

# **Redefining the political moment: Or the way Politics hollows out politics and how we should respond**

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## **Abstract**

On 16 February 2003, more than half a million people gathered in Sydney, Australia, as part of a global anti-war protest aimed at stopping the impending invasion of Iraq by the then US Administration. It is difficult to estimate how many millions marched on the coordinated protest, but it was by far the largest mobilization of a generation. Walking and chanting on the streets of Sydney that day, it seemed that a political moment was upon us. In a culture that rarely embraces large scale activism, millions around Australian demanded to be heard. The message was clear: if you do not hear us, we would be willing to bring down a government. The invasion went ahead, however, with the then Australian government, under the leadership of John Howard, being one of the loudest and staunchest supporters of the Bush Administrations drive to war. Within 18 months, anti-war activists struggled to have a few hundred participants take part in anti-Iraq war rallies, and the Howard Government was comfortably re-elected for another term. The political moment had come and gone, with both social commentators and many members of the public looking for a reason. While the conservative media was often the focus of analysis, this paper argues that in a time of late capitalism, the political moment is hollowed out by 'Politics' itself. That is to say, that formal political processes (or 'Politics') undermine the political practices that people participate in everyday (or 'politics'). Drawing on an ongoing research project focusing on democracy and young people, I discuss how the concept of 'politics' has been destabilised and subsequently, the political moment has been displaced. This displacement has led to a re-definition of 'political action' and, I argue, the emergence of a different type of everyday politics.

## **Introduction**

In Samuel Becket's renowned play, *Waiting for Godot*, two characters, Vladimir and Estragon, wait around for someone named Godot to arrive. The play follows the lives of the pair over two days as they attempt to divert themselves while waiting expectantly, and as it turns out unsuccessfully, for Godot. They claim he is an acquaintance, but it seems that they hardly know him, admitting that they would fail to recognise him if he were to arrive. They occupy their time eating, sleeping, debating, arguing, playing games, swapping hats, and contemplating suicide. They will do anything "to hold the terrible silence at bay" in their wait for Godot (Becket quoted in Knowlson 1996, p. 57).

For many interested in political change, waiting for the political moment is similar to waiting for the arrival of Godot: we believe that it will eventually come, but not sure either when this will happen or that we will even recognise it. We are not even sure what will trigger the arrival of the moment.

Throughout contemporary history, many authors including Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci and Antonio Negri direct us to that moment: likely to be brought on by the crisis and inherent contradictions of capitalism (Negri 1991). The ecological threats that emerge through the ever-expanding essence of capitalism are also seen to trigger a crisis that will lead to the moment for change (Burkett 1999). When it does arrive, we believe that a post-capitalist, ecologically sustainable and socially just society will emerge.

At two separate points during the play, Pozzo and his heavily laden slave Lucky, interrupt Vladimir and Estragon. The entrance of the two is quite dramatic including an appalling cry from the edge of the stage as Lucky enters with a rope around his neck. Lucky staggers half way across the stage before we see his master holding the other end of the rope. Pozzo yells rudely at the slave, calling him 'a pig' while being friendly to the other two, who initially mistake him for Godot.

This type of 'false arrival' is something that has come to dominate the political moment. There have been many instances across the world when we have believed that the political moment has arrived. In 1999 during the World Trade Organisation (WTO) negotiations in Seattle, for example, a new global justice movement emerged that insisted the demands of trans-national corporations be secondary to social and environmental concerns. The protesters claimed solidarity with third world movements such as the Zapatistas in Mexico, and established a 'people's blockade' which 'shut down' the WTO ministerial (Barlow and Clarke 2001). Such blockades were mirrored all over the world: from Melbourne, Australia, which attempted to stop the meeting of the World Economic Forum in 2000, to countless protests against the 'purveyors' of 'development' throughout the world that have been at the source of an economic model that has failed the majority of the world's population including the World Bank and Asian Development Bank.

Each one of these blockades was aimed at symbols of globalised capitalism, and represented an alternative vision of globalisation. Along with the annual World Social Forum meetings held in Porto Alegre in Brazil, it was argued that this movement had seized a political moment to bring global capital to account for its excesses (Kingsnorth 2003). Elsewhere, I have described this movement as 'counter globalisation' rather than the popular 'anti-globalisation' title it was given as it presented us with a different vision of globalisation (see

Arvanitakis 2007). Though the movement remains active and continues to challenge the excesses of capital, it is difficult to argue that it has not lost momentum, not least because of the 2001 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington that put such activity under severe scrutiny (Fernandez 2009). The moment had come and gone, and little had changed.

Likewise, on 16 February 2003, more than half a million people gathered in Sydney, Australia, as part of a global anti-war protest aimed at stopping the impending invasion of Iraq by the then US Administration. It is difficult to estimate how many millions marched on the coordinated protest, but it was by far the largest mobilisation of a generation – with new technologies allowing a coordinated approach by the anti-war movement that was not possible during the mass protests against the Vietnam War.<sup>1</sup>

Walking and chanting on the streets of Sydney that day, it seemed that a political moment was again upon us – the multitude of protesters had re-emerged, taking a different form and expanding to include many who had never previously taken to the streets. In a culture that rarely embraces large-scale activism, millions around Australian demanded to be heard. The message was clear: if you do not hear us, we would be willing to bring down a government. The invasion went ahead, however, with the then Australian government, under the leadership of John Howard, being one of the loudest and staunchest supporters of the Bush Administration's drive to war.

Within 18 months, anti-war activists struggled to have a few hundred participants take part in anti-Iraq war rallies, and the Howard Government was comfortably re-elected for another term in 2004.<sup>2</sup> Again, a new people's 'super power' emerged, and again it dwindled, leaving many wondering what happened to 'the moment' (Moore 2003).

This paper has two broad aims. To begin with, I discuss the absence of a specific political moment – particularly following the economic and environmental crises that currently

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<sup>1</sup> One estimate has placed the figure at 36 million people participating in over 3,000 protests in the three-month period between January-March 2003. See [http://www.socialistworker.co.uk/article.php?article\\_id=6067](http://www.socialistworker.co.uk/article.php?article_id=6067) – accessed May 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Though a detailed analysis of the re-election of the Howard Government is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to note that John Howard was able to sideline and dismiss criticisms about the war during his campaign by appealing to Australians to 'support the troops'. This allowed him to concentrate on then opposition leader, Mark Latham's, many weaknesses as well as focussing on silencing many individuals and organisations critical of his government. See Hamilton and Maddison (2007) for more details.

confront us. I argue that in a time of late capitalism, the political moment is hollowed out by 'Politics' itself. That is, the processes of contemporary capitalist political cycles undermine and erode moments of political action by citizens, be they large or small. Consequently, formal political processes (or 'Politics') undermine the practices of the citizenship, forcing them to increasingly focus their engagement towards informal or everyday small 'p' politics. The second aim of the paper, then, is to consider the transformation in the character of the relations between citizens and civic institutions that follow this – a relationship that has become increasingly complex due to many factors, including globalisation and the rise of neoliberalism. What follows is that the concept of 'politics' has been destabilised and subsequently, the political moment has been displaced. This displacement has led to a re-definition of 'political action' and, I argue, the emergence of a different type of everyday politics by citizens that we find difficult to understand and measure.

### **The political moment**

It does not take a 'Marxist' to appreciate the crises and contradictions that are intrinsic to capitalism. Central here is a system – economic, political and social – that relies on ongoing and continuous expansion. To achieve this, capitalist production must find new ways to grow: be it through new forms of domestic exploitation or imperialist expansion. Inherent in this is that our society takes on a capitalist subjectivity (Hardt and Negri 2000). From our politicians and union leaders, to our own personal position, we are constantly looking for new opportunities of growth, wealth, accumulation and affluence.

Within this ongoing need for expansion, we see the emergence of crises. Antonio Negri's (1991) reading of *the Grundrisse*, for example, outlines how the exploitative demands of capitalism lead to antagonistic relationships between classes creating the constant potential for crisis. Negri argues that the historical development of capitalist society involves the development of both the working and capitalist classes as separate and antagonistic subjects. For its own survival, capitalism must ensure the relationship expands both horizontally (through increasing levels of surplus labour) or vertically (by expanding a capitalist accumulation subjectivity). Negri sees this working class subjectivity constantly being manipulated and controlled by various means, as the working class has the potential to throw the system into crisis and tear it down. Here, capital cannot appropriately control the working class and the potential for a revolutionary (political) moment remains constant.

In contrast to traditional approaches to Marxism, Negri (1991) argues that class struggle is not limited to the economic sphere, but exists everywhere. In this way, political relationships are ubiquitous. Consequently, the political moment can materialise in any sphere.

Additionally, the shape of this political moment is also undefined by Negri. For clues here, we can turn to Negri's later projects with Michael Hardt (2000; 2004; 2009) where they discuss the emergence of the 'multitude'. Hardt and Negri present the multitude in expansive terms, describing it as "a broad category that includes all those whose labour is directly or indirectly exploited by and subjected to capitalist norms of production and reproduction" (2000, p. 52). Later, Hardt and Negri (2004) attempt to solidify the multitude and qualify it in terms of today's progressive activist movements.

While this attempt to better explain their political subject has many critics (see Brennan (2002) and Callinicos (2002) for example), Hardt and Negri (2004) seem to purposefully be avoiding an ultimate definition. As such, they present the concept of the multitude and its emergence as being "internally different, multiple social subjects whose constitution and action is based not on identity or unity... but on what it has in common" (ibid. p.100). The group of social actors, then, defines this common. Defined in a more pragmatic way, this can be thought of citizens cooperatively taking control of challenges that confront them (Hay 2009).

As highlighted above, we do not have to look far to identify crises in capitalism – though the political moment remains elusive. Most recently, this occurred during the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) when the exploitative and casino nature of neoliberal capitalism emerged. Related here, is simultaneous unmasking of the state apparatus that supports and underpins the system that gave rise to the GFC.

A detailed explanation of the financial crisis is beyond the scope of this paper but just how embedded it has become in our contemporary world is best understood by the fact that it has its own acronym: GFC. Like LOL (or laugh out loud for the uninitiated), the GFC remains very today: not only used as an acronym when writing, but actually used when speaking as well. I am not making light of the crisis that refuses to go away despite promises that all is well. Rather, the fact that such an acronym is used confirms it is part of our daily experience.

This is not a stand-alone crisis, however, and is accompanied by the global food crisis (or the ‘other GFC’). Though it no longer makes the front page of our newspapers, it has not gone away. The ‘other GFC’ saw the standard of living of over half of the world population fall dramatically following a surge in food prices in 2007-08 (World Bank 2010; Lorimer 2008). While many of us may have noticed a jump on our grocery bill of a few dollars, the world’s more vulnerable populations felt the effects immediately, with tens of millions of people more than before faced hunger and hundreds of millions having to reduce their food consumption. The World Bank (2010) estimated that the result of the surge in food prices increased the number of undernourished people in the world to a staggering 923 million.

Then of course there is the most challenging of all crises: climate change. With only a handful of political dinosaurs now believing that this is actually not a problem to be confronted, the issue of global warming is interlinked with both the GFC and the food crisis in a number of ways – not least the need for capital to expand despite the consequences.

As the global economy stood on the brink of collapse, the combined and complementary struggles of the world’s working classes operating simultaneously could have given rise to radical socio-political transformation. Despite the mass demonstrations (which are continuing in Greece and Spain at the time of writing), no such political moment emerged and the general feeling is the worst is over – a point recently encouraged by the International Monetary Fund in their *2010 Economic Outlook*<sup>3</sup>.

The crises I have described above, then, have not led to a political moment but a withdrawal from formal political processes (Li and Marsh 2008). To understand why this is the case, I believe we need to turn to a study of citizenship and how its changing nature has hollowed out the political. Despite flashes of resistance and protest, recent research in Australia finds that people feel increasingly alienated, excluded and disempowered from formal politics (Arvanitakis and Marren 2009). I argue below that this is because the formal Political sphere constructs and thrives on such feelings of disconnection.

Before proceeding, it is important to note I am discussing the emergence of both the citizen and the ‘political moment’ within a national context rather than expanding this examination

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<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2010/01/index.htm> - accessed May 2010.

to include concepts such as the ‘global citizen’ (Davies 2006). While this may diverge from the thrust of Hardt and Negri’s (2004; 2009) broader intent, it is important to note that I am engaging an approach that connects theory with observed reality. My work here is based on what Nicolescu (2006) describes as ‘phenomenological transdisciplinarity’. By drawing on this approach, I am attempting to integrate a “non-dogmatic treatment of the transdisciplinary theory and practice” within a plurality lived experiences (ibid. p.3).

### **The complex relations of citizenship**

In its most basic definition, we can think of citizenship as a set of social practices (Turner 1993, p.4) that bind us to a nation (Mueller 2002). From this flows a concept that citizenship is linear: a direct relationship between civic institutions and the citizen. The quality of this relationship is measured by voter attitudes and participation (Kymlicka and Norman 1994).

In this way, the concept of citizenship has been proposed as a way of describing what people are excluded from, and what they could be included in. This envisages a form of belonging entailing both rights and responsibilities, and constructs a unifying sense of the *civis* to which they may belong.

In the contemporary world, however, there is a need to understand citizenship as a more complex phenomenon. That is, it should not be seen as a simple one-to-one linear relationship between an individual and a civic body, but it is also a function of the relationships with those around it. This is a relational approach to citizenship, where my bond with civic institutions is complicated by the connection I have with those around me (both near and far), as well as their relationship with the same *civic* institutions.

In addition, we have the rise of dual citizenship and increasing migration levels. In Australia, for example, the percentage of people born outside the country has increased dramatically over the last 30 years and now represents 25 percent of the population. In addition, it is estimated that 45 percent of Australians were either born overseas or have at least one parent who is a migrant.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See Department of Immigration and Citizenship Fact Sheets available at <http://www.immi.gov.au/media/fact-sheets/04fifty.htm> – accessed April 2010.

There is also the ‘non-citizen citizen’. That is, the displaced person or temporary migrant who lives within a country’s borders. In an increasingly globalised world, we must acknowledge this section of the population and the influence they have even though they are not ‘citizens’ in the traditional sense of the word. For example, in 2007 Australia had over 7 million temporary migrants (who were working, studying or visiting).<sup>5</sup> In a population of just over 22 million, this is a significant proportion and one that is also important in influencing the relational nature of citizenship. This became evident in the emerging tensions caused between Australia and India when a number of Indian students were the victim of violent attacks. Such attacks created a number of strains, both locally and internationally, as Australians reflected on a history of underlying racist exclusion and tensions (Haigh 2010).

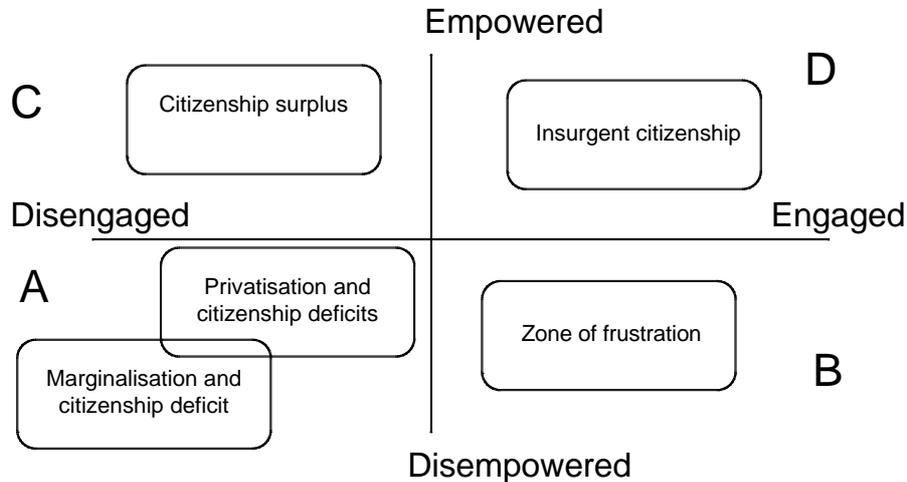
Such a position on citizenship means that we cannot understand the relationship between the individual and the state in a straightforward equation. Rather, it is complex and constantly re-negotiated. It also means that we should resist the concept of citizenship as stable or its meaning universal. Consequently, we need to see the relationship between the state and citizens as constantly in flux with different groups and individuals having significantly different relationships (see Figure 1).

A key problem is, however, that the most common way of seeing ‘citizenship’ is in rigid, restrictive terms, privileging a limited range of values and identities. In Australia, we have found that this is basically a conservative, mono-cultural, Anglo-Australian, and it is being imposed on those who do not fit: from the young person to immigrant populations (Arvanitakis and Marren 2009). In this way, it reinforces a sense of exclusion that is aggravated because citizenship is seen as something that you must ‘fit into’ (Collin 2008). We can think of this as a type of blunt instrument forcing all citizens, including their values and aspirations, into a pre-determined shape (Aly 2010). This idea of citizenship, paradoxically, has led to sense of alienation rather than addressing it.

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<sup>5</sup> See Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade information sheets available at [http://www.dfat.gov.au/aib/tourism\\_students.html](http://www.dfat.gov.au/aib/tourism_students.html) - accessed April 2010.

## Figure 1: Citizenship Typology



This process of exclusion was dramatically illustrated during a media debate in 2007 about the Citizenship Test that controversially asked a question about Australia's most famous cricketer, the late Don Bradman, who would be unknown to anyone outside a handful of countries. In fact, Bradman's career peaked during the 1930s and '40s, and though a 'cricketing legend', is from an era that even the majority of Australia's cricketing supporters can barely relate to. This failed to recognise the dynamic reality of today's multicultural population. This Anglo-centric, parochial definition disconnects them (and Australia itself) from the dynamic, changing global context that frames all social action today (Hodge and O'Carroll 2006). From Australia's point of view, it achieves a 'fantasy of unity' at the price of excluding the various talents and energies that could make a difference. For those excluded, it reinforces a sense of not being valued or supported, for themselves and for their role in the *civis*.

At the same time, even those who take part in the 'fantasy of unity' are feeling alienated, marginalised and neglected, and often believe they are remote from the workings of civic institutions (Poynting 2006). This is because the image is hollow and is simply not representative. Rather than acting as a way to unite, the image highlights just how far removed we are from the civic institutions that are meant to represent us.

This disconnection is aggravated when attempts by the broader population to become engaged are dismissed or ignored. There are many examples to draw on, including the dismissal of the then Foreign Minister, Alexander Downer, of anti-war protesters as nothing but ‘a mob’ (cited in Marr 2007), or when the then NSW Premier, Bob Carr, described the demonstrators as “street fighting fascists” (ibid.). More recently, civil mobilisations and the emergence of a grassroots movement to demand action on climate change that directly assisted the election of Kevin Rudd as Australian Prime Minister in 2007 – a commitment that the Rudd Government walked away from (see Arvanitakis 2010 for a detailed discussion).

The result is increasing disinterest and distrust in formal political processes, as well as, public representatives (Collin 2008) and falling membership in formal political parties (Jaensch et al. 2004). This can be highlighted by returning to the example of former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s failure to act on climate change despite describing it as one of the greatest “moral challenges of our time” (Wright 2010). Surveys and opinion polls following this decision led to a collapse in both Rudd’s ‘reliability’ and ‘trust’ rating (Colgan 2010). This type of disengagement and distrust of formal Politics and lack of access to democratic processes is often described as a ‘democratic deficit’ (Della Porta 2005, p. 669).

Della Porta (2005) argues that this democratic deficit is caused by a combination of losing any sense of control as well as marginalisation. Recognising this deficit, many studies have investigated attempts to re-engage citizens through mechanisms to promote citizenship education and a more active citizenship (Portney and O’Leary 2007). This has led to a great deal of work to encourage ‘active citizenship’, which focuses on the twin nature of citizenship as including rights and responsibilities: that is, we have to know our rights but also acknowledge our responsibilities to those around us. In reviewing the work put forward here, I believe that they maintain both a ‘one size fits all’ and ‘top-down’ approach to citizenship. The result is that the impacts of such programs may actually be negative as they neglect the diversity of contemporary citizenship and are often rejected by those targeted (ibid.)

A better approach is to acknowledge the relationship between civic institutions and citizens, as well as the relationships between different groups. Further, we need to understand citizenship as in flux rather than as a stable category. A better way to understand this

complex relationship is by understanding citizenship as being in surplus and deficit. This acknowledges the relational and complex nature of citizenship in the contemporary world.

### **Citizenship deficits and surpluses**

In the sections above, I have outlined the need for a complex understanding of citizenship. To overcome this, I have previously presented a typology to reflect the different experiences of citizenship (see Figure 1). The aim of this typology is to show how a population's relationship with civic institutions cannot be taken for granted and must be acknowledged as variable. Once people interact with civic organisations, their experiences will reflexively influence future interactions. In this way, a negative experience either directly or by someone within a social network creates a relationship that further alienates a citizen. In this section, I outline the four key citizen types I have identified and implications for the political moment.

Referring to Figure 1, section A portrays 'marginalisation and citizenship deficits'. This is driven by a belief that interaction with civic institutions is pointless as opinions or demands will be ignored, disconnecting people from the civic institutions surrounding them. There is a feeling that any effort to be involved will have no results: hence, a sense of disengagement and disempowerment prevails. While not always the case, research shows that many young people fit into this group, as well as people from lower socio-economic backgrounds and newly arrived migrants (see Arvanitakis and Marren (2009) for details).

It is important to note that this attitude of disconnection arises from either personal experience or the encounters family or friends may have had with civic institutions. This highlights the need to understand citizenship in relational and complex terms: it is not just the relationship between the individual and the state and its institutions that is important, but also the experiences of those around us.

Section A also sees 'privatisation and citizenship deficits' apply to wealthy populations. This results from a lack of access to civic institutions because of privatisation and neglect by government, leading to the privatisation of decision-making and withdrawal from the public arena and democratic processes (Stoker 2006). Such citizens find their relationships with civic institutions more like that of consumers. As such, the relationship is merely a commercial rather than a civic one: the citizen simply sees the state as akin to any other service provider and in competition with the private sector. Consequently, there are no social

practices of citizenship as described by Turner (1993) but a mercantile relation. Such a population may feel empowered during times of economic boom but during times of financial hardships such empowerment may quickly dissipate.

Section C, 'citizenship surplus empowered not engaged' represents citizens in surplus though with limited or no political engagement. This group appears to have much in common with the privatised citizen above, but may come from areas that are highly serviced by civic institutions. The choice not to engage is therefore voluntary. There is a strong push for self-sufficiency – a belief that their social capital and connections, wealth and status mean that they do not require the services of civic institutions (including government bodies). While not antagonistic towards such institutions, they believe that many services provided by the private sector are superior to public ones.

Section D is the 'insurgent citizen' (see Holston 2007), who is both engaged and empowered. This group may not have access to many financial resources, but have high social capital and a willingness and ability to make time to be engaged in the political process. They feel empowered through their social background and engage with civic institutions and political processes. This group can have either progressive or conservative agendas: some promoting social justice issues (including students, academics, unionists and so on), while others may have a reactionary ideology (such as 'anti-immigration' groups).

This group further demonstrates the complex and relational nature of citizenship. Such active citizenship draws heavily on civil society connections and interactions (Isen and Nielson 2008). In this situation, while such individuals may at times experience alienation from formal Political mechanisms, links to civil society networks are maintained and active citizenship promoted regardless.

Importantly, such 'citizenship surplus' is increasingly documented in theoretical literature through different descriptions. Henrik Bang (2005; 2009) draws on the work of Marsh, O'Toole and Jones (2007) to discuss 'Everyday Makers and Expert Citizens' who, he argues, represent the emergence of a politics of lived experience. Bang sees these as evidence of resistance identities that emerge in industrialist society that aim for political transformation. For Bang, this is a group that is driven by a 'project': that is, a specific political outcome rather than ongoing solidarity. Such citizens are acting on and working with others to

confront issues of mutual concern rather than being part of a broader ‘values-based’ movement. For Li and Marsh (2008), such changes require a broader understanding of the way citizens now undertake the political.

Section B is the ‘zone of frustration’. This area represents the group of people who are engaged in political processes but for various reasons (including institutional racism) experience feelings of disempowerment. Such disempowerment means that frustrations towards democratic institutions may develop. Furthermore, this zone could expand as people have negative experiences in dealing with civic institutions.

While Section D is the zone that a healthy democracy operates in, I would argue that the hollowing out of Politics means that this zone is itself being ‘emptied out’. We can turn to the issue of climate change to highlight the ongoing disconnection between the daily experiences and practices of citizens (or ‘politics’) with the practices of formal politics (or Politics) as an example of this. This can be seen in the continued subsidisation of the coal industry, despite the rising evidence of detrimental health and environmental effects – both local and global – that has left many Australians exasperated.<sup>6</sup> Despite the engagement in Politics to alter this process, the latest federal position is one that continues to underwrite the industry. In fact, just how far the citizenship has become removed from Politics was highlighted by a proposed tax on mining ‘super profits’ which actually led to the downfall of Kevin Rudd as prime minister, who was replaced by Julia Gillard offering a version of the tax that was more acceptable to the mining industry.<sup>7</sup>

This sees a split between formal Politics and the informal, everyday politics. That is, the formal political realm of political parties and formalised consultation processes are seen increasingly distant from daily experiences and consequently, there is little incentive to participate. Consequently, we are not seeing a collapse of support for democracies (Norris 2011), but a general disintegration in the participation of political processes to the point that, according to Colin Hay (2007), we come to ‘hate’ politics. In many ways then, the political processes we are offered are often seen as nothing more than a method of placating public concern rather than being a real part of decision-making processes (Hay 2007; Collin 2008).

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<sup>6</sup> See for example <http://www.theherald.com.au/news/local/news/general/hunter-cancer-cluster-fear-prompts-health-reviews/1800850.aspx> - accessed May 2010.

<sup>7</sup> See McKnight 2010 for a detailed discussion on the role of the mining industry in the political collapse Kevin Rudd.

This phenomenon was also evident in the United States with the election of President Barack Obama. While an in-depth analysis is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to note how the election of President Obama was at the beginning of the GFC and presents us with an interesting example of blurring the line between the activist moment and the Political. This was the election of the first African-American president and he managed to utilise many former anti-war, union, student leaders throughout the course of his two-year campaign (Bang 2009). Also, as the election occurred during the start of the GFC, many of these people have since been tied up in the 'let him do his job' mantra (Dreier 2008) rather than critiquing his failure to deliver on some of his key campaign promises including action on climate change (Hillygus and Henderson 2010).

Is it possible to see how President Obama managed to inspire people to feel both empowered and engaged? This has not lasted as we have seen a collapse of his popularity midway through his first term.<sup>8</sup> Though the reasons for a collapse of his support are many, but it has been increasingly obvious that the President has not been able to ride the wave of support he created in his drive to be elected.<sup>9</sup> Once again, the formal sphere of Politics has led to disappointment.

### **Redefining political moments: a conclusion of sorts**

With such experiences, it is not difficult to understand how politics is hollowed out and how the political moment fails to materialise. In place then, what has emerged? Rather than looking for 'the political moment', we need to recognise that political moments are occurring consistently around us. That is, a politics is emerging that is outside formal political processes.

What does this look like? In many ways, it is difficult to identify as it materialises in ways that are non-traditional and have been dismissed as pointless. For example, in Sydney we have seen the emergence of bike cooperatives. Within these organisations we see an open

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<sup>8</sup> See analysis of opinion polls as follows: [http://www.nydailynews.com/news/politics/2010/04/12/2010-04-12\\_president\\_obamas\\_approval\\_rating\\_hits\\_an\\_alltime\\_low\\_polling\\_data\\_suggests.html](http://www.nydailynews.com/news/politics/2010/04/12/2010-04-12_president_obamas_approval_rating_hits_an_alltime_low_polling_data_suggests.html)

<sup>9</sup> Another phenomenon that followed the GFC has been the emergence of the TEA Party (an acronym for 'Taxed Enough Already'). While it is difficult to discuss this recent phenomenon, its emergence is one that complicates matters for a number of reasons. Firstly, despite claims that it is a grassroots movement, it is strongly supported by established interests (Hamsher 2009; Frank 2010). Furthermore, rather than calling for a radical re-think of the political, it has emerged as a force to support the system that created the crisis, calling for an increase in capitalist relations, no less.

space where the abovementioned capitalist labour relations break down in an open and free exchange of labour. Such moments constantly emerge in ways that challenge the very logic of capitalism – from the open sharing of intellectual labour to the emergence of a free university movement. It is here that we see glimpses of Hardt and Negri’s (2004) ‘working in common’ – relations that emerge the break down capitalist logic.

Another political moment can be found in the way many Australians continue to support Australia’s refugees. When elected, the former Rudd Government promised a more humane approach to dealing with refugees – an approach that had become internationally renowned for its cruelty under the previous Howard Government. The Australian government has withheld a number of basic human rights from refugees in pursuing its policies of mandatory detention, forced deportations and the rejection of refugee claims. Mandatory detention has also meant that numerous refugees have been held in prison cells for years, including newly born children. According to Cohen (2002), these policies have reverberated across the world as a number of Australia’s positions are increasingly reflected in the policies of other countries particularly throughout Europe.

By following such a path, Australia and other nations have turned even those with ‘legal’ asylum claims into ‘illegals’ – in a sense causing the criminalisation of refugees (CARD 2001). The result is that refugees have been persecuted twice – once in their homeland and the second time as ‘illegals’ by the nations from whom they seek refuge (UNHCR 2002).

The Rudd Government, despite its pre-election commitments, has followed a similar path that only seems to have accelerated since Julia Gillard replaced Rudd as prime minister (Eltham 2010). Despite this, a significant section of the population continues to resist and challenge this position. It is here we can see a cross section of people working both as individual citizens as well as part of a civil society network to harness their citizenship surplus and drive change. This ranges from lobbying organisations such as Get-Up<sup>10</sup>, to labour unions including the Maritime Union of Australia<sup>11</sup> and more issue-focussed groups such as the Refugee Action Collective<sup>12</sup>. While such groups pursue actions in the formal ‘Political’ realm, many of their actions also take place in the everyday politics space where change

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<sup>10</sup> See <https://www.getup.org.au/campaign/EndMandatoryDetention&id=1042> – accessed May 2010.

<sup>11</sup> See <http://www.mua.org.au/news/support-grows-for-union-stance-on-asylum-seekers/> - accessed May 2010.

<sup>12</sup> See <http://www.rac-vic.org/> - accessed May 2010.

occurs and many political moments are created. Here, we see the organisation of visits to support those held in detention centres, as well as working to break myths about refugees. Returning to Hardt and Negri's (2004) concept of the multitude, such groups work 'in common' to overcome the exploitation of such populations.

The challenge for both those aiming to promote progressive political change as well as research it, is to both understand the complexity of shapes that emerge here, as well as why it is difficult to harness its energy. How then can we build a notion of citizenship that is not trapped by the capitalist and exploitative state apparatus, but will mobilise those who currently feel excluded and disempowered, without discounting the heterogeneity of their backgrounds? Achieving this is important to confront the various crises confronting our world with the aim of a socially just and politically inclusive global society.

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