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‘A Brutal Blow Against the Democratic Normality’: Unlearning the Epistemology of the Political

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to rethink our understanding of ‘the political’ through an examination of two novels by José Saramago, Blindness and Seeing. Both novels tackle directly a central, if not the central, signature metaphor of Western political thought, namely that of ‘seeing the light.’ This metaphor takes many forms and recurs throughout the tradition of Western political philosophy as a source, legitimiser, and validator of knowing, and perhaps even a guarantor of knowledge. In particular this metaphor has served to make knowable whatever it is that is signified by ‘the political.’ By extension it also means that whatever might be outside of this epistemological frame is rendered unknowable, if not unthinkable. Both of Saramago’s novels provide a fruitful means to recalibrate how we might know ‘the political.’ The novels call into question the epistemic signatures that frame our commonly accepted understandings of ‘the political’ and in so doing provoke us further to question how we might move towards unlearning the epistemology of the political.

Key Words

Democracy, epistemology, political vision, Saramago, seeing, the political

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‘A Brutal Blow Against the Democratic Normality’: Unlearning the Epistemology of the Political

‘Living is easy with eyes closed, misunderstanding all you see’ (‘Strawberry Fields Forever,’ The Beatles, 1967).

“Living ... with eyes closed” is a familiar theme in political science, though perhaps not expressed with quite the same simplicity as a song lyric. Most people are assumed to exist in modes of being that prevent them from seeing what is real. Hence they need to be guided by those who have the capacity for insight, the capacity to see what needs to be seen. Those who possess this insight lay claim to a form of epistemic privilege that in turn confers (or at least is assumed to confer) various other privileges such as political authority and power. From the time of Plato to the present day the dominant political logic has been informed by a view that those who know should rule; those who do not (i.e. those “living with eyes closed”) should be ruled. This epistemic privilege is so deeply engrained as to be the common sense of political discourse. Even those who begin from positions espousing radically democratic, egalitarian or revolutionary politics succumb to the siren call of this epistemology of the political (c.f. Motta 2011: 179-181). The many must needs be led by the few. More importantly, the many must be persuaded, massaged, or terrorised into accepting, supporting and reproducing the conditions of epistemic political privilege of the few. Without the active acquiescence of the many, the foundations of political rule by the few are unsustainable.

This is the dominant theme of two remarkable novels, *Seeing* and *Blindness*, written by Portuguese author and Nobel Laureate, the late José Saramago. The original Portuguese title of *Seeing*, *Ensaio sobre a Lucidez*, conjures up more than what might be implied by the word ‘seeing’ since it could be translated as ‘An Essay on Lucidity’. It is the sequel to one of Saramago’s earlier, and perhaps more well-known novels,

Blindness (*Ensaio sobre a Cegueira*, i.e. An Essay on Blindness). In *Blindness*, an epidemic of blindness breaks out in an unnamed city. Saramago uses the metaphor of the epidemic to explore a number of themes such as the vagaries of human nature, human behaviour under stress, the relationships between individuals and their obligations to their community and others, and the place of fear and compassion in human affairs. Saramago also uses the metaphor of the epidemic to underscore his anarcho-Marxist critique of the state and what he sees as its structural, almost pathological, indifference to its citizens. On the other hand the plot of *Seeing* revolves around the very mechanism that symbolically authorises legitimate state power, namely the democratic election. In the same city as was featured in *Blindness* the majority of the citizens return blank ballot papers—completely unmarked, not spoilt or defaced in any way. In part, the novel could be read as mapping the citizens’ indifference to the apparatuses and authority of the state and the latter’s incomprehension to the turning of the political tables. The novel explores how this incomprehension plays out when the institutions of ‘democratic normality’ no longer have the act of voting as their source of systemic legitimacy. Taken at face-value as a stand-alone novel *Seeing* challenges the ways in which we understand what we call ‘the political.’ When considered in conjunction with *Blindness*, the two novels question the commonly accepted epistemological underpinnings or signatures of ‘the political.’

Of course this begs the question as to what I take to be the idea of ‘the political’ in this paper, a discussion taken up, in part, by Jose and Motta (see pp. ___ of this issue). They point to a number of ways in which the term is commonly understood within mainstream political science. In one cluster of configurations it marks out a set of (contested) principles, philosophies and ethics invoked to inform the constitution and exercise of politics, it is an understanding that is asserted to provide the very basis for political rule. From another perspective it maps out the various binaries that define

political attitudes and behaviour, in particular the friend/enemy, insider/outsider, subject/non-subject binary. And finally it could stake out the terrain of the exact opposite, namely the disruptive, dissolution of those self-same binaries and boundaries (Freedden 2015: 6-7). These are not entirely exclusive domains. There are often degrees of overlap. For the purposes of my argument it matters little which of these domains is emphasised because my focus is with the particular configuration of power that is differentiated from the economic, the social, the sexual and so on. That is, in what follows the idea of ‘the political’ is specifically concerned with that domain that has as its focus how relations of power between rulers and ruled are constituted, justified, and exercised. It is not that these other domains are not inflected with considerations of political relationships and various forms of relations of power. They are. However, their domains allegedly mark out objects, processes, flows and so forth that are ostensibly specific to them, in the same way as ‘the political’ marks out whatever is presumed or asserted to be specific to it. Whatever it is that is marked out by the words used to conceptualise each of these domains is underpinned by domain-specific epistemological understandings that render those domains knowable.

They are also shaped by what Dean describes as their ‘signatures’, the signs that are ‘the mark of their sources’ (Dean 2013: 140). Even when scholars attempt to map the histories, genealogies, or archaeologies of ‘the political’, these traces or signatures often remain undetected, or if detected, are treated as normal or unproblematic. Implicit within Dean’s approach is another idea, namely that a ‘signature’ is an identifying mark or practice that renders whatever is signified as knowable. This is not necessarily to suggest some essential meaning for the concept of ‘the political’, nor that the word ‘political’ should be conflated with the concept ‘the political’ in some Aristotelian sense (see Lakoff and Johnson 1999: 379). Rather it is to acknowledge that our concepts are informed by an epistemology that enables them to be known and their uses rendered

acceptable. By extension it also means that whatever might be outside of a given epistemology is unknowable, if not unthinkable. Insofar as our political theories, including our theories of ‘the political,’ are systematised combinations of ideas, then there is an ever-present danger that they are always at risk of taking on a Frankensteinian life of their own. There is an ever-present tendency towards ossification that becomes increasingly resistant or unresponsive to the reality with which it purports to be connected or engaged. It is not that this problem is not recognised. To the contrary, much energy is expended in refining our theories, making them ever more complex (or simplistic) as we try to prevent whatever we think bedevils them. Yet despite producing new or increasingly more complex theories, we never quite succeed in achieving what is intended. Like Sisyphus, we push our theories up whatever solution mountain that seems appropriate only to find the theories rolling back down again. The question is why do our theories keep falling short of the mark? Why are we apparently indifferent to the failures of our theories, and of the systems informed by such theories? Why do we keep repeating what does not work? Variations on these questions frame the context for Saramago’s concerns in *Blindness* and *Seeing*.

In combination *Blindness* and *Seeing* provide a fruitful means to recalibrate how we might know ‘the political’ and in so doing provokes us to ask the questions and see the necessity to unlearn the epistemology of the political. Both novels tackle directly a central metaphor of Western political thought: namely that of the ‘light’, of ‘seeing the light’, as a source, legitimiser, and validator of knowing, and perhaps even a guarantor of knowledge. This metaphor takes many forms and recurs throughout the tradition of Western philosophy. The metaphor of ‘seeing the light’ can be regarded as one of the signatures of ‘the political’ insofar as it can be traced back at least to the earliest manifestations of Western philosophy in the ancient Greek world (c.f. the surviving fragments of works by various pre-Socratic philosophers—see Kirk and Raven 1966).

Within Plato's works this metaphor receives some of its most distinctive expressions. While Plato might not have originated arguments about 'the political' it is fair to suggest that he marks the beginning of this epistemological knot in the sense that his various dialogues have provided justifications both for how we might know 'the political', as well as for whom or what should be accepted as legitimately figuring within 'the political.'

Knowing the Political: Plato's Signature and the Metaphor of Light

In Plato's *Republic* the metaphor of light appears in three key discussions: the Sun [507b–509c], the Divided Line [509d–513e]; the Cave [514a–521b], of which the last mentioned will be discussed here. In his Simile of the Cave in *The Republic*, Plato has Socrates describe how its inhabitants dwell in a world where their vision and movements are fixed such that they cannot do other than see shadows, which they then take to be the reality of their existence. Their understanding, the very language and concepts that shape their knowledge, is provided by their perceptions of the shadows. They are unaware of the sources of the shadows and they are incapable of finding out. Plato then describes what happens when one of them breaks out of the knowledge trap in which they are held. The escapee first of all learns that the shadows are produced by objects being moved in front of the light generated by a fire, and thus discovers that the shadows are not reality. Not only are the shadows not reality, they are products of manipulation and an artificial source of light. The escapee is temporarily blinded by this light, but once accustomed to it is able to use it to expand his understanding of his world. And it is no accident that Plato's heroic escapee is a man.

He then pushes beyond this artificial light to venture out of the cave and into the world outside. There he discovers a wholly different reality. Again he is temporarily blinded by the light, but gradually his vision adapts. This time he comes to learn that

this light is not artificial. It is the light of the sun, and his understanding is transformed. He attains true knowledge. He is no longer the prisoner of the shadows, of second-hand reality and illusions. But Plato does not end the allegory on this point. Plato then has Socrates ponder what might happen when the escapee returns to the cave to enlighten his fellow prisoners. In brief, they do not believe him. From their perspective he is deluded because his vision is now out of step with that of the majority, both in terms of content and an understanding of how it is produced. As importantly he is now an alien, a person outside of his community because he can see what the others cannot (Panagia 2006: 3). His new knowledge alienates him just as it imposes upon him the duty to enlighten his fellow prisoners, to lead them to true knowledge. This is the duty of leaders, to enlighten their citizens so that they might find true happiness [*Republic* 517a-e].

The ordinary population has to rely on those with the capacity to face the light of the sun, those who can venture out of the cave to face the real world. It is they who come to know because they can withstand the light, can see how the world really is. They are the ones capable of true knowledge and hence should rule; those who do not know should be ruled (or should be content to be ruled). Plato's advocacy of political rule by a philosopher-king in *The Republic* is based on this view [*Republic* 518a-b]. However, it is important to note here that, at least in *The Republic*, the objects of knowledge are the Forms. These are the objects of human understanding which are the perfect versions of their empirical instantiations in the material world. Plato did not accept that true knowledge could be derived from the senses alone because the senses were fallible (see *Theatetus*). He never fully resolved the problem of what guarantees or defines true knowledge, though in *The Republic* he attributed this to 'the form of the good' which he suggested was 'responsible for whatever is right and valuable in anything' and was 'the controlling source of truth' [*Republic* 517e].

What is important for my purposes is that for Plato, it is the philosopher-king who knows, who can distinguish truth from opinion, reality from appearance, and so forth. This legitimised the claim to rule and also entailed the duty to rule [*Republic* 519c-d]. It also legitimised an ontology of the epistemological as representative (see Motta 2011). That is to say that a particular way of knowing was being articulated and, at one and the same time, its underlying reality was being posited in the act of knowing. In this way knowledge was representational of the real, of what was both known and knowable. It was a way of knowing which separates theory from practice, mind from body and so on. But it was not knowledge in the sense of a collection of facts. Rather its political salience was in creating an understanding of how to know, of arriving at correct understanding. Those who possess the skill to know what was real, as distinct from illusion or opinion, were entitled to rule; those who do not have this skill should be ruled (see *Protagoras*; *Timaeus*).

The *polis* would then be harmonious and orderly because the ignorant, that is those who cannot see correctly because they cannot withstand the light of the sun, the ordinary citizens, would be properly ruled by those capable of exercising political power [*Republic* 520e-521a]. As noted, Plato may not have been the beginning of this epistemological knot, but to rework a sentiment expressed by Whitehead (1929: 39), his contributions to the tradition of Western philosophy have served as its philosophical predicate. It is in this sense that Plato's signature is all over the epistemic privilege of past and present understandings of 'the political'. Laying bare the conceit of this epistemic privilege and opening the possibilities of its unlearning is the task Saramago pursues in *Blindness* and *Seeing*.

Blindness and Seeing: An Overview

Clearly the metaphor of the 'light' and its attendant variations such as 'en-lightenment', of being en-lightened', and of 'seeing the light' are recurring themes within Western

political thought. In whatever forms these metaphors might appear their key discursive and disciplinary power is in being a source, legitimiser, and validator of knowing, and perhaps even a guarantor of knowledge. Saramago's novels of *Blindness* and *Seeing* both address this problematic in different but complementary ways. Both are set in the same unnamed city in an unnamed country. The narrative in each turns on a singular, but distinctly different, defining event: in *Blindness* it is an epidemic of literal non-seeing, blindness, afflicting most of the citizens, and for *Seeing* the overwhelming majority of citizens of the city return blank ballot papers during an election.

In *Blindness* the normal frames of reference disappear as the epidemic of blindness slowly takes over the city. The medical cause of the blindness is not explained, nor is its origin, except in terms of its beginning point in the narrative—a motorist stopped at the traffic lights (an everyday, familiar act) suddenly and inexplicably goes blind. All who come into contact with the motorist become blind, except the wife of the ophthalmologist who treats the first victim and is known (in both novels) as 'the Doctor's wife'. The nature of the blindness is described by Saramago as *cegueira branca*, generally translated as 'white blindness', but it could also be translated as 'white blankness' or 'the blankness of whiteness' (Rollason 2006: 15). The afflicted see only whiteness, a luminosity (*Blindness* 15, 27-8, 86); they are in effect blinded by the light. They are thus not in the dark as would be the expected description of what the blinded should have experienced. When the epidemic begins to recede, the first man to go blind becomes the first one to recover, explaining that he knew he could see because 'I saw everything dark, I thought I had gone to sleep, but I hadn't, I am awake' (*Blindness*, 322), thus indicating that he had returned to his normal, pre-blindness, state of being.

When the government becomes aware of the outbreak of the epidemic, it reacts by attempting to isolate the afflicted (the blind and contaminated) from the rest of the

city. This strategy proves to be ineffectual and so it pursues a second strategy of encouraging families to take responsibility for their own or at least ‘to keep their blind indoors’ (*Blindness*, 123). For those who are taken away by government authorities, they soon learn that they are not in a hospital but are being housed in a disused mental asylum. In effect the asylum becomes an internment camp. Food and water is delivered by the military but in order to avoid contamination the soldiers keep their distance. No medical assistance or supervisory care is provided. The inmates have to prepare their own food and clean up after themselves, including their toileting. In short they are left to fend for themselves. Gradually, the normal bonds of community that had previously held the inmates together prior to their affliction disappear (with the exception of those of the Doctor and his wife, who has feigned blindness so that she does not become separated from her husband). The normal features of being ‘civilized’ gradually fall away as each inmate struggles to survive. The conditions gradually worsen and any sense of mutuality becomes reduced to atomized calculations dominated by a need to manage eating and bodily evacuations. The breakdown in hygiene and toilet habits, almost unavoidable when their blindness works against habits of personal cleanliness and no one can see the gradual deterioration in their faculties, signifies the breakdown in their human-ness.

The soldiers provide no assistance beyond delivering food. On one occasion when the soldiers deliver the supplies they become panicky after several of the inmates come out to meet them to collect the supplies. The soldiers open fire on them with automatic weapons, killing a dozen or more. No help is given to bury the dead, and even the negotiation for a shovel to dig with becomes symbolic of the inmates’ condition. The soldiers fear the inmates because the source of the blindness and how it might be spread is unknown. They are ostracized and abandoned by the government whose main concern is not with their welfare, but with minimizing the political costs of the epidemic

and hence its own survival. Internment is inoculation, the standard response of the state to what it perceives to be threats to its body politic.

At some stage a number of men, some of whom (but by no means all) have a criminal history, establish control of the food supplies. This enables them to establish themselves as 'rulers' who force the rest to pay for what they get to eat. As conditions deteriorate further they then demand sexual favours from the women in exchange for food. After one particularly horrific sexual exchange the 'Doctor's wife' decides to take part in one of the sexual visits. She stabs the ringleader in the neck with a pair of scissors while he is engaged in sexual intercourse with another woman. At about the same time one of the other women manages to set fire to the 'rulers' quarters. The asylum burns down and the inmates escape to the outside where they discover that the guards have disappeared. The whole city, in effect, becomes the asylum as the blind are now everywhere, and the diminishing number of sighted humans themselves in turn becomes the confined as they lock themselves indoors to avoid the contagion. As the escapees wander the city the narrative recounts numerous incidents that further reinforce Saramago's reflections on the human condition and the sort of politics necessary for its happiness.

Turning now to a summary of *Seeing*, the central trigger event is that of *o voto em branco* or 'blank-paper voting' (Rollason 2006: 15). On election day a majority of voters (75%) hand in blank ballot papers. This phenomenon baffles the government as does the fact that nearly all of the vote are cast at or after 4.00pm, following the end of an unseasonal torrential storm that had lasted most of the day. In accordance with constitutional provisions a second election is held a week later. The number of blank ballots increases to 83%. For the Prime Minister, the President and the governing coalition of the party of the right (p.o.t.r.) and the party in the middle (p.i.t.m.) both sets of results are taken as an affront to 'democratic normality', the cause of which remains a

mystery. While the results are ‘troubling’ the government concludes ‘that its legitimacy in office was not called into question’. The Prime Minister reassures his listeners that government will go on as normal and foreshadows a ‘state of emergency’ so that a thorough ‘in-depth investigation into the anomalous events of the past seven days’ can be undertaken to identify those responsible for such ‘unpatriotic acts’. What is needed is ‘a rigorous examination of conscience’ which the promised ‘state of emergency’ will achieve. The Prime Minister tempers this with the sentiment that ‘the nation’s government’ is ‘like a loving father’ having to deal with ‘a prodigal son’; and that in any case the government is ‘merely giving expression to the fraternal will of the rest of the country, of all those citizens, who with praiseworthy civic feeling, properly fulfilled their electoral duties’ (*Seeing*, 27-8).

The government uses various methods to determine the cause of this voting behaviour. It deploys undercover agents throughout the city. It interns five hundred citizens, more or less on a random basis, and interrogates them, subjecting most of them to various forms of torture and lie detector tests. When these methods fail the government removes itself from the city and seals it off from the rest of the country. The city is placed under siege until the problem is resolved. However, this also affects the government’s supporters, and so the government agrees to let them leave, but this too becomes a problem because this gives an opportunity to those who did not support it to leave. The government then reverses its decision and orders everyone to return to their homes. No-one is permitted to leave. The government then resorts to a range of tactics: disinformation campaigns, media manipulation, random acts of state terrorism, government workers are ordered to strike so that public services such as garbage collection will cease, and so on. At some stage the government is informed (by the first man to go blind in the epidemic) that the ‘Doctor’s wife’ is the only one who did not go blind and that she had committed a murder during that time. On that basis the

government concludes that they had a candidate for ringleader of the blank ballot conspiracy and the Interior Minister decides to send in three police agents (the superintendent, the inspector, and the sergeant) to arrest her.

During the investigation 'the superintendent' ends up having a crisis of faith. What he witnesses in the city does not square with his ideology, or rather with the governmentalising ideology of his profession. He does not find any lawlessness, disorder or mayhem in the absence of the government. His interrogation of the informant, the Doctor and the Doctor's wife convinces him there is no evidence against her. But as a result of his daily communications with the Interior Minister, he also concludes that she will be arrested (or worse) regardless of evidence. The Interior Minister advises the superintendent that the newspapers will soon publish their exposés of the conspiracy. He orders 'the superintendent' to rendezvous with a man 'wearing a blue tie with white spots' and give him the photograph of the 'Doctor's wife' and her friends. Not long after that meeting he decides to take a stand by typing up a report of the facts as he knows them which he passes on to a newspaper to publish. A toned-down version is published. All copies of the story are confiscated by the authorities and the newspaper is shut down. Within hours the superintendent is shot in the back of the head (by a professional assassin, the man 'wearing a blue tie with white spots') while sitting on a park bench. The Interior Minister announces the death of the superintendent, implicates the 'Doctor's wife', and foreshadows imminent arrests. However, it is the Doctor who is arrested, and his wife is left to puzzle the outcome. When she steps on to her balcony two bullets from a high powered rifle with a silencer end her life, and a third ends that of her dog which 'unleashed a terrifying howl' at the sight of her dead body. Saramago ends the novel enigmatically with the following exchange between two blind men:

Did you hear something, Three shots, replied another blind man. But there was a dog howling too, It's stopped now, that must have been the third shot, Good, I hate to hear dogs howl (*Seeing*, 307).

Saramago and 'the Political'

Both novels certainly speak to and of 'the political' as we might ordinarily know it in that they depict the power of the state being exercised in ways that we have come to accept as normal, though horrifying, in crisis situations. In both cases they replicate the political logic typical of contemporary representative democracies, be they liberal, socialist, or authoritarian in complexion, specifically that 'the government's response to the anomaly is, immediately, arch-authoritarian: state of siege, censorship, espionage, arbitrary arrest and indefinite detention, bombs planted by government agents' (Rollason 2006: 15). In both novels Saramago exposes the political logic that informs the normality of the state's actions. In particular, he emphasises the ruthlessness of the state's policies and actions in pursuing its objectives. This logic should be obvious to the citizens subjected to it, but more often than not they (and we) remain blind, unseeing. In both novels each new measure undertaken by the state incrementally increases the intensity and severity of that which preceded it. Nevertheless, in both cases the state proves itself unable to solve the problems confronting it. This was a situation that Saramago saw as part of the normality of contemporary democratic states (Saramago 2005 cited in Rollason 2013: 12). Neither the epidemic of blindness nor the spirit of representative democracy (*pace* Aristodemou 2013) is able to respond to the state's institutionalised violence because the institutional form of representative democracy is both constituted and bound by a political logic in which such institutionalized violence is the 'democratic normality'.

Importantly, Saramago is not just concerned with presenting us with yet another critique of the state and its disconnectedness from the lives of its citizens. He is equally concerned with examining ‘our most basic assumptions about being human, about being the “political animal”’ (Tronto 2009: 2). However, we need to recall that the idea of a ‘political animal’ derives from Aristotle’s *zoon politikon* (*Politics* 1253a], but which in its original context meant *polis*-dwelling being, someone who was a member of the *polis*. In both novels Saramago’s deeper concern is with exploring the question of how people relate to each other, specifically how they might live in community with each other, when their normal frames of reference are no longer available to them. Of particular importance in *Blindness* is the question of the need for people to have some means of organisation for communal survival. A key theme in this novel is that people need to rely on each other, and this presupposes trust, and without it there can be no community. And it is also through trust that we come to know ourselves and each other. Hence the conversation between the Doctor’s wife and her husband, captured in the penultimate sentence of the novel, serves as a moment of hope:

Why did we become blind, I don’t know, perhaps one day we’ll find out, Do you want me to tell you what I think, Yes, do, I don’t think we did go blind, I think we are blind, Blind but seeing, Blind people who can see, but do not see’ (*Blindness*, 326).

In *Blindness* the citizens are living with eyes closed. But in *Seeing* they have learned the lesson of their previous normality, of their blindness. It is the lesson illuminated by ‘the light that those casters of blank votes hope someone will begin to see’ (*Seeing*, 99).

This light is clearly seen and understood by the citizens, as it is by the government and its leading politicians who mobilise all the power at their disposal to extinguish it. The citizens have come to know and practice a different political from that of ‘democratic normality’. However, if *Blindness* had a message of hope, that it is

possible to see the light of lucidity, then the great refusal (c.f. Marcuse 1964) of *Seeing* appears to end on a singularly depressing note. Not only does the government eliminate the perceived leader of the casters of the blank ballots, the erstwhile hero of the time of plague and the central figure of the *Seeing* narrative, it could be seen to have eliminated lucidity in the process. By killing off ‘the character once embraced as savior’ Saramago is ‘twisting in the knife, as if to resurrect the nightmare of his city of the unseeing’ and with ‘the disappearance of the last lucid woman, totalitarianism may yet install itself in the hearts and minds of a whole dehumanised population’ (Rollason 2006: 16). Yet she is not the last lucid woman. There are thousands of them, and men as well; citizens who have seen the light, and it is this that sends the seismic waves of fear rippling through the corridors of power, both in the fictional city in *Seeing*, and in the non-fictional cities of our own liberal democracies.

Saramago articulates this in a speech given by the Prime Minister to his Cabinet as they contemplate their political position.

the blindness of those days has returned in a new guise, we will draw people’s attention to the parallel between the blankness of that blindness of four years ago and the blind casting of blank ballot papers now, the comparison is crude and fallacious, as I would be the first to recognize, and there will be those who will reject it at once as an offence to intelligence, to logic and to common sense, but it is just possible that many people, ... will be convinced, will ... ask themselves if they are, again, blind, if this blindness, more shameful than the other blindness, is not leading them from the straight and narrow, propelling them toward the ultimate disaster which would be the possibly definitive collapse of a *political system which, without our even noticing the threat, carried within it, right from the start, in its vital nucleus, in the voting process*

itself, the seeds of its own destruction or, a no less disquieting hypothesis, of a transition to something entirely new and unknown, so different that we would probably have no place in it, raised as *we were in the shelter of an electoral routine which, for generations and generations, managed to conceal what we now realize was one of its great trump cards*. I firmly believe, ...that the strategic change we needed is in sight, yes, the restoration of the system to the status quo ante is within our grasp (*Seeing* 162-3. Emphasis added).

The ‘threat’ in the ‘vital nucleus’ of ‘the voting process itself’ is in part the gap between what the system promises and what it delivers. It is also the fact that the electoral system renders voiceless those for whom its existence is supposed to guarantee a voice. This is the light that renders the citizens ‘blind’ so that they might gain lucidity. And in *Seeing* it is this lucidity that is feared by the powers that be, and which pushes them towards totalitarianism. For Saramago this is not accidental or unanticipated because in his view totalitarianism is already lurking in the heart of representative democracy insofar as ever increasing invocations of state power in the name of the people are its preferred solutions to crises. It is emblematic of its political logic.

In *Blindness* the people ‘can see but do not see’ (*Blindness* 327), and hence they go blind when the obviousness of their indifference to their political reality becomes overwhelming. They ‘see the light’ but cannot see their way until they have learned to trust each other and to support each other through their practices. When this occurs the epidemic recedes and their sight returns. In *Seeing*, the ‘democratic normality’ is supposed to give the citizens their political voice, but in reality it betrays their trust and renders them voiceless. If the act of voting is the vehicle for the voice of the people (c.f. the rhetoric of voting means to have your say) then submitting a blank ballot paper enables the voters to offer up a voiceless preference. But this is not the same as saying

that the citizens have lost their faith in democracy and become ‘atheists’ of democracy as Aristodemou (2013) has suggested. While it may be that ‘the people of *Seeing*, ... have dethroned the subject supposed to know’ insofar as the state often arrogates to itself that epistemic authority, and that ‘faith in government [may have] turned into atheism’, it does not follow that the citizens thereby abandoned their faith in democracy to become atheists of democracy, or even that they were ‘a non-voting electorate’ (Aristodemou 2013: 183-5). The citizens clearly exercised their right to vote, and in doing so, reaffirmed their belief in a process in which their views should carry weight. By returning a blank vote, they signified their lack of faith in the existing system and their willingness to live without its representational outcomes. Following the election, ‘things simply proceed the way they always have’, life goes on as before (Vanhoutte 2014: 10), the only difference being that ‘the dethroned politicians’ connive to maintain the illusion that they are still legitimately in control, with that legitimation made manifest through ever-increasing totalitarian means.

Conclusion: On the Epistemology of ‘the Political’

Both novels speak to the epistemology of ‘the political’. *Blindness* identifies two layers. The first is that when confronted with the knowledge of the reality of the political the citizens of the city become overwhelmed and incapable of seeing anything. In a sense reality becomes too much to bear. The second layer is that of the impotence of the existing political arrangements, in this case the representative form of the democratic state, to know and to deal with the unknown and the unseen and hence to secure the welfare of its citizens. This leads to the insight that the political as currently configured needs to be changed. But the change has to come through the citizens themselves. They have to recognise their own humanity through their common need of mutual support.

However, recognition is a visual quality and Saramago abandons sight and uses the other senses to achieve it, in particular sound, smell, and touch.

While *Blindness* ends with this recognition only partially realised, Saramago nevertheless underscores its presence and potential in two ways. One occurs when the first man to go blind regains his sight and tells his wife they will return home in the morning, but she is reluctant as she is still blind. Her husband replies ‘I will guide you’ and Saramago immediately continues: ‘only those present who heard it with their own ears could grasp how such simple words could contain such different feelings as protection, pride and authority’ (*Blindness* 324). Human connection had been re-established (though as it transpires in *Seeing* their personal relationship does not survive their return to sightedness and normal marital existence). The second way in which Saramago underscores the new recognition occurs is the conversation between the Doctor’s wife and her husband when, on regaining their sight, they reflect on the meaning of their blindness. They speak their understanding.

In *Seeing* the visual recognition of ‘the political’ is entirely denied. The ballot papers contain nothing that can be read since they are not marked. A blank ballot paper conjures up a ‘blankness of whiteness’, the ‘white blindness’ of the previous novel (Rollason 2006: 15). The blankness of a ‘white blindness’ returns but in a wholly different guise. By definition blank ballot papers cannot be read, hence the visual endorsement of ‘the political’ is not possible. This is the significance of the exchange between the two blind men at the end of *Seeing*. It does not necessarily signify the end of lucidity, despite Rollason’s (2006) pessimism. Throughout *Seeing*, Saramago has de-emphasised the importance of sight as a way of knowing ‘the political’. His conclusion in *Seeing* highlights the possibility of other ways of knowing ‘the political’—the two blind people hear gunshots that are, for all intents and purposes, silent. They do not need to see the shots or their outcome to know that the prevailing political is uncertain.

This is revealed by their recognition of the killing of the dog. While this is a standard trope to signify someone's character (i.e. a dog-killer, especially of a dog that features centrally in both narratives, is obviously bad), the fact that one of the blind men acknowledges a dislike of howling dogs suggests an ambiguity about the future. Have the citizens really learned to unlearn the epistemology of the political? Or was the blind man's comment a sign of empathy for a suffering fellow creature, and hence an indication from Saramago that humanity has a positive future.

However, in the end Saramago leaves the future of the political open-ended. It is not given, indeed for Saramago it cannot be given that we can know 'the political' once and for all. The political, to the extent that it can be known, is a contingency, a consequence of people's choices with respect to their relationships and capacity for humanness, which in turn presupposes the active and continuous development of trust and empathy. The people of *Seeing* choose a different political, one that challenges their longstanding 'democratic normality'. However, Saramago offers no fairy-tale ending for *Seeing* since he aims to remind his readers that 'democratic normality' was neither democracy nor a basis for human emancipation since it rests on an epistemology that privileges the few rather than frees the many. Taken together *Blindness* and *Seeing* provide a means to help us understand and perhaps rethink the workings of the epistemology of the political.

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