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An Uncounted Army: Forging Consensus in a Fractured Age

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“Politics,” argues French philosopher Jacques Rancière in his Dis-Agreemen: Politics and Philosophy, “arises from a count of community parts, which is always a false count” or a “miscount.” So it is only fitting that on November 8, 2016, we realized we had been subject to a miscount of epic proportions. Poll averages had shown Clinton ahead by at least 3.4 percentage points the entire campaign only to see their numbers in many states essentially invert. FiveThirtyEight downgraded its Clinton win probability from 64% to 52% and then fell silent. The stock market ticker in the corners of our television screens dipped until the financiers realized their miscount, and then their earnings began to pile in.

With them, a new white working class asserted a place on the political stage. Having declared their support for the president elect, they brought themselves into being as a voting bloc. “Why had they not been counted before,” we all wondered, as we watched Clinton’s vaunted “blue wall” crumble. Early voting data, exit polls, probability estimates, turnout trackers—all of our fancy statistical tools failed us. The hidden white voters of post-industrial, post-union America, barely thought to be anything more than a shadowy mirage, stalked fully into the light and seized their part.

Rancière would have found this event familiar. A former student of Louis Althusser with a bent towards understanding popular uprisings, he argued that the very emergence of political categories always recreates their world. Politics, for Rancière, is about the “part of those who have no part.” It is the conjuring into existence of new communities and ways of being in the world that were previously excluded or ignored in political discourses. It is not, for him, “the exercise of power” but is rather a “paradoxical” mode of political action in which one is “at once the agent of an action and the one upon whom the action is exercised.” In other words, in voting for Trump, these voters not only acted and exercised power in electoral politics, but subjected themselves to a certain action—to the formation of a group of working class white people who will show up to vote for a particular type of candidate.

Which is not to say that this version of the white working class spontaneously appeared on the political stage. There were certainly precedents for their emergence. They were in fact important members of Obama’s 2008 coalition, whose contributions were overshadowed by that year’s assertion of the “Rainbow Coalition” of young, racially diverse voters. Many of these areas had been assumed to be decided voters due to their long history of union-organized Democratic support, without any consideration for the effects that deindustrialization, right-to-work legislation, and general union weakness may have had on that loyalty. 40% of the “missing white vote,” after all, was between the ages of 18 and 24, and likely never directly experienced the effects of unionization in their own lives.

But Trump also did not see this coming. He did not control a significant voter turnout operation, and was not, in any sense, strategizing about capturing particular groups of voters. Instead, like any good demagogue, he toured the country giving speeches and repeated whatever got a
response. The Trump model of electoral politics is readily amenable to the self-constitution of political communities. His was a call that resonated with a group of people with shared experiences, regardless of whether any of them had communicated with one another about their commonalities.

In many ways, Democrats have taken precisely the opposite approach. They identified preexisting interests within well-established demographic categories, and catered to them—“microtargeting” female voters with pro-choice legislation, black voters with community investment, and Latino voters with a progressive stance on immigration policy. They also appealed to a general interest, asserting that we would be “Stronger Together.” Clinton’s advertising famously pushed the idea that Americans would unite to condemn Trump’s offensive campaign.

Politics, for Rancière, is that which “breaks” with established orders. It is any activity which “reconfigures” or “shifts” things such that it “makes visible that what had no business being seen.” However, the second a dispute is recognized and its subject(s) thereby brought into being, it becomes part of the hierarchies that are antithetical to politics, suggesting that politics is only ever a temporary event. Once one is recognized, one is part of the existing order, and thus incorporated into the system of oppression. Politics, then, is only ever temporary.

There is therefore also a way in which Rancière’s “politics” is always a relational, displaced kind of politics. In turning up to vote, this community brought not only itself into being, but also a new category of precarious peoples—the black and brown, queer, and non-male bodies that are and should be afraid—a group of people unified by fear. We could leave it at that, and say that taking a political opportunity to say “we exist” will always entail an othering of those that are not part of that “we.” But there is a political opportunity here, which Rancière points towards, and which these voters enacted—a political opportunity to stretch those understandings of who that “we” is to include those that it evidently is not. This is because Rancière’s dichotomy between “politics” and the mechanisms of everyday affairs also works to create commonalities that had not previously existed—as he describes it, to be “together to the extent that we are in between.”

Commonality over shared oppression is not a new idea, of course—who can forget “Workers of the World, Unite!” But where Rancière’s thinking on this type of politics takes us is enticing. Whether because of the failings of the Democratic electoral strategy, increasingly individualized and polarized media, or the collapse of collective social venues, appeals to shared interests have not worked. (Which is not to say we should not keep trying that avenue.) But Rancière’s thinking also points us to another route to seek, which is the search for commonality over unanticipated difference, over the thing that makes us together that we are not yet aware of, or that we have not yet articulated. Counterintuitively, his is a call to find not only the obvious points of commonality (after all, the call to unite in our common humanity for climate change has had limited success) but to find the ways in which we have not yet even imagined we might be common. To put it bluntly—we need what political theorist Samuel Chambers describes as an impossible politics or, a politics of the impossible—a being in common that cannot really exist, but therefore cannot be stopped.
Finding the ways in which our disunity, dissensus, and fragmentation can be the thing that holds us together may feel like a heavy burden, and even more so when we are already weighed down by crushing defeat. After all, how do you assemble an electoral coalition out of an impossible strategy? And yet if there is one thing we learned from this election, it is that a politics of impossibility is exactly what the Democratic Party needs to win. After all, just a few days ago, nobody, not even Donald Trump’s own pollsters, thought his campaign could succeed. Trump set up the conditions that allowed a new class to organize as an electoral bloc that did not imagine itself as existing even as it acted in concert to upend the desires of nearly the entire American elite class. After all, this was a group of voters that before this fateful evening had not been counted—had not counted themselves—as voters. Trump’s strategy, though by no means guaranteed to win any specific combination of voters, was the one which was open to the possibility of hitting the right nerves in the right people and in the right places.

What we can learn from this is that we need not dream up those impossibilities—we need only create the conditions for people—all people—to organize based on commonalities that are not evident to them. In addition to continuing to appeal to our common interests, we also need to create a space for the kind of unpredictable allegiances that emerge from the meeting of several minds. Which means that in addition to all of the directly political work we are doing to regain power in 2018, we need to create community-based groups for which there is no strategic purpose—ones that simply bring different people together in ways that allow them to organically generate new categories. An impossible electoral coalition can only be one that is not predefined in advance of election day and lured out with specific appeals. It is one that votes itself into existence, and in so doing, creates and constitutes itself.