



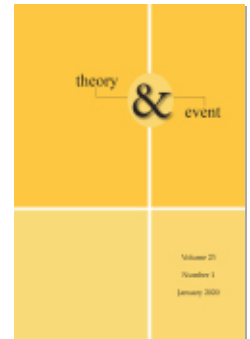
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Introduction

Cristina Beltrán, Kennan Ferguson

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Introduction

Cristina Beltrán and Kennan Ferguson

This January issue of *Theory and Event* (Volume 23, Number 1) takes up some of the most consequential, exciting, and intolerable conditions facing us this second decade of the 21st century. These articles and symposia—exploring questions of aspirational fascism, counterinsurgency, mass incarceration, universal suffrage, new materialism, the politics of extractivism, and the disavowed genealogy of modern freedom—remind us that our democratic imaginaries are both necessary and contaminated. Indeed, as we enter a new year defined already by intense and accelerating forms of peril and possibility, all of these essays speak to the power of problematization and the need for counter-histories, new assemblages, and individual cultivation as well as collaborative practices of collective transformation.

In “Eventocracy: Media and Politics in Times of Aspirational Fascism,” Rohan Kalyan exposes the link between media events, practices of subjectivation, and the rising fascisms taking place globally. Examining the idea of eventocracy (rule by event), Kalyan describes the strategic manipulation of media events to gain political advantage. Examining the rise of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi from 2002 to 2014, Kalyan argues that Modi’s story links to global politics through the process of subjectivation—the transformation of concrete, heterogeneous individuals into political subjects through the mediation of events. Like other eventocratic leaders (Trump in the United States, Putin in Russia, Erdoğan in Turkey) Modi is at his most powerful when manufacturing or taking advantage of unexpected events that split public opinion into oppositional camps, dividing loyalists from the opposition and friends from enemies.

Kevin Duong examines a different vision of the radical component of electoral democracy: when calls for universal suffrage envisioned the franchise not as a liberal, routinized form of preference aggregation but as a manifestation of a true *vox populi*. Infused with radical dreams of liberation, voting was envisioned as the public process of assembling and articulating a shared voice of the people. “What Was Universal Suffrage?” turns to forms of visual and material culture (lithographs, colored ballots, daguerreotypes, automatic voting booths) to curate a rich collection of “episodic clues” that reveal how suffrage’s expansion entailed the contraction of conceptions of popular voice. Duong

exposes a paradoxical history of how certain extensions of civic life also work to vitiate the democratic imaginary.

For Anna Terwiel, Michel Foucault brings novel ways of thinking that make possible new forms of political action. In “Problematization as an Activist Practice: Reconsidering Foucault,” Terwiel turns to Foucault’s later work to develop an alternative interpretation of the concept of problematization. The prison, she shows, not only undergirded one important book but taught Foucault the practical and pragmatic transformations of power that underlay much of his subsequent theorizing. Going beyond approaches to problematization as a form of philosophical inquiry focused on ethical self-transformation, Terwiel engages problematization as a collaborative practice that assists in reimagining the politics of prison reform today.

Gabriel Rockhill also finds an alternative history – an alternative *to* history – in Foucault by reinterpreting Foucault’s famed reworking of Friedrich Nietzsche’s genealogical project. Rather than extracting meaning from origins (Nietzsche’s ostensible project), the political resonance of genealogy arises from its power to remake valuation itself. “Foucault, Genealogy, Counter-History” (the title signals the multiple references and reworkings the essay will enact while also noting how Foucault did the same) extends Foucault’s differentiation between *Herkunft* and *Ursprung* as two opposed conceptualizations of origin as excavatory versus foundational, moving instead to consider the potential of discarding the unitarity of history itself. Historians often dismiss counter-history as unhelpful fictionalizations, but Rockhill finds in them the potentialities to escape the value-laden excrescences of historical meaning – and the capacity to politicize what seems settled in the contemporary.

What forms, motivates, and directs the kind of warfare known as counterinsurgency? in “Counterinsurgency’s Ambivalent Enterprise,” Eric Vázquez shows that such state-sponsored modes of military oversight repeatedly attempt to pacify the very civilian populations that they purport to protect. To do so, they must position such populations involved in a paradox of innocence and culpability: always needing protection from militants while also constantly threatening to erupt into militancy. This, in turn, leads to a bifurcated identification, trying to “think like a revolutionary” while repressing and denying the conditions that lead to revolution. Looking at the field manuals that emerged from the U.S. counterinsurgency against Latin America (and therefore became the templates for the 21st century’s “war on terror”), Vázquez traces the affective and intellectual disharmonies and disconnections that emerge from counterinsurgencies’ ambivalent logics of appropriation and reversal.

The political theories that have highlighted such affective politics travel under the name of “new materialism.” However, William Kujala and Regan Burles argue, they actually derive from a relatively older materialism: that of the 17th-century philosopher Baruch Spinoza. While Spinoza’s *Ethics* remains widely read, his political theory has been neglected. Contemporary political theorists in the Spinozist tradition—Connolly, Bennett, and Massumi, for example—therefore concentrate on developing ethical outlooks, a politics grounded in individual cultivation. Focusing on Spinoza’s writings on sovereign authority and its limits, Kujala and Burles argue in “The Politics of Ethics,” highlights the role that force, constituent power, and assemblage play in the potential and limitations of politics.

This issue also features two symposia. The first reproduces the 2018 Maxwell Lecture given at the University of Utah by Elisabeth Anker. “White and Deadly: The Sweet Taste of Freedom in a Global Era” explores sugar as crucial to freedom’s “gustatory archive.” Here, freedom’s sensorium is marked by desires and pleasures that are inextricably tied to colonialism, slavery, dispossession, and domination. With an introduction by Steven Johnston, the symposium features responses by Lida Maxwell and Andrew Dilts. The second symposium, organized by Emily Ray, explores conceptual concerns emerging from extractive activities’ (drilling, mining, pipelines) role in the contemporary economy and environment. With contributions from Robert Kirsch, Sean Parson and Ray, and John Hultgren, these essays argue for extractivism’s centrality to 21st-century political theory.

Issue 23.1 concludes with four book reviews: Kye Anderson Barker reviews Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval’s *Common: On Revolution in the 21st Century*. Sarah Kessler reviews adrienne maree brown’s *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good*. Lida Maxwell reviews Karin Amimoto Ingersoll’s *Waves of Knowing: A Seascape Epistemology*, Nick Estes’s *Our History is the Future: Standing Rock Versus the Dakota Access Pipeline and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance*, Andrea Ballesterio’s *A Future History of Water*, and Anna Clark’s *The Poisoned City: Flint’s Water and the American Urban Tragedy*. And Robert Nichols reviews Brenna Bhandar’s *Colonial Lives of Property Law, Land, and Racial Regimes of Ownership*.