

Daniel Innerarity

The Transformation of Politics

Governing in the Age of Complex Societies

P.I.E. Peter Lang



■ Nowadays, politics is only one voice among many in the concert of social self-organization. Its function is to articulate the differentiated systems of our societies: it encourages their self-restraint, while at the same time restraining itself.

Such a conception obviously threatens the primacy of the nation-state. While it is not necessarily disappearing, it must nevertheless cease to be thought of as a dominant principle of organization, and must assume its place in a system of regulation that proceeds on several levels. Distant from the anarchist or Marxist theories that herald the end of the state as it is from libertarian theories of the minimal state, the book illustrates that it is possible in the contemporary period to go beyond the alternatives of *dirigisme* and neoliberal spontaneity.

However, such a transformation can only prove effective through two conditions: we must first reject the enduring opposition between Right and Left, and second, we must invent an anti-state social democracy that is able in its own right to glean the most it can out of the liberal legacy.

This book combines philosophical technicality, clarity and elegance of writing in an attempt to provide politics with meaning again, particularly in an era where discourse about its powerlessness abounds.

■ **Daniel Innerarity** is Professor of Philosophy and “Ikerbasque” Research Professor (Universidad del País Vasco). He is the Director of the Instituto de Gobernanza Democrática. In Spain, this book was awarded the National Literature Prize. It has been translated into various languages. Daniel Innerarity is the author of other books: *Ética de la hospitalidad*, *La sociedad invisible*, *El nuevo espacio público*, *El futuro y sus enemigos*. The French magazine *Le Nouvel Observateur* included him in a list of the 25 great thinkers of the world.

The Transformation of Politics

Governing in the Age of Complex Societies



P.I.E. Peter Lang

Bruxelles • Bern • Berlin • Frankfurt am Main • New York • Oxford • Wien

Daniel INNERARITY

The Transformation of Politics

**Governing in the Age
of Complex Societies**

Diversitas
No.7

This book was published with the financial support of the Directorate General del Libro, of Archives and Libraries of the Spanish Ministry of Culture.

This book was originally published in Spanish: Daniel Innerarity, *La transformación de la política* (Península, Ayuntamiento de Bilbao, 2002). Translated by Stephen Williams and Serge Champeau.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form, by print, photocopy, microfilm or any other means, without prior written permission from the publisher. All rights reserved.

© P.I.E. PETER LANG S.A.
Éditions scientifiques internationales
Brussels, 2010
1 avenue Maurice, B-1050 Brussels, Belgium
www.peterlang.com; info@peterlang.com

Printed in Germany

ISSN 2031-0331 (Print-Ausgabe)
ISBN 978-3-0352-6020-5
D/2010/5678/45

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Innerarity, Daniel, 1959-
[Transformación de la política. English] The transformation of politics : governing in the age of complex societies / Daniel Innerarity ; [translated from Spanish by Stephen Williams and Serge Champeau].
p. cm. — (Diversitas ; no. 7) Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 978-90-5201-646-7 1. Political science—Philosophy.
2. Philosophy—Political aspects. I. Title.
JA71.I5613 2010 320.01—dc22 2010029726

CIP also available from the British Library, GB

Bibliographic information published by “Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek”
“Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek” lists this publication in the “Deutsche Nationalbibliografie”; detailed bibliographic data is available on the Internet at <<http://dnb.ddb.de>>.

DANIEL INNERARITY

**THE TRANSFORMATION OF
POLITICS**

GOVERNING IN THE AGE OF COMPLEX SOCIETIES

Translated from Spanish by Stephen Williams and Serge Champeau

*To my son Javier, in hopes that he won't believe
those who consider politics an unworthy endeavor,
and that he won't contribute to proving them right, either.*

Contents

INTRODUCTION. Politics Otherwise	11
---	-----------

PART I. THE CONCEPT OF POLITICS

CHAPTER 1. Politics as a Possibility	19
CHAPTER 2. Politics as an Opportunity	25
CHAPTER 3. Politics as an Invention	29
CHAPTER 4. Politics as a Compromise	35
CHAPTER 5. Politics as Mediation	41
CHAPTER 6. The Paradox of Politics	45
CHAPTER 7. Beware of Morality.....	49

PART II. THE NEW SOCIAL LOGIC

CHAPTER 1. The New Pluralism	57
A. The Anatomy of Contemporary Pluralism.....	57
B. Impossible Neutrality.....	62
C. Probably Unjust Rights	68
D. A Confrontational Democracy	71
CHAPTER 2. New Antagonism.....	75
CHAPTER 3. The Politics of Identity	81
CHAPTER 4. The Politics of Visibility	91
CHAPTER 5. The Politics of Security	95
CHAPTER 6. The Politics of Nature.....	99

PART III. THE NEW POLITICAL CULTURE

CHAPTER 1. Politics Beyond the National State	105
CHAPTER 2. Governing a Complex Society	111
A. The Polycentric Structure of Contemporary Societies	113
B. Politics' New Tasks	119
C. The Crisis of the Welfare State.....	123
D. Learning to Cooperate	127
E. The Supervisor State.....	132
CHAPTER 3. The Right and the Left.....	137
CHAPTER 4. Social Liberalism: A Libertarian Alternative.....	143
Bibliography.....	151

INTRODUCTION

Politics Otherwise

Dissatisfaction with politics is nothing new, but its causes have varied from one time to another. Our common history could be written by outlining the changing motives for this dissatisfaction. The measly credit granted to politicians by their citizens has hardly changed, even if the causes of their scorn have varied quite a bit. If we were to take inventory of the general protest currently circulating, we might be surprised to find out that its content has changed drastically in recent years. Just a little while ago, we used to condemn the abuse of power, but today we deplore the powerlessness of the supposedly powerful. This *malaise* does not stem from the all-powerful heads of state, but is rather caused by powerless politicians that cannot manage to clarify their ideas, and who recite the same old conventional speech on a drably lit stage.

The current cause for discrediting politics is not authoritarianism but rather the distance that lies between what is done and what ought to be done, the gap between words and actions, and the hasty conclusion that it is impossible to do otherwise. The most damaging factor in politics can be located in its confusion and powerlessness. Quite simply, we could say that politics has never been so powerless. It is also worrisome to note that its ability to transform society has never been so weak, if we were to measure it by its own ambition and by the role we assign to it. The danger looming over politics today is not so much violence or chaos, but rather the powerlessness that lies in monotonous stagecraft.

This weariness with politics is not a sign of disinterest for the public good, but is due to the fact that citizens have lost hope in the capacity for traditional politics to take action. Whereas political duties have changed radically in the last quarter of the 20th century, the discourse, the style and the way politicians act have remained more or less the same. Politics appears now to be a fortuitous mix of deferments, administrative management and tactical calculations.

With its abstract and conventional style, political language is the first to witness this insignificance. We only hear about levels, factors, issues and indices and we are losing interest in politics, leaving the field open to dangerous simplifications. Many concepts we continue to use have

decayed and we find it difficult to invent new categories in order to better understand social reality. This theoretical deprivation makes us feel as though we are living in an unfamiliar society whose reality is evolving faster than our political vocabulary, which seems to always be one era behind. Virtually all political and social dictionaries are outdated and yet their concepts are still commonly used. A large part of our discourse is based on moribund, unsuitable language. The same verbal edifices hide a drastically transformed reality. We are like someone searching in vain for the end of a rainbow or someone trying to live off of a pension dried up long ago.

However, language is not the only thing that needs changing. In the political transformation that these new circumstances require, the essence lies in determining what *we* require from politicians. As long as the particular functions of politics have not been clearly formulated, politics will remain what it is today: a strange mixture of incompetence and craftiness. The question lies in knowing what to expect from politics, how to get something from it that no other social function can provide. The lack of a clear answer to this question most likely explains political meddling on the part of entrepreneurs, judges and journalists who are driven by a simplistic demagoguery which scorns the incompetence of the political class, when they are actually scorning the very requirements of democratic life.

This populist simplification highlights an underlying problem that politics must resolve. If politics were merely to understand this phenomenon as an unjustified interference, it would be ignoring an opportunity to clearly define its responsibilities. It would be failing to establish the reasons why it would not be justifiable to apply economic, judicial or communication methods to it. It would not be impossible then to imagine it carrying on working like this, minding its own business without bothering anyone, simply because of the insignificance of its services for other systems, to the point where we would have to wonder where exactly its role lies within society, and if this role could not be carried out, perhaps even more professionally, by other systems. Such an insufficiency of politics would benefit the various populisms which, in order to solve political problems, would bring forward those supposed to have proven to reliably solve other types of problems, in economics or judiciary domains for example, or who are leaders in the world of communication. The political ambitions of entrepreneurs, judges and journalists rely on the incompetence of politicians and on the satisfaction that simplistic messages are received in a world overwhelmed by complexity.

If this is the way things are, it is not surprising that there has been for quite some time a prevalent rhetoric of inaugural discourse which masks

a real perplexity in the field of political science. Proclamations of historical ruptures, the welcome rituals for new theories, or the solemn farewells to unusable concepts are not devoid of interest, but they also show that we no longer really know what is happening. It is easy enough to notice that something no longer works, but it gets more complicated when we have to decide how to replace it. As far as politics goes, there is nothing very serious in all this because of the fact that politics only deals with the roughest knowledge we have at our disposal – except that we cannot do without it (as is the case with other things that trouble us, but are less necessary) or we could do without it by paying its full consequences.

To a great extent, this dismay depends on the fact that political events are much more interesting than the concepts with which we use to interpret them. As Xavier Rubert de Ventós puts it, “there are more things and experiences than organized discourses where we arrange and neutralize them”. Lamenting on the poor functioning of politics is understandable enough: this is a very difficult art where, more than anywhere else, we have to manage uncertainty, where we deal only with probable and contingent events, all while only having limited time and information. And this difficulty is even more sensitive when politics does not give itself over to a simplification of traditional ideologies which has made society a manageable and predictable object.

We are in an era of transformation and neither optimists nor pessimists can predict how it will turn out – whether politics will be revitalized or if its degraded form will become the norm. In the current situation of a complexity that defies understanding, when everything that happens seems to have a dynamic that runs up against the possibilities of an action of those in power, the question lies in knowing if it is even possible to find a modern equivalent of what politics used to be long ago. The question that Hannah Arendt asked fifty years ago, “Is politics still relevant?” is still very much pertinent today.

The main function of politics is to produce and distribute the collective goods necessary for a society’s development. For that purpose, it is necessary to make a series of decisions within a limited time, on the basis of feeble information and with restricted means, all this in an extraordinarily complex environment that new social conditions do nothing but complicate further. The competence of the politician lies in this particular ability to make collective decisions in a highly complex environment. Politics is a realm where we innovate, not just manage. And this creativity is closely related to the development of a language capable of dealing with innovation. In this light, we might try to find a new way of distinguishing Left from Right, and progress from tradition. Being progressive means being able to discover new problems, to name

them and to deal with them; being conservative means masking difficulties and one's own perplexity behind undeniable certainties. Progressive politics emphasizes the sensitive issues that mental idleness tries to ignore for fear of having to reevaluate its comfortable patterns, its usual practices and what little attention it pays to changes. The real political dividing line passes between those who only find reasons confirming what they already know, and those who tolerate uncertainty. New situations remind politics that before each reform, it must ask itself whether it is facing easily solvable problems or rather if it has to do with sweeping historical transformations that require new ways of thinking. Innovation has always stemmed from the point where someone wondered if what we have held as true up until now could be applied to a new reality. Those who are capable of thinking about change as an opportunity understand that the erosion of certain hard and narrow traditional concepts presents an opportunity to reinvent politics.

Politics primarily consists of having an overall idea of society and of thinking about the compatibility of the elements at stake. For this it is necessary to have comprehensive representation (or to imagine it by proceeding more or less blindly and tentatively or by assuming risks, as is usually the case). Circumstances have complicated matters, for it is quite difficult to arrive at such a total comprehension in a society that is more opaque from here on out, which has seen a considerable diversification of levels of government, social actors, of fields of activity, of contradictory demands (economical, political, cultural, security, environmental), of domains relevant to political decision-making, of the effects of each intervention, etc. Even if some may veil their confusion behind simplifying rhetoric, we can no longer solve problems by searching for culprits, for these problems are caused neither by the ill will of an elite minority conspiring in the shadows, nor by the perversity of the dominant class, nor by the faulty ignorance of those who govern over us. All these collective agents suffer from nearsightedness. There are numerous reasons that lead us to think that it is particularly difficult to construct an intelligent and intelligible social order.

If this is the case, it is not surprising that the quickest social evolution coincides with a more or less total disinterest for attempts at innovative transformation. When the change is too drastic, citizens refuse to budge and they flee from experimentation. One of the most disappointing features of our political practice is precisely this almost ritual stagnation, the fear that stems from any attempt to escape from conventional formulas that have always worked until now, hence these tendencies toward technocracy, routine and immobility. It is striking to see how innovative financial, technological, scientific and cultural sets inhabit the same sphere as apathetic and marginalized politics (Vallespín 2000,