Formatting Non-Religion and "Unformatting" Late Modern Society: Reinvigorating Democratic Politics

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Résumé

The idea of formatting non-religion for a late modern society conjures images of ordering and arranging categories in a very modern way. The proposed paper gently questions such formatting. While certain sectors, such as law, may require clearly defined parameters, other sectors may thrive on interrupting the process of formatting. As an example, the paper suggests that a particular approach to the study of non-religious citizens in political spaces can provide pathways to "unformatting" modern binaries such as religious/secular, religion/politics, and, in so doing, reinvigorate democratic politics with a much-needed vitality that has been lost in recent decades and ceded to populist politicians.

The paper opens by observing that the last twenty years has seen a reawakening to the continued role of religion in the public sphere amongst politicians, policy makers and practitioners (Dinham 2009; Baker 2013; Wood 2002). Yet it suggests that in policy in particular this renewed awareness has often represented little more than a new approach to controlling religions (Beckford 2012). Alternatively, more radical theorists have seen this awakening as an opportunity to challenge the dominance of bureaucratic rationalisation, individualism and material values, and thereby reinvigorate interest in democratic politics (Jamoul and Wills 2008; Cloke, Sutherland, and Williams 2016).

It then suggests that religion does not have a monopoly on this counter-cultural capacity. By way of demonstrating this, the paper draws on ethnographic research amongst political activists in Vancouver, Canada, to highlight the "myths" of non-religious citizens. These myths are core to political mobilisation. But the paper then suggests that the dominance of religious/secular, religion/politics binaries in political spaces has undermined the capacity of non-religious citizens to reflect on their myths. By unformatting these binaries, democratic politics can ignite engagement amongst a growing population of non-religious citizens.

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