05 2016

Instituent Practices. New Introduction to the Revised Edition 2016

Stefan Nowotny / Gerald Raunig

Language editing: Kelly Mulvaney

On the occasion of the new edition of *Instituierende Praxen*[1] transversal texts publishes the new introduction to the book.

As we set out to finish the first edition of this book for the eipcp series republicart in mid-2008, crisis could maybe somehow already be smelled, felt, sensed. In the preface we wrote of an “ubiquitous decay of representative democracies in Europe” and of “the progressive social marginalization in different parts of the world, to be understood in part as an effect of current national and transnational institutions”. The debates and struggles around precarity, especially in the first half of the 2000s, can today be interpreted as foreshadowing what later would, with many different connotations, be called crisis. Yet it was by no means possible to foresee the economic and political turmoil, the social misery, the new racisms and wars which in the following years would also extend into parts of the “West”. There is no soon end in sight to these developments, even today, given that the spirals of economic austerity dictates, politically blind strategies of military conflict management, and the dismantling of fundamental social and

political rights continue to be enforced – with in part disastrous consequences, particularly where the effects of these spirals become superimposed and intensify one another most strongly.

Our intention here is not, however, to advocate a generalized miserabilism. On the contrary, we feel inspired to follow the amplifications of instituent practices even against the hardened background of seemingly hopeless political developments. With reference to the lines of rupture proposed by our book, we would like to update three components of its conceptual field which simultaneously form key aspects of our understanding of instituent practice: (1) the monstrosity of instituting, (2) the relationship between instituent practice and constituent process, and (3) the question of destitution.

(1) The crisis brought about new subjectivations, new forms of critical attitude and proactive critique, thus giving new urgency to the debate around instituent practices and alternative modes of institutionality. At first, molecular forms of resistance developed at the focal points of the crisis: the university protests and mobilizations between edu-factory and unibrennt in the years 2009 and 2010, but above all the occupation movements between late 2010 and 2013, from the "Arab spring" to 15M in Spain, the Greek Syntagma Square, the Occupy movements emanating from the US, or Taksim/Gezi in Istanbul. At the same time micro-political practices emerged, bringing decisive new impulses for the questions central to this book – such as the question of "how institution and movement relate to one another and how this relationship can be made productive in the sense of an emancipatory politics without setting up rigorous boundaries between the two poles". In some contexts the situation was even reversed: genealogical lines led from the discourses, of which this book was and is part, to the new micro-political practices and social movements. There can be no

doubt: institutional critique, instituting, and new institutions are aspects central to the New Left in the Mediterranean space, and some of the people involved in Universidad Nómada, V de vivienda, Precarias a la deriva and Fundación de los Comunes are also key actors of the Spanish movement of the new *municipalismos*. The solidarity economy platforms in Greece or the Spanish Plataforma de Afectados per la Hipoteca (PAH) can definitely be seen as instituent practices which confront old or simply abolished institutions with something new or put something new in their place. Considering these countless new formations, instituting can be understood as an event that breaks with the state apparatus.

At the same time, instituting requires duration, persistence, recurrence; it therefore also implies a new institutionality and the development of orgiastic state apparatuses, that is, of state apparatuses that stretch, overstretch, breach the principle of representation. New parties, new state apparatuses, new reterritorialization. Municipalities that aren't municipalities, parties that aren't parties, institutions that aren't institutions. A new politics in the making, in a process in which the sense of political actions is not determined in terms of their compliance with established institutional forms, but according to their capacity to give a new sense to social experiences and challenges and to provide this new sense with perseverance.

If the moment and mode of instituting are in the foreground for this new institutionality, however, it remains no less important to avoid the permanent closure of (in) the institution and to prevent the persistence of the new from coming at the expense of the *capacity* for renewal. Especially in Spain, a chain of ongoing and diversely composed forms of instituting processes seems to escape structuralization or to counter it with something. That something could be named with one of the recurring concepts of this book:

monster. When in the second half of the 2000s, in collaboration with our Spanish colleagues, we started to affirm the monster in its heterogeneous manifestations, one of our theses in this respect was the following: in certain situations, it makes sense to not strictly set movement and institution against one another or dissolve them into each other, but to process their relationship in terms of a monstrosity. This is exactly what seems to happen through the new municipalisms, which do not simply take over state apparatuses after successful elections, but question the sociality of these apparatuses before the elections through militant research and continuously question them further. The monster here is by no means the excessive bureaucracy of the old state, but rather the non-classifiable disruptions between movement and institution.[2]

(2) Another, somewhat controversial point of departure for our book was the relationship between *con*stituent power and *in*stituent practice, between recomposition and instituting. It was important for us to understand constitution, similarly to institution, not as a static setting, not solely as a juridical problem. Analogous to the instituent practice we keep asking ourselves how a constituent process can emerge which may – at once situationally and translocally – develop situated sociality and its differential knowledge across and beyond national borders. A purely juridical-political interpretation of the constituent would be insufficient here. In line with feminist debates around social reproduction and vulnerability, the turning point of such a broad understanding of a constituent process would rather be the production of the social. In a similar way as with regard to non-institutional instituting, one would have to inquire into modes of production that set out from forms of social interaction themselves, from assemblages of care or *cuidadanías* which no longer conceptualize debt as a moral-economic entanglement but as fundamental vulnerability, for

attitudes which do not strive for a *footing*, a standpoint or a position, but for a critical *relation* (of exchange).

This involves a re-evaluation of the relationship between constitution and institution that moves away from any understanding of constitution as a prior composition, in the sense, for example, of a "We" that is fixed in its identity or conditions and provides itself with longevity by means of institutions. In other words, the question of instituting cannot be treated as secondary to the one concerning constituent processes if the *con-* of constituting is to adopt a significance beyond existing orders of belonging and repudiation. Rather, instituent practice and constituent power mutually presuppose one another, in a process which enables exchange and the joint articulation of social experiences as well as the opening towards a shared future.

To promote such a process, or in a certain sense to even start it in the first place, seems more and more important in a situation in which state institutions guarantee less and less economic security and prospects of development, and are used on the contrary to indebt individuals not only to a state-shaped We, but moreover to the perils of speculation activities that have never been committed to such a We in the first place. However, to promote such a process also seems more and more important in view of the fact that precarization and commanded self-entrepreneurial subjectivations are increasingly reflected in diseases of seclusion (anxiety, depression, etc.) and instrumental forms of relations which damage the very capability to reconstitute sociality. And finally, such a process is of course of central importance at the specific site where the best known form of a historically constituted and juridically enacted We – the nation-state – becomes more and more visible in its social impotence: that is, in the context of current refugee and migration movements. Constituent power here

combines with the practices of all the solidarity initiatives and networks which, in the midst of government restrictions, racist policies, and deepening social fault lines, have not allowed themselves to become misled about the fact that no shared future is available without instituting new forms of social interaction – and that no future will ever be available at all if not as a shared future.

(3) This brings us directly to our third point: the question of destitution or varied figures of flight, defection, betrayal, desertion, exodus. With the concept of destitution, we aimed at the potentials "of a dis-position *(Ent-setzung)* which is not related from the outset to performatively re-positing or re-instituting modified conditions of acting, but to the opening of a field of changing *possibilities* for acting." A "positive No" which derives its positivity neither from self-positioning nor from op-position, but from withdrawing its own power from the grammars of existing lines of conflict and from being taken into service by dominant formations of forces and desire. Such a positive No is diagrammatical in that it crosses and abandons the prescribed alternatives of existing grammars; and it is resistant in a sense which cannot be derived from the negated because this resistance has its truth in the formation of forces that withstand the attempted impositions of subservience and deny them their cooperation, in order to advance the capacity of these forces aloof of dominant formations. The problem of destitution today presents itself less than ever as a question of deposition of the old, which opens into immediate reimposition and recomposition. It presents itself as the question of a dis-position, an *Ent-setzung*, a suspension of the ways in which life and living together are functionalized and subordinated to ends, an affirmation of the simple fact from which these functionalizations constantly nourish themselves as they

simultaneously seek to make it forgotten or even defamed: the fact that life and living together are in no need of them in order to invent themselves.

We cannot close our eyes to what appears to be a continous narrowing of the margins for the positive No of destitution in the current conditions, in which ever expanding necessities and impossibilities are being raised: constantly refined workfare strategies increasingly occupy the time, space, and energy available for the engagement in other agencies, and their effectiveness is supported by the subjective impacts of insecurity and social atomization through precarization. Affective, cognitive and relational capacities are bound to the dominant conditions not only by post-Fordist labor regimes but also by regimes of consumption and desire, which profoundly shape these capacities even beyond immediate functionalizations. Globalized relations of production extenuate neither the repudiations propelled by the international division of labor nor the dissociation between productive and reproductive work, but drive them on and mobilize them in unstable geographies. And since last year at the very latest, in Europe, too, nobody can any longer ignore the fact that more and more fugitives find less and less spaces of refuge and flight.

Yet, though indubitably in extremely fragile and too often deathly ways, there is a destituent moment inherent in these very movements of flight: not only because fugitives withdraw from various kinds of regional devastation engendered within a global field of forces, but also because they ultimately lead *ad absurdum* the political-juridical grammars and regimes of subservience operated by the "host states" (nation-statehood, division between "economic migration" and "legitimate asylum", globally differentiated economies of resources, care, production, waste, ecological inequality, etc.). The migration policies of the privileged

world have long been impaired by a tenacious denial of the social *fact* of flight and migration and its inevitability in the contemporary world – and as an expression of this denial they continue to indulge in phantasms of fortifying existing political-institutional orders. However, just as between instituent practice and constituent power, there is, too, a relation of reciprocal presupposition between destituent resistance and instituent persistence: in the sense of the practical claim for a future that draws on social experiences which within the dominant institutional forms cannot even be articulated.

[1] http://transversal.at/books/instituierendepraxen. Earlier English versions of some texts of this book are available in the multilingual web journal *transversal*: "Anti-Canonization. The Differential Knowledge of Institutional Critique", http://transversal.at/transversal/0106/nowotny/en; "Instituent Practices. Fleeing, Instituting, Transforming", http://transversal.at/transversal/0106/raunig/en; "Instituent Practices, No. 2. Institutional Critique, Constituent Power, and the Persistence of Instituting", http://transversal.at/transversal/0507/raunig/en; "The Double Meaning of Destitution", http://transversal.at/transversal/0507/nowotny/en; "eventum et medium. Event and Orgiastic Representation in Media Activism", http://transversal.at/transversal/0707/raunig/en?highlight=eventum; "On Police Ghosts and Multitudinous Monsters", http://transversal.at/transversal/0508/nowotnyraunig/en; "Instituting and Distributing. On the Relationship Between Politics and Police Following Rancière as a Development of the Problem of Distribution with Deleuze", http://transversal.at/transversal/1007/raunig/en; "Modifying the

Grammar. Paolo Virno's Works on Virtuosity and Exodus", http://transform.eipcp.net/correspondence/modifyingthegrammar.

[2] Cf. the upcoming issue of the eipcp's multilingual web journal *transversal* on the Spanish *municipalismos*: transversal.at/transversal/0916.