

# Critical Dialogue

**Disobedience in Western Political Thought: A Genealogy.** By Raffaele Laudani. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013. 181p. \$29.99.  
doi:10.1017/S1537592715002406

— Martin Breugh, *York University, Toronto*

In his book, Raffaele Laudani discusses the “absence,” the “spectral presence,” and the “dissolution” of disobedience from the ancient world to the globalized neoliberal order of today (p. 5). Despite its title, this book is not simply a genealogy or a conceptual history of disobedience. More ambitiously, it seeks to show the link between disobedience and “destituent power,” understood as an extra-institutional form of action. It is “the immanent movement of an excess” that considers “conflict as a process of continual and generally open ended withdrawal” from the various forms of institutional domination (pp. 4–5). Such a perspective implies a rejection of more commonly accepted forms of disobedience, such as the “civil” variant as found in Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and John Rawls. Laudani’s work hence provides a fresh, somewhat controversial, and potentially novel perspective on disobedience and destitution that warrants the attention of scholars of political theory.

Laudani defines disobedience as “a political practice that acquires sense and theoretical depth in relation to the way the agents that practiced it assumed, re-elaborated, and criticized the fundamental concepts of modern politics” (p. 3). Thus, disobedience can only be missing from ancient and medieval political life. In ancient Athens, the two paradigmatic instances of disobedience, Antigone and Socrates, are convincingly presented as dealing with issues other than that of a politics of disobedience. Antigone stubbornly obeys “parental piety” (p. 13), while Socrates in the *Apology* is preoccupied with *parrhesia*—truth-speaking, or obedience to a higher order of truth. In Rome, obedience to a “tempered political constitution” is the bedrock of politics, as Laudani’s reading of Cicero, the patrician political thinker par excellence, indicates (p. 17). Oddly, for a scholar looking for traces of destituent power, Laudani characterizes the plebeian practice of secession in Rome as a “general strike” that is “never a subversive political action” because it “operates as a reequilibrator of the *concordia ordinum*” (p. 19). While a minor aspect of

the book, this is a counterproductive reading of plebeian politics. By seceding from Rome and setting up camp on Mount Aventine, the plebs are indeed demonstrating, in situ, the point that the author is trying to make: that there exists a destituent disobedience, the extrainstitutional manifestation of an “excess,” that practices politics on the mode of a withdrawal. This interpretation of the plebeian experience does not correspond neatly to his overall reading of the trajectory of disobedience, however. In any case, the emergence and affirmation of Christianity in early and late medieval times will not help advance the cause of disobedience. Indeed, disobedience is here entirely apolitical, and even secession must be rejected in favor of martyrdom (p. 23). Even the late medieval articulation of a “right to resistance” is subordinated to the obedience to God, the highest of authorities.

It is with the appearance of Étienne de La Boétie’s seminal work, *Discourse of Voluntary Servitude* (1548), that disobedience as destitution appears. La Boétie teaches that tyranny provides the logic upon which all forms of power are founded: the logic of One. Institutions are driven by the “will to dominate” that “lurks in the logic of unitary command” (p. 36). For La Boétie, disobedience is the extrainstitutional expression of the political dignity of the many, as well as of the natural liberty that is at the core of the human experience. Laudani argues that La Boétie’s invitation to avoid clashing with power should not be understood as lacking in courage. Instead, it should be seen “as a way of conceiving political conflict” in its “*destituent form*” (p. 38). But the heredity of this thought will not be found with the Reformation or with the monarchomachs, who did not accept the unfounded or contingent nature of power as understood by La Boétie (p. 39). Instead, Laudani locates it in the sailors and commoners, the “many-headed hydra,” of the revolutionary Atlantic world.

The modern history of destituent disobedience is characterized by a struggle between attempts to neutralize it, by contract theorists such as Hobbes and Locke, and its reappearance in the form of praxis during the American Revolution and other postcolonial struggles. To complete this portrait of the “spectral presence” of disobedience in modernity, Laudani analyzes civil disobedience in the United States, from its intellectual origins to its practice in the Civil Rights Movement, as well as in the more radical variants found in the student uprisings of the

1960s or with the creation of the Black Panthers. Without explicitly saying so, the radical variant seems closer to destituent disobedience than does civil disobedience. In fact, in a persuasive interpretation of Rawls's "justification" of civil disobedience, Laudani identifies the fundamental limit of the liberal democratic attitude toward disobedience: "In Rawls's perspective, the whole element of *challenging* the political order is completely absent" (p. 113).

For Laudani, the globalization of the neoliberal order brings about a return to the practice of disobedience in its destituent form. Following the analyses of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, the author argues that the crisis of sovereignty opens a space for the creation of new forms of protest, such as "temporary autonomous zones" and hackerism. These new forms are tangible manifestations of the extrainstitutional action of the "multitude" that does not try to develop institutions that would neutralize conflict (p. 153). But the "multitude" is ambiguous. It is less a constituted political subject (*being-multitude*) than a "doing-multitude." It "must therefore be 'governed' and 'organized'" in order to allow for the passage from destitution to constitution. Indeed, Hardt and Negri are fixated upon the creation of a constituent power that would allow for the revolution to occur and, with it, the creation of a "democracy of the common." For Laudani, disobedience as destitution experiences here nothing less than a "recession": "[D]isobedience takes a step back, waiting to find a new existence beyond itself" (p. 154).

In order to conceptualize destituent power, the reference to Hardt and Negri's multitude is an unhelpful one. For the authors of *Empire*, only constituent power provides the key to revolutionary change. Because they cannot find it in the multitude forever toiling in destitution, they assume a vanguardist position, close to that of Lenin. Such a position implies disregarding the political capacity of the many, the possibility of radical democracy, and the grassroots efforts to foster a more egalitarian society. Instead of borrowing from potentially authoritarian strands of Marxism, Laudani could have explored certain post-Marxist theorists who place democracy, understood as the concerted action of the many against all forms of domination, at the core of their thought.

In *Democracy Against the State*,<sup>1</sup> French political theorist Miguel Abensour develops the notion of "insurgent democracy," which could enter into a fruitful dialogue with Laudani's destituent disobedience. Abensour argues that insurgent democracy practices conflict outside of the state and against it. This interpretation echoes Laudani's idea of conflict as a never-ending process of withdrawal from the "logic of One." Alternatively, Claude Lefort's enigmatic concept of "savage democracy"<sup>2</sup> could help analyze the politics of destituent disobedience today. Indeed, for Lefort, the term "savage" points to the excess or surplus of democratic energies that can never be fully neutralized by the political institutions of modernity.

In addition, Abensour and Lefort recognize, as does Laudani, the centrality of La Boétie and of his critique of the will to dominate rooted in unitary logic.

Strangely enough, Laudani was not compelled to enter into a fruitful dialogue with either thinker. His genealogy of destituent disobedience is certainly a compelling one. At the same time, it would have been even more compelling had he fully engaged other contemporary theorists writing on similar themes.

### Notes

- 1 Abensour 2011.
- 2 Lefort 2007.

### References

- Abensour, Miguel. 2011. *Democracy Against the State. Marx and the Machiavellian Moment*. Trans. Max Blechmann and Martin Breugh. London: Polity.
- Lefort, Claude. 2007. *Le temps présent. Écrits 1945–2005*. Paris: Belin.

### Response to Martin Breugh's review of *Disobedience in Western Political Thought: A Genealogy*

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— Raffaele Laudani

Martin Breugh's critical remarks focus essentially on two issues, both strictly related to the critical perspective he developed in his *Plebeian Experience*: The interpretation of Roman secession and the neglect of important contemporary theorists such as Claude Lefort and Miguel Abensour—both very influential in Breugh's own perspective—in the chapter dedicated to the "return" of disobedience in the global age.

Let us start from the end: Breugh is certainly right in pointing out the partiality of the authors and perspectives discussed in the last chapter. But this is true also for the previous ones. My book was not intended as an exhaustive reconstruction of all authors that in the history of political thought have approached disobedience and radical dissent. On the contrary, the main intention of the book was—as Breugh clearly acknowledged in the opening lines of his review—the conceptualization of a new political concept: destituent power. The hidden goal of the book was, then, theoretical. Selection, of authors and traditions of thought, was thus inevitable. As the founding scholars of the Italian journal *Filosofia politica*, to which I myself belong, explained almost 30 years ago in their dialogue with the German *Begriffsgeschichte*: In its true meaning, the history of political concepts is always a form of political philosophy.

To offer more details, the reason for a direct confrontation with Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, instead of Abensour (or others who could be equally included in

this picture), is double: First of all, because of Negri's workerist beginnings in the 1960s and 1970s, they appeared to me a better tool for confronting the political theory of global radical movements than that of their immediate global predecessors. Moreover, several groups today have declared themselves inspired by Negri's and Hardt's perspective. The critical discussion of their perspective was then a useful tool for discussing the potential and the limits of global radical movements.

Where I disagree with Breugh is in his description of Negri's and Hardt's perspective as containing "potentially authoritarian strands of Marxism." Frankly, I do not see in their analysis any authoritarian risk. And I believe that the old distinction between authoritarian and libertarian perspectives is somewhat ineffective today. Negri's and Hardt's controversial and unresolved argument is essentially the same around which radical movements have been struggling since the 1960s (and maybe even back to the very beginning of anticapitalist movements): How is it possible to combine the destituent spontaneity of the many with the constituent imperative of producing durable changes within society? How can spontaneity be organized? Their incapacity to give satisfying answers to these dilemmas is that of all contemporary radical movements and, probably, one of the reasons for neoliberalism's enduring domination, notwithstanding its recurrent crises.

The other critical remark—the interpretation of Roman secession—is not unrelated to these more political questions: I believe that *secessio* was a radical form of dissent in the form of the withdrawal of consent, without, however, defying the fundamental social hierarchy of Roman society. In fact, it operated as a tool of Roman *auctoritas*, contributing to its enduring greatness and stability. This is at least the way Roman political thinkers (particularly Cicero) saw it.

Then again, the question is not only academic but political: In the historical plebeian experience we can see, *mutatis mutandis*, the same problem that is affecting some of the most advanced political experiences of our times. At the end of the twentieth century, social movements' capacity of destituting political power was a fundamental component in the rise of several postneoliberal governments in Latin America (Brazil, Argentina, and Ecuador, among others). The force and peculiarity of these innovative political experiences was the delicate equilibrium between conflicting negotiation and inclusion of radical movements that kept open to the "underlying population" the channels of political decisions. After 15 years, what remains of this innovative experience? The brutal repression of social protests during the last soccer World Cup in Brazil, under the progressive administration of Dilma Rousseff, has openly put an end to this peculiar form of governance of society, while continuing to benefit several important and historical Brazilian social movements.

In more theoretical terms, the question is how to conceive a radical praxis of social movements based on the model of Roman plebeian experience without transforming this praxis into a *sui generis* form of lobbying unable to affect the essential structure of power in existing societies.

**The Plebeian Experience: A Discontinuous History of Political Freedom.** By Martin Breugh. New York: Columbia

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— Raffaele Laudani, *University of Bologna*

*The Plebeian Experience* is the historical reconstruction of a "hidden" tradition of political struggle for freedom that has developed "discontinuously" underneath mainstream Western politics and political thought. In this sense, the book is deeply related to two previous and very different "classical" researches on the "alternatives" of modernity: Antonio Negri's *Insurgencies: Constituent Power and the Modern State* (2009) and Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker's *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (2012).

Like Negri's, Martin Breugh's study is situated within "the Machiavellian constellation" (p. xvi): The Florentine Secretary is considered the beginner of a conception of politics alternative to mainstream modern theory of state sovereignty and centered on the immanent presence of conflict. More specifically, the plebeian experience described by Breugh finds its model in Machiavelli's theory of political "humors"; It is, in fact, the expression of the desire for freedom of the "people" (or "plebs") against the appetites for domination typical of the "nobles."

In line with Linebaugh and Rediker's history from below, the "traces" of this peculiar political experience of struggle for liberation are to be found in the history of marginal groups and common people: The prototype and first historical example is the 494 B.C.E. secession of the Roman plebs to the Aventine Hill to protest their political exclusion, followed by the Ciompi Revolt in Florence (1378) and the Masaniello uprising in Naples (1647), the English Jacobins of the London Corresponding Society at the eve of the nineteenth century, and the Paris Commune of 1871.

The selection of these historical examples is not only a way to circumscribe an otherwise unlimited research field but also and most of all a discursive strategy for underlining the discontinuous character of the plebeian experience: its repetitive but not progressive existence between the wrinkles of Western history. Similarly, the decision to stop this discontinuous history at the Paris Commune does not mean the exhaustion of the plebeian experience and its relegation

to a “historical” phenomenon. From the Zapatista uprising and the Seattle and Genoa movements at the eve of the twenty-first century, to the Arab Spring, the *indignados*, Occupy, and Gezi Park, until the recent resistance of Kurdish women in Kobala and the African American riots in the United States after the “Ferguson case,” a full list of (heterogeneous, but still connected) examples of contemporary “plebeian” struggles for freedom is available. Indeed, it is today that one of the main features of Breugh’s plebeian experience is gaining a complete self-consciousness in the theory and practice of radical movements: the intrinsic plurality and ambiguity of political subjectivity, resistant to the *reductio ad unum* that was typical of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century idea of class struggle (here again, careful readers will find more than an echo of Negri’s recent theory of “multitude”). From this perspective, Breugh’s study can be seen as a historical genealogy of global radical politics or, in his words, of “the politics of the many” (p. xix).

Although Breugh’s focus is not primarily theoretical, *The Plebeian Experience* also gives us useful insights for a new and alternative theory of political conflict. In particular, it intersects many elements of what has been recently defined as “destituent power” (see Laudani, *Disobedience in Western Political Thought: A Genealogy*, 2013, and Giorgio Agamben, *L’uso dei corpi*, 2014): Modern Western thought has prevalently understood political conflict in terms of constituent power, as the activation of a creative energy that gives rise, *ex nihilo*, to a new institutional order where human relations are disciplined and organized (constituted power). In all of the different historical examples discussed in *The Plebeian Experience*, the struggle for freedom takes, on the contrary, the form of a withdrawal (Plebs’ secession being again the paradigmatic example). Conflict for liberation is not conceived, then, within a military imagination, that is to say expressing itself in the form of a direct clash with power for the conquest of power or of something that is missing (rights, freedom, better salaries, etc.), but, on the contrary, as a form of withdrawal of his/her support from the functioning of the power machine. But this is not only a negative force but also a dialectical one: Its negativity brings with it simultaneously an affirmative potency, a different way of conceiving human relations, where conflict is an inner dimension of a new practice of democracy.

Breugh’s reference on pages 41 and 42 of his book to Etienne de La Boétie’s *Discourse of Voluntary Servitude* (1997) is thus not surprising: “Refuse to serve no more,” the French writer said, “and you are at once freed. I do not ask that you place hand upon the tyrant to topple him over, but simply that you support him no longer; then you will behold him, like a great Colossus whose pedestal has been pulled away” (*Discourse*, pp. 52–53). Here, more

than in Machiavelli, we can find theorized for the first time destituent dimension of the plebeian conflict and, more in general, a conception of politics where the conflict between logics of domination and will to freedom is an immanent condition that cannot find a stable and permanent institutional composition.

In this sense, a more direct confrontation with La Boétie’s *Discourse* would have helped Breugh to better develop the relationships between the plebeian experience and the idea of democracy as free and conflicting association (which is Breugh’s implicit normative element). On the contrary, Breugh’s use of La Boétie is limited to the more classical argument on “voluntary servitude.” to emphasize, against any mythology of the plebeian experience, its ambiguous and ambivalent nature. According to Breugh, there is, in fact, always the possibility that the plebeian desire for political freedom will relapse into its opposite: the desire for servitude. However, La Boétie’s voluntary servitude is part of a broader conception of politics that, assuming the constitutive fragility of sovereign power because of its potential exposure to the withdrawal of the consent of its subjects, makes of politics a fluid space of conflict between the cooperative instances of the many and the logic of domination of the One. In other words, to make the plebeian experience a real alternative within modernity, it would be better to shift from Machiavelli, who in the last analysis is searching for an institutional composition of the natural conflictuality of society, to La Boétie’s idea of politics as movement.

If a real limit can be found in Breugh’s book, however, it is its spatial framework, the geographical borders of its historical reconstruction, which remains essentially Eurocentric. In particular, it ignores one of the most significant examples of plebeian conflict: black abolitionism. Better than the example of the Romans’ secession, a confrontation with the experience of abolitionism could have helped Breugh to highlight the capacity of plebeian withdrawal to produce “affirmative” effects. W. E. B. Du Bois magisterially explained it with the idea of an “abolition democracy”: The African American withdrawal from the plantation system to join the Union Army during the Civil War (Du Bois’s “general strike of the black worker”) not only changed the nature of the conflict, transforming it from a “constitutional” war to a fight against slavery, but also opened the way to a revolutionary, though unfulfilled, process of democratization of American society beyond the limits of its constitutional form. And several other examples of non-European declinations of the plebeian experience could be found in the now-conspicuous historical research coming from Atlantic and postcolonial studies.

In other words, a discontinuous but more complete history of the plebeian experience would call for, to use Dipesh Chakrabarty’s famous expression, its “provincialization” or, which is the same thing, its emancipation



from the European narrative of sovereignty within which the plebeian experience can remain a “hidden tradition.”

**Response to Raffaele Laudani’s review of *The Plebeian Experience: A Discontinuous History of Political Freedom***

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— Martin Breugh

My thanks go to Raffaele Laudani for his generous and penetrating review of *The Plebeian Experience*. Before responding to his criticisms, I would first like to offer some elements of context regarding the genesis of my book.

First published in Paris in 2007, *The Plebeian Experience* staked a claim for radical politics in the midst of the “return of political philosophy” that occurred in *fin de siècle* France. This “return” took a paradoxical form: Its most influential scholars considered democracy as an “inescapable horizon,” yet they were dismissive of the politics of the Many. In short, they reduced democracy to institutions, procedures, and “majority rule,” rather than *also* considering it as “the capacity to do things” collectively (J. Ober 2007). This left little room for any scholarship that rehabilitated, either theoretically or historically, a substantive conception of democracy based on the political capacity of the Many and allowed for a politics of the “extra-ordinary” to become an integral part of our political heritage. (For an alternative intellectual history of the French “return to politics,” see Martin Breugh et al., eds., *Thinking Radical Democracy: The Return to Politics in Post-war France*, 2015.)

As Laudani aptly frames it, my work undertakes a “historical genealogy of global radical politics.” As such, it resonates with the work of other scholars, notably with that of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s *Multitude*. If there seems to be “echoes” of their work in my own, our perspectives diverge, however, in many key respects. For example, my work insists on a non-class-based analysis of radical politics: The plebeian experience involves “anybody and everybody,” and it is respectful of the idea of plurality, as understood by Hannah Arendt. As well, my

work categorically rejects the idea that the Many need “leaders” or “vanguards” in order to organize their entry into political agency. In fact, I consider the presence of such elites to be one of the greatest threats to the political freedom generated by a plebeian experience.

Laudani invites me to make the conceptual move from Machiavelli—too concerned with the “institutional composition of the natural conflictuality of society”—to La Boétie and his “idea of politics as movement.” While I am intrigued by this suggestion, I wonder what would be lost by such a move. After all, the second part of my book deals with the “forms of political organization” of the plebeian experience and shows that the radical politics of the Many cannot be reduced to the simple liquefaction of existing institutions, but that it also created radically democratic political organizations open to plurality and thriving on conflict—in stark contrast to the central institutions of liberal democracy. Would plebeian politics as pure movement not reinforce the bromide that we have nothing to learn from radical politics because of its instability and transience?

Finally, Laudani considers that the “real limit” of my work is that its “geographic borders” are limited to Europe. As it is often the case, the selection of historical case studies was based primarily on my training as a scholar of European political thought and history. This said, the concept of “plebeian experience” was created with a deliberate aim to understand a type of politics that goes beyond the historical scope of my work. One of the main objectives of the book is to offer a new heuristic device to analyze, and thus better understand, radical politics. As Laudani himself states in his review, my framework accurately describes W. E. B Du Bois’s “black abolitionism,” and I am pleased that other scholars have begun to use my work to analyze non-European radical politics, such as contemporary uprisings in Latin America (see Ricardo Peñafiel et al., eds., *L’interpellation plébéienne en Amérique latine*, 2012). Indeed, my hope is that Laudani’s final critique will be read as an *invitation* to scholars to deepen our understanding of radical democratic politics through the prism of the plebeian experience.