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Catwashing the far right

Tracing the contours of political time

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QU'EST-CE QUE L'ACTUALITÉ POLITIQUE?

Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle
352pp. Gallimard. €22.

Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre

Early in 2020 the French started hearing about Marine Le Pen's cats. Keen followers of politics already knew about the feline-friendly proclivities of the National Rally (RN) leader, but even they were surprised to learn that she had recently earned a professional

qualification as a cat breeder. Once the news was out, Le Pen sought to make political capital from the sudden interest in her life: she put her cats on Instagram, gave interviews to glossy celebrity magazines and shoehorned pro-animal policies into her manifesto. Critics accused her of trying to distract voters from her distasteful politics - we might call it “catwashing” - but there was no doubt that she had found an effective means to communicate her personality to French voters.

It is difficult to judge the efficacy of Le Pen’s attempt to capitalize on her pets, but it is likely that it contributed to humanizing the leader of a political movement primarily known for its xenophobia and racism. Le Pen’s wager was that it would contribute to the steady *dédiabolisation* (de-demonization) of her party. This, in turn, is one of the many explanations for the RN’s success in last month’s legislative elections, where the party secured a record eighty-nine seats in the Assemblée Nationale.

Beyond its value as an example of political spin, the eruption of Le Pen’s cats into the public imagination raises the complex issue of the relationship between specific events, such as presidential debates or political scandals, and the way people respond to them as part of the larger electoral or parliamentary cycle. This is the question that lies at the heart of a new book by the sociologists Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre, *Qu’est-ce que l’actualité politique? Événements et opinions au XXI^e siècle*.

Scholars of politics have always struggled to articulate the challenges of political time. After all, it is not always clear why some events “stick” and others do not. For example, the relatively benign accusations of corruption directed at the centre-right politician François Fillon in 2017 killed his presidential campaign, while Le Pen’s reputation among her electorate remains untarnished despite substantial accusations of embezzlement levelled at her and her party. And why was it that the recent scandal over the deputy chief whip Chris Pincher led to the toppling of the British prime minister Boris Johnson when so many previous ones had bounced off him? While Boltanski and Esquerre do not have a clear answer as to why there is such a disparity in reactions to political events - or why some politicians seem particularly vulnerable to scandal - their illuminating discussion of what the French call *actualité* allows us to think in a new way about the contours of political time.

The word *actualité* has no direct English translation. The terms “news” or “current affairs” are not as abstract as the French *actualité*, which in this case denotes the coalescing of a sequence of events that are given meaning by the media in real time. Boltanski and Esquerre are at pains to emphasize the difference between *actualité* and “history” (with a capital “H” in the French). The latter operates in a different temporal realm, which does not necessarily coincide with the facts under discussion. What characterizes *actualité* is its immediacy, mobility and malleability.

In contrast to commentators who argue that the growing importance of *actualité* to our present day - especially in the news media - has deformed democracy, Boltanski and Esquerre argue that its purpose is to render the “inaccessible” accessible to the public. It does this by mediating between an individual’s lived experience and the long temporality of history: *actualité* makes politics real. It is a dynamic process of knowledge creation. To put it another way, the *actualité* around Le Pen’s cats

brought the largely inaccessible realm of ideology and far-right party politics into conversation with the everyday experiences of millions of animal-lovers.

Boltanski and Esquerre's opening chapters range across topics from critical theory and periodization in history to the formation of generational political identities and changing forms of political

discourse. The heart of their book is an analysis of raw material, in the form of 120,000 user comments on articles on the website of *Le Monde* and more than 8,000 comments on the YouTube channels of the Institut National de l'Audiovisuel, the French audiovisual archives. The data ranges from informed discussion to hate speech and trolling - in other words the contemporary political reality of a significant proportion of voters in France and throughout the world.

The authors' close reading of this material yields fascinating insights into how political convictions are formed. Commenters are anonymous, but we can gain many insights into their personality from their user names and the underlying literary and stylistic form of their comments. For instance, they frequently use irony in their user names - Raspoutiny, Scoubi Doo, Sir Conspect - and in the construction of their comments. Another typical trope is denunciation, whereby commenters position themselves as indignant citizens. They also make imaginative use of the pronoun "on", which in French can be used to refer both to "us" and "one". This allows commenters to present themselves simultaneously as the voice of the people ("us") and as dispassionate observers ("them"). Boltanski and Esquerre see these stylistic and linguistic manipulations as an extension of a "pamphleteering" style of political intervention, the origins of which can be traced back to the print culture of the French Revolution.

The authors also take us into the opaque world of comment moderation. Even respected publications such as *Le Monde* outsource moderation, which combines a blacklist of trigger words alongside the manual moderation of individual comments by real human beings. Certain topics, such as Islam and LGBT politics, are much more heavily moderated than others, with a much greater proportion of rejected comments. Commenters know this and often decry the "censorship" to which they are subject, even though the parameters of moderation are opaque and unevenly applied.

Above all Boltanski and Esquerre are interested in what these thousands of below-the-line comments can tell us about how people become politicized. They find that *actualité* and its expressions in the media act as key vectors of politicization, allowing individuals to interpret political events and processes such as the rise of the far-right polemicist Éric Zemmour or the European Union's supposed democratic deficit. By erupting into everyday consciousness, *actualité* bypasses traditional political structures such as political parties or trade unions, and creates a direct, if fragile, connection between the individual and the political realm. It brings the temporality of politics into people's everyday lives.

It is a shame that, despite their close attention to the inner logic of below-the-line comments, the authors treat their subject matter as if it were hermetically sealed off from the rest of the internet. It is hard to believe that active commenters on newspaper websites and YouTube do not also have social

media profiles or an active presence on platforms such as Reddit. Unlike the static model of below-the-line comments, these sites tend to privilege direct confrontation through the aggressive retweet or the rough-and-tumble format of the discussion forum. To what extent does this faster, more dynamic virtual landscape – one that is particularly subject to “trends” and “virality” – inflect the way people are politicized? How does engagement with *actualité* change between different platforms? Given the

vast literature on internet-based mobilization and activism, it is surprising to see almost nothing on these wider internet cultures in the book.

Another area that receives too little attention here is the audiovisual dimension of *actualité*. Apps such as TikTok and Instagram – along with YouTube and other video platforms – have enhanced the visibility of online political debate. Political pronouncements become memes; *faux pas* are preserved and replayed; archival footage is resurrected and recirculated. Ordinary participants in political debate are no longer limited to written comments on the work of others. Today, they can create *actualité* themselves using their phones. Boltanski and Esquerre’s focus on below-the-line comments – the contemporary online equivalent of “letters to the editor” – feels rather quaint given the impact of audiovisual media as a site of political struggle in recent years. It is surely significant that mainstream news outlets, including traditional print publications like *Le Monde*, increasingly augment their articles with embedded videos and tweets. They understand where *actualité* is being made in 2022 better than the authors of this book.

Fundamentally, Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre’s conceptually rich but frustratingly abstract analysis elides the ephemeral quality of their subject matter. For all that the authors are concerned with political temporality, they seem not quite to have grasped the transient nature of internet time. So much internet commentary exists as a momentary intervention in a vast echo chamber. Of course, one might argue that, cumulatively, many such interventions can have a powerful effect on an individual and their politicization. But it is hard to avoid the sense that online jousting in below-the-line comments is part of an elaborate, self-conscious game that leaves few traces. Rather like Marine Le Pen’s cats, a stray comment on YouTube will soon be forgotten when the commenter uncovers another viral meme to pass the time between coffee breaks, or electoral cycles.

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