Report of the third Käte Hamburger Lecture

Democracy, Visibility and Resistance

with Prof. David Chandler (PhD), 6 February 2013

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Before the recent shift of our understanding of politics, the public used to associate the issues of politics, power and resistance with the contestation of mass parties, unions and associations. Today, the public sphere seems much less central. For many commentators, what goes on in parliament or at the state level is much less important than the ‘everyday’ politics which takes place out of the glare of publicity, in our private choices and decisions.

At the third Käte Hamburger Lecture Prof. David Chandler, Senior Fellow at the Käte Hamburger Kolleg / Centre for Global Cooperation Research, addressed the erosion of the public sphere as the centre of political life – of democracy and of the resistance to power.

Prof. David Chandler started his lecture with the observation that politics has shifted in different ways. Chandler subsequently looked at our contemporary understanding of politics: how it has been transformed, and what we might think about this shift.

Whereas in the past politics used to be seen as being situated in a particular box – in a public sphere with public institutions, politicians and political parties – Chandler argued that this separateness of politics has disappeared. He claimed out that today, there no longer exists a division between politics and a broader understanding of the world (of economics, sociology and culture). Instead even our everyday lives have become political. Chandler indicated that basic institutions, like universities, schools, businesses, companies etc., have been transformed into somehow political institutions and are influencing our understanding of politics in a broader – more social – way. As a result, the transformation of politics is a socialisation of politics.

According to Chandler, this development can be seen as a reduction of politics to everyday life. This is not just about a removal of a set of practices of liberal representation; it is also transformative for other and previously non-political institutions in society, all the way down to the individuals.

To give a clear picture of this transformation, Chandler divided his lecture into three sections:

1. How we reinterpret and reconstruct problems
2. How we see the opportunities created by the new understanding of politics
3. Three potential conclusions
How we understand the problems of the world

David Chandler started with the contestation that the problems of the world and the way we think about addressing them today are no longer a prerogative of the public sphere in terms of politicians, and institutional frameworks of politics and law. Rather we tend to think that in a global, complex, and interdependent world, these institutions and frameworks no longer work, as they don't lead to the sort of changes we intended. According to Chandler, this has led to a shift of our understanding where power might lie.

To illustrate the general argument of a shift to the social, Chandler outlined examples in the areas of international relations and domestic politics:

Chandler suggested that initially in the post-Cold War world we thought we lived in a world that is linear, where – if we had the right policies - we could introduce democracy in other parts of the world, introduce security, assist development, and overcome inequalities. This thinking basically had to with traditional politics: intergovernmental, institutional organisation and how we think from a top-down perspective about certain policies which are imposed in order to achieve something in the world. From this very traditional political understanding we seemed to realise, or the world seemed to tell us, that it was not that simple to transform the world and overcome inequalities.

David Chandler argued that after these experiences, we became more sociological in our understanding. We understood that when we had a set of programmes and a set of policies to address problems in the world, unintended consequences and second-order effects produced differences. Every different society that we intervened in had a different outcome. By realising that we are living in a non-linear world, Chandler concluded, we focused on hybridity, superficial nature, and bounded rationalities. And in our non-linear understanding we saw the limits of politics and power, and we focused on the insides of these societies.

Instead of having aims, we say perhaps that the aims of our interventions should be derived from within the society, from our engagement and our dialogue with “the other”. So rather than us governing and having policies, the new thinking goes that the state-building goal should be left open for the other and we should learn from them. Chandler pointed to the contradiction that even when we say we have to intervene because if left to themselves the problems will just get worse, we don’t have our own policy programme of what they should do.

Chandler suggested that by increasingly appreciating differences, pluralities, and cultures it becomes very difficult for us, the west, to govern and try to resolve problems. And similarly where politics is reduced to complex, internal, social, and psychological processes, it makes it very difficult for governments to govern domestically, according to Chandler.

Chandler continued to give an idea about the new construction of problems in domestic politics. One of the traditional problems of the old world of labour,
capital and economics was about social and economic problems. And governments in the old days spent a lot of time with different macro-level policies about markets and state intervention. Chandler argued that the old world of politics and conflicting ideologies has disappeared. And that once we sociologise our problems, bringing them deeper into society, we have a different set of approaches.

In consequence, Chandler argued, there are real economic and social problems, domestically and internationally, but the way we understand those problems and the way we understand we should address them has nothing to do with politics as state-level programmes, governments directing and controlling, or ideologies of left and right. Therefore, Chandler argued it is difficult to overemphasise the fundamental shift in our understanding of how things might work in this world.

**How we see the opportunities created by the new understanding of politics**

Chandler suggested that the way we think of politics and the possibilities of politics is shaped through a sociological understanding of connection and our spheres of affinity and how we mediate with the world.

Again delivering his verdict on international relations, Chandler argued that in the 1990s we were freed from a certain political formalised international law of constraints: the constraints of geopolitics. With the end of the Cold War and geopolitical, ideological competition, states gained more agency. And they called the new agency the ability to do ethical foreign policy. Suddenly, the link between politics and liberal representative constituency, which was traditionally how states rationalised their policies and the projection of that in the international sphere, disappeared. Through the abandoning of geopolitical strategy, states were freed of national interests. And moreover in that opening up of the world, globalisation freed states. The world of policy-making was transformed in a way from the restricted world of state-society relations.

In another example Chandler presented the transformation of the role or the politicisation of business in the 1990s. Businesses were freed to be political and had Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) because they were interconnected in a whole set of relations. Businesses became more than just about making profits. The meaning of a business became transformed as the understanding of responsibility was not only about how they treat their workers (in terms of a labour-capital understanding of business). It became about reflexiveness and social embeddedness, and responsibility became part of the chain of interconnection.

The point Chandler made was that how we do our politics, how we are freed as agents in a global and complex world where politics is no longer discrete, we as individuals are all “our own little businesses”. In this respect Chandler referred to Professor Thomas Pogge, who gave the second Käte Hamburger Lecture. Pogge
worked out how much our social embeddedness and interconnection means that we need to pull back to be social responsible. Not only do we have a carbon footprint, where we can measure our environmental badness, we even have a human rights footprint. Because of our embeddedness as individuals, Chandler finally reasoned, we suddenly have a lot of responsibility. We suddenly can be political in all sorts of different ways. The only way we are not political is in the old way.

Three possible conclusions

At the end of his lecture Chandler gave three very critical conclusions to his observations:

1. It is the end of a human world. Everything is boiled down to culture. Culture is at the same time the explanans and the explanandum. We don’t need social science anymore, we don’t need social theorizing, philosophy, or political theory because our world makes culture. And the solutions to our problems lie in the understanding of the mysteries of culture.

2. Politicians cannot be accountable. Even if we still have representation, in a more complex and non-linear world, where the unintended outcomes are more important, it seems obvious that governance is just there to administer. And if politicians were to be accountable, it would just be for their bookkeeping, and not in terms of any political ideas and goals.

3. Our new understanding of politics is de-humanising. In a world of complexity and the reproduction of difference the question is who the enemy is. We understand capitalism and the market as a self-reproducing system that we are part of in our buying and consumption. In conclusion everybody is responsible, and as Pogge said, the only politics that we could do is “Oskar Schindler politics”. For Chandler, this is a negative view about understanding government and our own society, because once we understand that the environment is being destroyed and human rights are being abused because of people not being reflective and responsible enough, the problem becomes all the people. And we tend to be at home with our own individual footprints and our individual attempt like Oskar Schindler to do something right in the world. At the end Chandler emphasised that this has nothing to do with engagement in politics, and that it is a very alienated and degrading way of understanding the world that we live in.
Comments by Dr. habil. Volker Heins and Kai Koddenbrock

The first commentator Dr. habil. Volker Heins, Head of the Research Area “Interculturality” at the KWI Essen, divided David Chandler’s lecture in two major arguments.

First, from a descriptive point of view, Chandler argued about the new world we live in – a world where parties, social science and other things are going missing. There are no longer struggles between social classes. Rather global society is not populated by friends and foes, but by victims and perpetrators. This is connected to Chandler’s argument about responsibility. The concept of responsibility and resistance has changed significantly in an age characterised by increasing complexity, interconnectedness, and globalisation.

Second, Chandler maintained that from a normative point of view we have reasons to worry about those changes because they give rise to new forms of paternalism, both in international and domestic context. Our everyday lives become political, which for Chandler does not have good implications. David Chandler said that we now live or are said to be living in a non-linear world, characterised by a massive search for unintentional, indirect consequences of our actions and policies. Heins calls this the butterfly effect. As a consequence, Chandler argued, responsibility had been flattened, more equally distributed among the citizens and in this sense democratised. We are told that our everyday behaviour saves the world, which is ethically important to Volker Heins. The flip side is, of course, if one fails to do those things, one is damaging and wronging distant populations and ultimately mother earth itself.

Thomas Pogge pushed this argument to the extremes by calling the citizens of economically prosperous western countries either violators of human rights of citizens in poorer countries or resisters in the image of Oskar Schindler, who saved thousands of Jewish lives during the Holocaust. So Chandler’s critique of Pogge’s extension and also conflation of different types of responsibility was quite strong in Heins’ view. Elaborating on Chandler’s critique of the concept of CSR and consumer responsibility, Heins pointed to the fact that our economies have been called “plutonomies” recently. These are economies in which growth is power. Plutonomies refer to a society where the majority of the wealth is controlled by an ever-shrinking minority. Moreover, Heins stated that moral campaigns (for example about HIV patients in Africa) have also been run by upmarket brands, such as American Express, Apple, and so on. It seems interesting that economy is basically driven by an increasingly small part of the population and they also claim to be the moral consumers. So Thomas Pogge can be interpreted that now even the group of moral persons becomes dependent on a minority group. The richer you are the better you are potentially as a moral person. Heins argued that one may describe this as a perverted Calvinism where power becomes a sign that you have been chosen for salvation.
Then, Heins gave two questions he wished to discuss. First, how new is all this? Referring to his own work about NGOs, he stated that anti-slavery enthusiasts as early as the era of America Revolution invented the notion of complicity and personal responsibility for bad things happening elsewhere. So these things have a history.

Second, Heins asked how bad all this is. He agreed to the extent that the combination of over-moralisation of everyday actions and real disempowerment exists. According to him, making people responsible who are not really in charge of their own lives is cynical. The new ontology creates an atmosphere of moral hybris where every person who does car sharing is now Oskar Schindler. And Heins wondered that there is something fundamentally wrong about it. But Heins suggested that Chandler sometimes conflated things that are obviously wrong and things that are totally harmless.

The second commentator, Kai Koddenbrock, a Fellow at the Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi) in Berlin, was struck by Chandler’s discursive mode of analysis, which is very much in line with the way Foucault analyses how things become thinkable and acceptable. According to Koddenbrock, the critique that is often levelled against Foucault can also be levelled at Chandler’s approach.

With his discursive mode of analysis, Chandler only talked about the world of today in terms of how we make sense of it, describing shifts as successions of events of how things become possible. Koddenbrock was surprised that Chandler did this kind of analysis without engaging in any kind of ontology of the world. Chandler did not say whether there are material realities about it, whereas some would say the world is actually changing. Therefore, Koddenbrock was interested whether Chandler thinks theoretically it is actually relevant whether the world is ontologically different at any point of time, and to what extent material social relations matter for participating in these changes he described.

Furthermore, Koddenbrock pointed out, when Chandler argued that there is no public sphere anymore and politics don’t take place anymore, he is implicitly saying that the autonomy of the individual does not really matter for the way we think about politics. Hence, Koddenbrock wondered if Chandler’s idea of autonomy functions like an ideal or a claim that we as re-politicised subjects should striving towards. Against the background of our social embeddedness Koddenbrock asked if we should purposely do politics again or if there are constraints to it, and how we can increase the space of freedom from the world of complexity.

Response by Prof. David Chandler

Answering the question of Dr. Volker Heins as to how new it all is, Chandler reasoned that the difference is that we have a systemic understanding of the world, but at the same time there is no anti-systemic politics. Second, answering
the question how bad it is, Chandler argued that the state is governing us, but not through the public sphere. The important thing is the social construction of value and how we make our own capitalism, transforming the market so that we can all be better people. According to Chandler, from the beginning to end it does everything the wrong way around.

Then Chandler turned to the questions of Kai Koddenbrock. In terms of ontology, he stated in his point of view it is a philosophical question. There is a material basis why we have the ontology we have, and why being itself is understood differently (i.e. in an interconnected and embedded manner). According to him, the material basis for that is a historical defeat of the enlightenment project. Responding to what we can do, Chandler said that politics is a human construct and we can rebuild it.

Discussion

In the last part of the lecture, the floor was opened for the audience. During the discussion it was emphasised that whereas Chandler ends up with a focus on micro-structures and the character of individuals because, according to him, the complexity lies there, the macro-structures nonetheless remain important. Institutions exist, and the decisions of these institutions and big actors have consequences. Chandler responded to these questions that we know that the macro-structures and international politics are empirically there. But we should consider why they might be less real. Talking about visibility and invisibility, it seems that the invisible is working more, i.e. the private, the psychological, the social, and the inside.

Another question that was raised repeatedly and is closely connected to the first issue was whether we are living in a world of complexity or are we said to be? Is it just a construct that we are living in a non-linear, complex world, or do we have any kind of objective evidence? Chandler replied that we make our own complexity as well as our own simplicity. But his approach to complexity was not in terms of existent material, rather he was talking in terms of a philosophical ontology of what complexity means. Chandler pointed out again that in the past we were humanising the world, making the world more amenable to ourselves. We enlightened ourselves as humans in a world where we are gaining knowledge, control, and possibilities. In the discourse that world seemed to have disappeared, whereas Chandler doesn’t believe it has. In the old days when we collectively engaged with transformative purpose, agency and structure were clear. In today’s world where we are less engaged it seems agency and structure is all the same thing.