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Translating constituent process, or the political work of translation

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A monstrous, contagious, invasive expansion of *municipalismos* through and around Europe presupposes translation. But what makes up translation in this context of socio-political experience? What does it do? What gets assumed and implied in the act of translating a movement? Where are pitfalls, lines of flight?

Before, in and after any spread or circulation there is politics of translation. Performing translation is a political labor, as Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson (2013) and others have written. But as a social, semiotic and affective process translation also does political work itself.[1] In drawing (on) particular understandings and practices of language, geography and assembly, people use and develop working knowledges of translation to define what gets translated and how, what relations are forged or foreclosed amongst activists and territories, and what political projects are thus rendered imaginable or impossible, where, when and for whom.

In this text I return to a meeting of movements that took place in 2012 in Madrid, called Agora99, to look closely at translation. The reflection that unfolds is revealing not only of certain dynamics of

translation in movement settings, but also brings sedimented assumptions about language, space and assembly into purview, making it possible to clarify some of the radical potential of *municipalismo*.

Flashback, flash forward: translating constituent process

For the open group that constituted itself in Madrid to organize the Agora99 in 2012, the meeting would serve the double purpose of introducing activists from beyond Spain to the political language and practices of the 15M movement, while creating an opportunity for Madrid residents and visiting activists alike to situate otherwise locally or nationally framed struggles in a transnational context. It was a meeting, in other words, set up to promote translation: of 15M from Spain to elsewhere, of local struggles to transnational terrain. Against the backdrop of the ongoing imposition of austerity by and through European institutions, coordinating strategy "at the European level" was an oft-cited goal. Indeed, the Agora99 in Madrid was the first and arguably only transnational, open-call meeting of movement activists of its size that took place in Europe in the immediate wake of the 2011 mobilizations. Alongside debt, constituent process was the foremost topic on the meeting's agenda. This was never announced in general terms, but it was so frequently cited by the Madrid hosts – at the kick-off roundtable, in the dozens of smaller workshops that made up the Agora, in squats and cafes and on sidewalks where meetings took place and discussions were continued – that the workshop "Towards a constituent process," which was scheduled for the second day of the three-day encounter, became a highly awaited event.

The workshop was held in a collectively run bookshop in the city center, a medium-sized and well-lit space into which several hundred bodies squeezed themselves as it rained outside. An extensive presentation was given in Spanish at the front of the room, in which activists from Madrid presented arguments about the need for a constituent process in Spain and in Europe. Whispering translation into English was offered in one corner, but mostly translation proceeded in a de-central manner in the densely packed room, in the swarm. And thus, rather than linearly producing a standard glossing in the national languages into which translation was being performed, the workshop became filled with multiplying encounters – linguistic and more generally, semiotic, as well as affective – between political theories-discourses-traditions-experiences-alignments.

Presentations ended on the makeshift workshop stage with the proposition that the remainder of the time be spent discussing what shape a constituent process in Europe might take and what tools it would require. These questions were taken up in multiple ways, but two arguably representative responses centered on translation. One activist attending the meeting from Berlin was upset by the proposition: How could the Spanish comrades pose constituent process as a strategy adequate for Europe? If constituent process meant calling for a new constitution, this might resonate throughout the mass mobilizations in Spain, but would be totally unrealistic in Germany where the population supported the status-quo. Clearly the workshop organizers were stuck in the bubble of their Spanish experience, failing to take on the transnational perspective required to build solidarity across Europe in crisis. Another activist attending the meeting from Rome offered a distinct interpretation: No movement like 15M was to be found in Italy, and given the different temporalities and

situations of crisis across European space, activists would need to develop novel modes of relating across new borders. Activists from beyond Spain might imagine a map of Europe on which 15M marks a hot point of orientation, a place to attend to and learn from, but not to copy. Such imaginaries would be a condition of success for transnational cooperation.

The debate about "constituent process" at and around Agora99 involved a sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit meta-debate about translatability: according to what terms is *proceso constituyente* to be translated and what are the criteria for successful translation? The two responses sketched above assume and offer different answers to these questions. They draw (on) distinct working knowledges of translation: one based on a referential understanding of language, a European modern political geography of nation-states, progressive centers and regressive peripheries, and a politics that understands assembly to be about representation and decision; the other based on a performative understanding of language, criss-crossed and multiple political space-times, and a politics where assembly is a non-representational encounter for exchange and negotiation. Just what is at stake in these working knowledges, and how they congeal, remains to be shown.

Finding equivalents, creating conditions

Those translating Spanish-to-German at Agora99 were puzzled: how to best gloss *proceso constituyente* in German language? In English it was unmistakably constituent process, in Italian *processo costituente* – but in German the matter was less evident. Were the Madrid activists referring to *verfassungsgebender Prozess* (constitutional process)? And if not, what else could it be called? By and large, the debate circled on the assumption that the task of

translation was a linguistic procedure, which furthermore consisted in identifying a German-language equivalent of *proceso constituyente* – that is, a term that would refer to the same thing.[2]

Of course, this also implies a presumption that there is a thing to begin with, constituted and identifiable according to terms already at hand. All this was bound up in the intervention depicted above, which relied on the assumption that *proceso constituyente* "meant" *verfassungsgebender Prozess* – a fact lost on other workshop participants because the intervention itself was delivered in English. The choice for *verfassungsgebend* was not arbitrary, nor was it made for theoretical or semantic purposes. Rather, it was based on sociocultural familiarity – on the availability of texts known, of linguistic resources, learned in experience. Most Spanish-speaking German activists had learned Spanish not in Spain, but in Latin America, and not few were particularly tuned into political developments in Venezuela, Ecuador and Bolivia, where they understood *verfassungsgebender Prozess* to play a central role. As denotation, *verfassungsgebender Prozess* foregrounds the creation of a new constitution, a meaning that is iconically reinforced as the lexeme *Verfassung* (constitution) is part of the term – and as *Verfassung* is understood in its "classical" (given, constituted) form. As such, some German-speaking activists understood the constituent process workshop at Agora99 to be proposing a juridical procedure. Amongst those with stronger affinities to South America, the assumption circulated that the thing Madrid activists were calling for a process for Europe in line with what they understood to have been set into motion in Venezuela and Ecuador and Bolivia. Crucially, constituent process, in this propositional, referential sense, would be a kind of unitary formula, belonging to and for application in a given world-out-there. Understood in this way, it was possible to assume and conclude,

almost in one breath, that "it" might be "realistic" in Spain, but not in Germany.

As understood by many activists from Madrid, however, *proceso constituyente* was not a given thing or phenomenon in the world that could be pointed to, and thus equally glossed in Spanish or German. Rather, in addition to but not separate from its political-theoretical affordances and associations, including with South America, the term designated a process of learning and becoming that had begun to form in the 15M movement.[3] In this context, moreover, "playing with language" had become regarded as a crucial, if newly acquired, political technology. The semantic imprecision of the *proceso constituyente* – comparable in Spanish and English,
between a "classical" notion of a constitutional process and *something else* – had been identified as a strength in the context of the 15M. As use of the term came to mark solidarity with the movement, the persistence of this ambivalence was strategically promoted in order to prevent a splintering of the movement into so-called "radical" and "reformist" camps. During and around the constituent process workshop, activists from Spain pressed with questions about "what they meant" by constituent process repeatedly avoided any particular definition, or offered so many partial definitions by way of allusion or example – drafting a new constitution, yes, but maybe something more like a wiki, definitely with social feedback loops, and including a process of material reorganization, as one activist put it – that the term itself seemed impossible to contain. For some, this was precisely the point. Rather than spelling out an executable plan, the constituent process workshop posited and performed it, bringing activists to engage in discussion about how constituent process might be

imagined, and about what resources would be required in order to "develop the process."

As interactions multiplied and thickened at the Agora99, most German-language translators agreed that *verfassungsgebender Prozess* did not seem to be an adequate translation. In the following days and weeks, as discussions continued and research on "constituent process" was commenced, *konstituierender Prozess* became the commonly accepted term, in particular as existing German-language texts were found in which *poder constituyente* (constituent power) was translated as *konstituierende Macht*.[4] As the task of translating slowly took new shape, from determining to what the Madrid activists were referring, to addressing the question of how to work on constituent process in Germany, the debate about the appropriate German gloss was placed under a new light. It was problematized that *konstituierend* would not have the capacity to become popular as *constituyente* had in Spain and elsewhere, because *konstituierend*, with its Latin root, would count as elite, academic language in many social spaces. The point here is not to verify or negate this claim but rather to point out that it emerges from a different working knowledge of translation than as the search for a (denotational) equivalent. The social context of meaning, already relevant all along, was beginning to be discussed in explicit terms. And if insight into the social effectiveness of language is one step to its creative use towards specific ends, then the discussion about translatability had a political impact.

Chronotope in and out of the nation

If different knowledges of language at work in the translation of constituent process, so was meta-geography.[5] In November 2012, of course, the discourse of the so-called eurocrisis was still at its

peak. Whether understood critically or as governmental necessity, the eurocrisis was broadly effective as a performance in "European" space of a division of states (and thus political space) into creditors and debtors, the former more modern than the latter, as was broadly known to have happened previously in terms of a "global" center and periphery. Critical and affirmative accounts alike have drawn associations between the "global periphery" and the "new European periphery" as well as between the "global center" and the newly posited "core countries" of Europe. This scheme works as center/core *qua* "Europe," the measure of value, is assigned qualities of "progressiveness," "stability" while periphery *qua* non/less-"Europe" is deemed "backward," "unstable" ("in crisis"); drawing on the ideology of one nation-one language-one territory, thus "nationalized" persons, languages and territories are not only set up as opposites but also set along a temporal line "ahead of" or "behind" one another.

One response to this discourse in social movements was to claim the value of, even celebrate, the periphery. This was done as an act against the cultural devaluation and economic impoverishment taking place, but also – and this is what is more relevant here – in a kind of Eurocrisis anti-discourse that took up the terms of the Eurocrisis and turned them upside-down, associating movement and future promise with the "periphery," and stasis and conservativism with the "center." These coordinates informed a quite widespread common-sense amongst activists, leading to comments such as, "this is how we [in Spain] talked five years ago," as one Spanish activist commented after listening to a discussion amongst German activists – locating the movement in Spain in "the present" and the German activists in the past. Similarly, after visiting Greece, an activist from Berlin remarked that "they [the Greeks] are at least ten years ahead of us [the Germans]." Nation,

territory, and even way of talking (or "register") become linked, a chronotope actualized.

The eurocrisis anti-discourse created a context in which it would be reasonable to posit that constituent process – to return to the assessments circulating at the Agora99 – might be "realistic" in Spain, but not in Germany. Yet even if the 15M movement gave way to new political potentialities across the territory of the Spanish state, and even if a discourse on constituent process had developed in this setting, any "realistic" assessment would have concluded that a *verfassungsgebender Prozess* was also far from imminent or feasible in Spain in 2012. In fact, there was another layer of spatiotemporal understanding at work in making this claim seem reasonable – beyond but related to the eurocrisis discourse. Given the association of *verfassungsgebender Prozess* with the so-called progressive governments in South America, which was experienced by activists who had traveled there as the opposite of "conservative Germany," the suggestion of *proceso constituyente* in Spain drew up a political geography linking Spain and South America, and thus similarly setting "movement Spain" against "conservative Germany" – a scheme all the more powerful as many young German activists had traveled to South America in early adulthood, on politically inspired kinds of rites-of-passage journeys that are forcefully effective precisely because of the binaries at work.

Such spatio-temporalization fixes possibilities for relation and translation at the (presumably internally homogenous) nation-state scale, thereby erasing heterogeneity but also other political-economic scalings that are relevant for lives and livelihood. Here, the difference between the Berlin activist's response considered up to now and the second response sketched out in the introduction of this text becomes apparent. The activist from Rome spoke of

"multiple temporalities of crisis," "criss-crossed zones," and "border-making" – drawing (on) a geography markedly distinct from the Eurocrisis and its anti-discourse. In fact many people from Italy, where activist discourse included an elaborate debate on the politics of space, explicitly argued at the Agora99 and elsewhere that the center-periphery geography of Europe was "no longer adequate." The call to invent tools for a constituent process was related to the slogan to "reset Europe" that framed the meeting in Madrid, as well as the slogan "make Europe," which framed a second Agora99 meeting hosted in Rome one year later. These slogans are informed not only by a creative understanding and use of language, but also, and certainly related to this, by an idea regarding the productive power of representations of political space. The suggestion to relate to the 15M movement as a point of orientation, to attend to, to learn from, but not to copy, opens relational possibilities foreclosed by the movement vs. stasis, future vs. retrograde scheme, possibilities not available when the primary context of relation is that of state policy, of geopolitics. It was thus possible to take up and translate constituent process as something to play, test, set to the creative task of re-composition.

Ends of assembly, or, translation for what?

Of course, such possibilities are not only opened or closed through understandings of language and political space. What also proved to be decisive for translation at Agora99 was the expectations with which activists attended the meeting. These varying expectations hint at implicit models of assembly at work in activists' approaches to and engagement at meetings. In particular, different approaches to assembly were framed by different models of parts and wholes, and this in turn affected translation.

For the activist from Berlin quoted at the outset, the assembly was a place to determine strategy and decide about executable plans. It was due to a concern for the feasibility of such an imagined executable plan that he was focused on finding the right translation for *proceso constituyente*, which he took to be the name and objective of the supposed plan. Based on this translation, he argued in the workshop discussion that the plan could not be executed Germany, further presuming, therefore, that the aim of the discussion was to reach a decision about the supposed plan, whether affirmation or rejection.

Imagining that a few hundred activists gathered for a weekend meeting would create and decide on an executable plan for Europe rests on the idea that the meeting ideally consisted of activists as nation-state representatives, discrete, side-by-side, uniting into an abstract body of social movements in Europe.[6] The Agora99 is thereby assumed to be a site of evaluative judgment and decision, with jurisdiction covering the European map. Execution happens elsewhere – and afterwards. Practice "in movements" is thereby separated from the practice of decision-making "about movements," while practice is considered to follow, both temporally and causally, from a decision. Rather than a space of "contamination," it seems, this image of the meeting, cut off, above, is sealed off. It was assumed, moreover, that these were the terms of everyone's participation, that the terms of translation were shared.

The activist from Rome, in contrast, intervened explicitly into the question of how translation should proceed. By offering an alternative representation to Europe than the conventional political map or Eurocrisis model, and in attempting to account for situated difference, he put forward a model of translation in which parts could relate to one another, or to events or phenomena or other

intensities, as singularities, via a practice of attention and orientation. By starting a conversation about "how" translation might be practiced, his input aligns with the idea of the meeting as a space of "learning," and even more so as a space for "developing tools." As such, it is not taken to be a space separated from "the movement," but rather one kind of space in and of movement. In the multiple present it is not over, ahead of, or beyond the movement, but one confluence among others.

Translating municipalism

A working knowledge of translation thus affects relationality, presuming and enacting relational possibilities. It defines what gets translated, where translation begins and ends, and its possibilities for extension. The description and analysis that make up the bulk of this text are necessarily schematic, elaborating on the social and semiotic underpinnings of two approaches to translating constituent process at the Agora99 in order to sketch out in analytic terms distinct working knowledges of translation. If until now these approaches seemed to be placed aside one another, juxtaposed, as if opposing ideologies, from here it is worth considering how they are in fact not opposing, but rather different in tendency. In fact, this is inevitably written into the discussion above: while the working knowledge coalescing around referentialist language ideology, modern political space and the value scheme of Europe and a representationalist politics of assembly lent itself to critical, analytical dissection, the working knowledge coalescing around performative practice, spatiotemporal heterogeneity and the social making of space and immanence in movement called for something else.

At the Agora99 there was one activist from Berlin who was less interested in translating *proceso constituyente* as a linguistic expression or political formula. While others debated translation in these terms, he walked the neighborhood streets. By the third day of Agora99, he returned "infected" by the movement, having immersed himself in 15M, its colors, noises, rhythms, and knew he would set himself to helping bring something like it into being elsewhere. If the will to find a German-language equivalent to *proceso constituyente* came from the presumed necessity of knowing it in a certain kind of way, of determining its nature, in order to then decide on it, opening translation to include forces beyond the linguistic, and beyond that which is considered in a narrow definition of the political, was marked by a different relation to the unfamiliar. Perhaps, it does not imagine decision in terms of a cut in the line, separating a supposedly uncertain past to a future cast in certainty, but draws a different kind of imagined border between the "known" and "unknown" or "different," one that less demarcates than blurs, creates zones of vulnerability, of con-fusion. In this mode one enters an open-ended process of learning, dwelling with for a while, allowing oneself to be confronted, to engage with, to negotiate with, to be affected. Demanding more of the person, this touches on the terms of translation, so that translating knowledge of "it" must draw on a broader array of resources, of modes of knowing and relating, alongside critical analysis and decisive judgment.

Thus, if a working knowledge of translation defines what gets translated, that which is translated also affects translation itself. In this sense, the promise of translating municipalism relates to its capacity to contaminate translation itself, demanding and cultivating working knowledges of translation capable of playing with language, recomposing territory and promoting assembly in

ways municipalism has inherited from experiences of 15M. This can be aided by the scaling of municipalism in a non-national frame, which affords the circumvention (the "short-circuiting," to cite an illuminating concept from the municipalist register) of the one nation-one language-one territory ideology and the value scheme of Europe/progress with which it is tied up, which together so powerfully overdetermine social movement protocols and imaginaries across Europe, including and sometimes especially those explicitly critical of (methodological) nationalism. If the Agora99 was framed in "transnational" terms, municipalism will need to be translated "translocally," while ensuring that the local does not get equated with the city, or imagined as homogeneous space.

It can be hoped that translating municipalism will call into question the plot of movement and stasis/conservativism, the criteria of "success" and "failure," so pervasive in activist translation, that it can affect, infect, the very terms of relationality – and of knowing the political.

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[1] The resonance with Bruno Latour’s (1993) “work of translation” was only pointed out to me after this text was written, but its presence is no coincidence and it is only one among multiple resonances that I cannot address here.

[2] The analysis in this text is indebted to Michael Silverstein’s (cf. 1993, 2003) concept of “metapragmatics,” and in this section particularly to the linguistic-anthropological understanding of “language ideology” (cf. Irvine & Gal 2009).

[3] Some clarification is necessary. What I am doing here in part is tracing how translation works in real-time discursive interaction by drawing on situated, socially contextualized knowledge and re-instantiating it anew. This is distinct from a genealogical approach, which would need to choose a starting point, for example, with the publication of Antonio Negri’s book *Potere Costituente* (translated into English in 1999 as *Insurgencies*), and would show that this book was read and studied in movements and by political leaders in South America, where its terms became part of a broader discourse that was, in turn, re-taken up, together with Negri’s book, by activists in research and publishing collectives in Spain and

elsewhere in Europe years before 2011, when it was planted in the 15M movement. Of course, this trajectory is relevant for the Agora99, a site of its uptake or actualization. To clarify from here one specific point: my argument then is not that activists from Germany were the only ones to associate constituent process with South America, but rather that the context of meaningfulness of this association was crucial in a certain way for the translation that made constituent process "unrealistic in Germany."

[4] eipcp and *transversal* were the primary sites of this existing translation, as for example in Rauning (2005, 2007) or Negri (2011). The issue here is "availability": a translation is not merely "given" if it has already been performed, but it must be entextualized in a particular social-discursive (register) space, which in this situation was not the case.! In this kind of situation, the fragmented, stratified nature of language is revealed.

[5] Carlo Galli's (2014) concept of political space, Sandro Mezzadra's (2012) writing on time and space in postcolonial capitalism, Susan Gal's (2010) thoughts on the semiotic effectiveness of political geography and Roberto Dainotto's (2006) work on the performativity of Europe form the theoretical basis for this aspect of the analysis.

[6] See Gregory Duff Morton's (2014) careful reflections on the meetings of the landless movement (*Movimento dos Sem Terra*) and the points at which these are construed as "abstracted wholes."