

The Dialectics of Kettling

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With the development of a mass student protest movement at the end of last year there has been a lot of talk in the media of violence during the protests. While police violence has not gone entirely unreported, it has generally been downplayed and posited as a reaction to already occurring unrest. To question this I want to briefly talk about the tactic of kettling (referred to as containment by the police). Kettling is the locking off of a stretch of road by the police, containing those inside – nobody can come or leave. The police like to say that this is a way of stopping unrest from occurring. However, a closer look at the operation reveals that there is something else at work here, a curious dialectic.

In the first instance kettling is a provocation. A line of police is built; your freedom of movement is constrained. The aim is to provoke action. If, as a response to the kettle, demonstrators try to break out, the police can hit back and say that they were only reacting. The kettle provides the illusion of passivity, whereas actually it is no less passive than locking someone up in a room without food or drink. The kettle provides a blank cheque for the police, every action of the demonstrator is removed of its context, every action of the police becomes justified.

The same applies for all violence that occurs in the kettle; it is an angry reaction to the completely intolerable state the protesters find themselves in. The room metaphor continues to hold. Imagine you are having a party and you decide to lock one of the guests in a room (anyone with a policeman friend might want to try this at home). How will they react? In the first instance, the reaction will be, 'come on guys, let me out,' but once they realise that this is not going to happen they will start getting angry. They will bang on the door, they will shout, they might punch the wall or knock things over in frustration. This – on a micro-scale – is much the same kind of reaction as trapped protesters breaking the windows of bus stops or the like.

With increasing time, the kettle exercises the second part of its movement, one that is almost a complete negation of the first: it wears you out. After several hours of deprivation in the cold, the demonstrators are meant to resign – they are tired, the only thing they want to do is

go home (much the same would happen in the room example). Whereas in the first movement the kettle is designed to elicit action, in its second movement it elicits resignation. A major element is the fact that nobody knows when it will end, and after several hours the ordeal seems interminable. To further compound the exasperation outside the police like to engage in a Kafkaesque game in which every line of police will tell protesters that people are being let out at another end of the kettle. Once you arrive there, the situation arises anew. The kettle is a way of collectively punishing a group of people without trial on an *ad hoc* basis. As such, it is unpredictable. The kettle is an example of the inability of this state and this government to deal with dissent. It can only respond by hostility and coercion. In liberal democracy our free democratic choice is conditional on us making acceptable choices. The state cannot cope with true democratic expression.

However, the consequence of this second phase, the negation of the negation takes a turn that is not that desired by the state or the police. The kettle is meant to intimidate and scare protesters into not coming on to the streets again – on this count it is a complete failure. Rather than be deterred, the victims of kettling return with even greater anger at the injustices they have suffered. More than that: as we have seen, they adapt their tactics to escape the building kettle where possible. Where the police want to striate the space of the city, the protesters smooth it out and begin to swarm. In doing so, they are asserting the rights that they have but are being denied them – they are enacting a dissensus in Jacques Rancière's sense, and are thus asserting their subjecthood.

The unifying power of struggle cannot be as easily contained as the state would imagine. Certainly the police tactic of containment cannot do so – at best, it can temporarily limit the physical movement of those struggling. In the long run it is the struggle that is strengthened. The kettle simply gets re-signified as an incubator of radicalisation. The kettle is destined to boil over.