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HGGS Forum 2019

21st Century Risks and Opportunities:

The Politics of Withdrawal

Prof. Joost de Bloois, University of Amsterdam

Lecture and Workshop on 11th October 2019

In recent years, in both political theory and political discourse a host of, often interrelated, notions have come to the fore that closely relate to strategies of *withdrawal*: exit, destitution, exodus, disconnection, retreat, refusal, etc. etc. On the one hand, as Bruno Latour explains in his recent *Down to Earth*, the global ruling class is effectively preparing to exit a planet they have already given up on (from phantasies of space colonization to militarized island retreats). Meanwhile, Brexit and the US' withdrawal from trade agreements and the Paris climate treaty, are symptomatic of political dreams of autonomy and isolation. On the other hand, in radical (left) politics and political theory, we find calls to different strategies of withdrawal and fundamental refusal of the status quo: exodus from contemporary capitalist relations, invisibility as resistance in a context of 'surveillance capitalism', strategies of anonymity and tactics of destitution. Correspondingly, in response to the growing concern 24/7 capitalism, there's a surge of report on disconnecting through opt-outs and burn-outs, self-care and self-precarization, and various other forms of (literal) retreats: from writing retreats and digital detoxes, to alternate forms of living, and other more radical forms of commoning

In his introductory lecture, Joost de Bloois explores a number of more or less contemporary philosophical inquiries into the significance of 'the political,' from which 'withdrawal,' in particular, seems to emerge as a central concept. In the work of contemporary theorists such as Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Giorgio Agamben, Judith Butler, and - in a more activist register - the Invisible Committee, a conceptual nebula takes shape that includes notions such as withdrawal, retreat, disconnection, desertion, destitution, exodus, etc. In some of the most important and widely debated works of theory today, we clearly witness the emergence of a 'politics of withdrawal,' an idiom that intimately relates "the political" to acts/gestures of retreat, of destitution. De Bloois argues that this politics of withdrawal is to be read foremost as a response to 'the withdrawal of the political' as theorized by Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe, and is perhaps best understood as a work of mourning of sorts; albeit one that oddly mimics that which it mourns.

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In the workshop that follows the lecture, we will explore the political significance of such practices and theories of *withdrawal* for socio-political thought today. Through the critical assessment of a range of theoretical texts on a possible 'politics of withdrawal', the workshop will offer participants means to get a grip on a key notion in contemporary radical politics, in all its complexity, contradictions and tribulations. We will critically address questions such as: what if a politics of exodus and invisibility is in fact an option only to those who have the luxury of being included in the public sphere? What if enforced secrecy and invisibility through neoliberal shaming and social exclusion (of the poor, of minorities) compromises the political usage of withdrawal and secrecy?

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