is connected to the global war on terror imperative led by the United States. They dispute the frame within which subjects are named (as terrorists, enemies) and challenge ‘the perceptual and epistemic underpinnings of that order’. This is politics as dissensus. Similarly, in this present issue, which closes the 10th year of the journal, the five contributions dispute the terrains upon which food security, terror(ism), food crisis, sovereignty and state power, and citizenship are framed and open a space for rethinking our ‘perceptual and epistemic’ conceptions of such orders. This, again, is politics as dissensus.
Further, for Rancière, as May (2010) points out ‘such action, if it is political, is going to be collective rather than individual’; politics as dissensus, in other words, is a collective enterprise and in that regard the contributions to borderlands plug into, connect with, other movements, initiatives, forces, resistances. The issues the journal concerns itself with, the global readership it receives, and the links it has with other peoples, institutions, and critical circuits demonstrate that borderlands is not isolated in its project; it is more precisely part of a larger dissensus assemblage that struggles to expose the contingencies of different police orders, interrupt the flow of power, challenge the terrain of police and simultaneously stage a politics. The collective assemblage to which borderlands belongs seeks to reimagine a social order, participate in what Rancière terms ‘a dissensual re-configuration of the common experience of the sensible’ (2010, p. 140).

This issue, which I have themed ‘Disensus’ to mark borderlands @ 10, opens with Bethany Turner’s article ‘Embodied Rights: Food Security, the body, and GMOs’ which critically engages with the constitution of the idea of food security in international law. Turner argues that the structures, policies, and approach to food aid and food security, while being concerned with the body, fail to take up an ‘embodied human-rights based approach to food security’. This, the author argues, is fundamental to the discourse of food security. The body, while central to food security, is simultaneously killed by the very system that seeks to foster life. It is, in other words, necropolitical (Mbembe 2003). The body in policies on and about food security has been conceived, constituted, through a specific biopolitical regime premised on meeting the basic nutritional requirements and the provision of ‘adequate care, health and hygiene’. Here, the body—life—is scientifically coded and calculated along nutritional lines. What is absent from such calculations of life is ‘the cultural particularity of food and the ways in which food is implicated in the cultural construction of subjectivity through our bodies’ and this, Turner argues, is important so that we reject an instrumentalist conception of the body and embrace one that is attentive ‘to our embodied existence [which] provides the foundation for the kind of retooling of discourses of food security: a retooling which necessitates a rethinking of corporeality’. The retooling involves recognition of the cultural context in which bodies circulate, live; it involves recognition that ‘we experience the world through contextualized bodies’ and the rejection of a universal conception of bodies; and it involves the affirmation that ‘the bodily matters of bodies should matter in the discourse of food security’. Accompanying this, Turner argues, is the need to rethink the concept of food itself: a move away from a reductive conception of food in terms of ‘adequate intake of nutrients’ to a much more nuanced articulation which locates food in relation to the practices, rhythms and flows of the cultural field in which it circulates. This is precisely how we might grasp the decision by the Zambian government to refuse GM food aid even though ‘3 million people were on the brink of starvation’. Against condemnation from UN agencies of the decision to refuse intervention with the supply of
American GM food aid, Turner argues that the rejection signals precisely the problem with approaches to food aid that remain blind to the intricate connections between maize, the idea of food, practices of ‘cultivation, preparation, and consumption’, culture, history, economic well-being, connections to the past and the future, conceptions of care, bodies, health, community, family and other rhythms of life. ‘Hungry bodies in the developing world’, as Turner notes, ‘speak complex narratives that a discourse of rights, and its realisation through policy should engage with’. The politico-ethical imperative is to refuse the one-dimensional conception of the body and acknowledge ‘the body and our embodied experience of the world’.

Tackling the same issue, food security, is Olivier Jutel in ‘Neo-Liberal Discourse and the Global Food Crisis’. This contribution focuses on the 2008 global food crisis, which marked ‘the failure of the neo-liberal development policy of export-led growth advocated by ... the IMF and World Bank’, and inquires as to how these catastrophes were navigated by the neoliberal project. Examining the documents of global institutions—IMF and World Bank—in addition to US media coverage in the Wall Street Journal, the New York Times and the Washington Post, Jutel demonstrates that ‘a causal structure of economism/ urgency/ new consensus’ is employed as a strategy of articulating the events that not only legitimizes the neo-liberal project, but more importantly, secures ‘further terrain for the expansion of neo-liberalism’. Drawing on critical discourse analysis and critical political economy of the media Jutel analyses 42 texts identifying the principal actors, political positions, and the narrative force of the various articulations to demonstrate that a new consensus was forged around the food crisis, one that framed the event ‘within the calculus of economism (naturalization of market and actors), urgency (humanitarian need over theory/politics) and limited agency (moral failings/not enough liberalization)’. This new consensus, for which the discourse of crisis spells an opportunity for further capitalist expansion, is forged in the media terrain and institutional reports; more importantly (and insidiously) it marks an intensification of the neoliberal project for the framing of the event is linked up with discourses around the technologization of agriculture, market developmentalism, transnational corporations such as Monsanto, the scientifization of agriculture, genetic engineering and modification, and corporate interests. This is the complex network of the new consensus that profits from the crisis.

Like Jutel, whose contribution articulates a new consensus upon which neoliberal hegemony is staged, Mikkel Thorup in ‘Terror as Terror: The Return of Fear and Horror?’ examines the conceptualizations of terror and argues that a new conception of violence underpins the articulation of terror. The author argues that in the premodern world ‘violence’ was constructed as normal and everyday. In this context, terror was the fear evoked by extreme violence and was associated with God. Thus terror had a religious aspect to it. In the modern world violence was evacuated from everyday life and became the more subtle province of
institutions. And institutional violence has a voice: a voice that explains why violence is necessary and justifies itself. Foucault’s work on the asylum, prison, and clinic as instantiations of institutional violence with a voice is instructive in this regard. In the post-9/11 world, Thorup argues, terror, and the violence associated with it, has become understood as an everyday, and almost metaphysical, threat. The argument is that terror is now the generalised experience of the fear which founds our experience of life in a society based on ‘risk’ and risk avoidance, and a society in which, as a consequence, we fear epidemics, global warming, and other catastrophes. Further, ‘terrorism’ itself is now identified in multifarious forms, from nuclear terrorism to network terrorism: once more, terror has no voice and again, terror is unidentifiable. This is not the same lack of voice as in the religious terror of the pre-modern world but, rather, is the lack of voice of that which marks the extreme fear by which we, today, live out our lives. For Thorup, the new conception of violence that underscores our ‘perceptual and epistemic’ conceptions and relations to terror not only entrenches the terror-logic further into the social imaginary, it also, more dangerously, provides further grounds for the extension of sovereign power.

Brett Nicholls’ contribution ‘Documenting Conspiracy: The Loose Change Series and Truth-telling in the State of Exception’ considers the conspiracy texts that have emerged in the wake of the liberal state’s use of emergency powers as a tactic of popular criticism and opposition. Drawing on the ‘first internet blockbuster’ that went viral as a key example, Nicholls explores the claim that the Bush administration deliberately concealed the truth about 9/11. The Loose Change films attempted to expose the Bush administration’s deliberate creation of conditions to acquire complete sovereign authority to launch a military attack on Iraq. Though the pejorative charge of ‘conspiracy theory’ is frequently raised to dismiss such expressions, Nicholls reads this viral film as well as the debates surrounding it as examples of popular discontent, elaborating a range of vernacular discourses specific to the state of exception that reveal the undemocratic political foundation of the contemporary state, or what Agamben has called ‘the hidden foundation of the [sovereign] system’. Conspiracy theories perceive themselves as speaking ‘truth to power’, Nicholls argues, with the fundamental problem that conspiracies are by definition hidden, so that the objective of such films and their claims are a rationalization that must use inaccessible evidentiary proof. In their expressive form, such films take upon themselves the negotiation of this paradox, which Nicholls carefully reads as a series of ‘gaps’ in Loose Change. Popular conspiracy theories buckle under the weight of this impossible task of revealing the truth in a regime where the state has abrogated that right to itself.

The final article by Santiago López Petit, ‘What if we refuse to be citizens? A Manifesto for Vacating Civic Order’ opens by locating the unfree citizen, or more precisely the unfreeness of the subject that is a citizen. As Petit suggests, ‘today’s citizen is no longer a free person. Citizens are no longer free people who want to live in a free
community. A political consciousness that is not taught, but rather conquered, has gradually disappeared. It could not have happened another way’. The very articulation of citizenship or the mobilisation of the figure of the citizen whether this is done in the service of maintaining structures of power, or in the service of breaking power, is connected to specific conceptions of rights, care, duty, obligation, structures of government, democratic ethos and practices. In that sense the figure of the citizen is not free. It is not free in another sense: the figure of the citizen, the category of citizenship, is the unit of mobilisation for the state and for other transnational global institutions; it is the unit that is mobilised in the name of democracy, in the name of war, in the name of aid, in the name of sustainability, in the name of dealing with various kinds of crises (financial, ecological, planetary) and so on. It is in short, a figure that is close to dominant power and which works in the service of such regimes of power. It is after all a figure that emerged with the coming of the idea of the nation-state and as such is intimately constituted into what Petit calls the war-state. It is also not free in another sense: the interpellation of the identity of individuals and/or populations as citizen or in terms of citizenship ‘ties us up to what we are. It makes us prisoners of ourselves. We are citizens each time we behave as such, that is, each time we do what we are expected to do: work, consume, have fun ... To be a citizen is to believe. Citizens do not think, they believe. They believe what power tells them. For example, that terrorism is our main enemy. Or that the purpose of life is working ... we have to be citizens, but there is no public space’. How then might we break this reality, sever our connection to this and abandon the figure of the citizen? How might we work against the cutting that the figure of the citizen engenders? Petit suggests that to empty the figure of the citizen we need to embrace the concept of anonymity or more precisely, mobilise solidarities around and through the force of anonymity. The power of anonymity lies in its breaking down of lines of division, biopolitical cuts, refusing to be mobilised and named as citizens, refusing to be interpellated as subjects of the state, and refusing the reality on offer. This kind of refusal ‘sets in motion the power (potencia) of emptying and [allows us] to operate according to a transversal strategy’, which recognises that ‘there is no longer a privileged battlefront of struggle (for example: the sphere of work), but that the combat is aimed against reality itself conceived as a continuum of struggles. When life is a battlefront it is no longer useful to consider partial approaches. The aim should always be the same: to puncture reality in order to breathe’.

The essays gathered are diverse, in terms of the issues they interrogate, but what holds them together is a shared critical commitment to dissensus, to disputing and opening political space. I have framed them, their commitments, under the theme ‘Dissensus’ to capture the shared investments of the different articles in this issue; more importantly, the theme, I hope, captures well what is at stake here and in the journal more generally. And finally, a massive thanks to the entire borderlands collective for their time, energy, commitment and politics.
Notes

1 It should be noted that the state of exception is not only a feature of the contemporary world, captured by the war on terror discourse. What makes the current conjuncture different is that the state of exception is paradigmatic and not isolated as it was during the period of Fascism. It should also be emphasised that in *State of Exception*, Agamben traces the paradigmatic form historically to the ‘institution of Roman law … the iustitum … which … literally means “standstill” or “suspension of law” … The term implied, then, a suspension not simply of the administration of justice but of the law as such’ (Agamben 2005, p. 41).

References


http://www.borderlands.net.au/about/manifesto.html


http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/24403-dissensus-on-politics-and-aesthetics/


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