



In the street: Democratic action, theatricality, and political friendship

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Çiğdem Çıdam's *In the Street: Democratic Action, Theatricality, and Political Friendship* has many ambitions. One, to which the prologue, epilogue, first and last chapters are principally dedicated, is to show you what political theorists are missing if they do not take contemporary social movements, e.g. the Occupy movement, the Indignados movement, the various protest movements of 1968, and the Gezi Park protests, seriously on their own terms. The other, to which four of six chapters are dedicated, is to show why and how political theorists fail to appreciate the democratic features of protest politics by tracking Rousseau's democratic anxieties through post-'68 thinking from Antonio Negri, Jürgen Habermas, and Jacques Rancière.

Advancing a theory of Aristotelean political friendship and intermediating practices against extant theories beholden to Rousseauian visions of mass spontaneity as immediacy, *In the Street* makes the case that movements do not 'fail' when they do not get what they want, articulate a straightforward set of demands, or organize for their democratic perpetuation. Instead, the 'working existence of democracy' (p. 89) that defines these movements comprises the heart of their significance and can be a 'source of inspiration for future struggles' (p. 193), despite and beyond evaluations of their 'success' understood in instrumental terms.

Taking Rousseau's *Letter to d'Alembert on the Theater* and the stage-play *Pygmalion* as central texts toward an opening articulation of this mistaken approach to protest, Çıdam argues that it is not the socially atomizing choreography of the contemporary theatre that truly concerns Rousseau's aesthetic conservatism, but the uncontrollability of 'moral instruction' (p. 40) in theatrical models of politics. Even the public festival—the performative climax of the aesthetics-politics intersection for Rousseau as we typically read the *Letter*—must fall to an analogy of the plastic

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arts if Rousseau is to get what he wants, namely the closure of the irresolvable dynamism of theatricality.

This dynamism is downstream of the theatre's making-available of its own artificiality (p. 45). It is the awareness of the illusion—the accessibility of the terms of the production and the consequent possibilities of audience-judgment uncontrolled by the author—that frustrates the direct transmission of the message of the work for which Rousseau hopes. *Pygmalion* dramatizes the solution to this frustration in the distancelessness between sculptor and sculpture without making the terms of the sculpture's production available to the viewer (p. 55). The *Social Contract* expresses precisely this distancelessness in non-deliberative assemblies void of the unpredictable features of specifically theatrical, and mediated because theatrical, political action. This configuration of theatrical action's subversive and unstable features as problems to be solved invites us to imagine a solution in the form of education. The spontaneity of the theatre, layered and negotiated by a kind of audience which cannot be directly touched, is displaced for the immediacy of sheer, sovereign expression.

In what Çidam characterizes as a near-miss appreciation of spontaneous democratic action, Negri reduces the intensely mediated and necessarily diverse practices of actors in Italy's Long '68. Despite his identification of constituent power with democracy itself, Negri's Rousseauian dissatisfaction with the transience of this power and disinterest in the work it takes to constitute it pushes him in different periods of his thinking to valorize the immediate and the prescription of 'organization' as the only way to hold onto the democratic potential of spontaneous action. Habermas's notion of 'constitutional patriotism' does not follow Negri's suspicion of transience—this is one feature of political action Habermas is happy to embrace—but instead follows Rousseau's concern about the unpredictability of constituent power (p. 95). The installation of constitutional patriotism as a normative criterion for the legitimacy of civil disobedience erases the intermediating practices of political friendship in favour of a fantasy of sovereign expression and healthful correction over subversion or rebellion.

Whilst both Negri and Habermas try to resist Rousseau's thought on an explicit level, Rancière is the only one to advance the mediations of theatricality against the temptations of plastic immediacy that persist in their theories. That the staging of equality and its 'conspicuous artificiality' interrupts the extant 'distribution of roles' (p. 135) points to Rancière's appreciation of those characteristics, namely transience and unpredictability, which Negri and Habermas resist. Again, however, Çidam finds in Rancière's more recent work a critical absence of attention to intermediating, subjectivizing practices—this follows downstream, she argues, of an outsized fidelity to the boundaries between politics and the police order (p. 124-125, 143). An Aristotelean approach might answer these distinctions, which are blurred if not effaced in the plurality of spontaneous action, with political friendship. Political friendship and its concomitant practices can accommodate both the establishment of new ways of 'doing, seeing, and being' (p. 29) and the exclusionary ordering of the police.

In the final chapter, Çidam charts theoretical reactions to the Gezi Park protest and shows us a more contemporary version of the same mistake: theorists '[reduce] spontaneous political action to instantaneous, immediate event' (p. 162). To answer this elision, Çidam undertakes close original work with the Gezi



Park movement on its own terms, tracing its lead-up through café meetings and hour-by-hour clashes with police, and constellating activist testimony toward a rich and specific portrait of the intermediating practices and political friendship. These are important conceptual interventions which nevertheless tend toward abstraction in earlier invocations. Against an attachment to popular and immediate mass unity, Çidam argues that protestors who collaborated toward the occupation of Gezi Park had critical internal disagreements which had to be negotiated—activists had to employ strategies of deliberation and judgment to navigate, for example, tensions between LGBTQ activists and homophobic and transphobic resistance strategies. The theatricality of these practices lies in their making ‘visible what had no business being seen’ (p. 175). Aristotle’s political friendship is an illuminating touchpoint insofar as it articulates the activity and work of making something common to individuals and communities with competing symbolic traditions, interests, and paradigms of political action (pp. 178–181).

Çidam’s study cuts to the quick of some of our most quotidian vocabularies for political and social action. Protest nowadays ‘erupts’ in the same way rain ‘pours’. *In the Street* argues that there can be more to the story even as we hold onto the elements of eruption which we, romanced as we may be by Rousseau, might find objectionable. It is the working existence of democracy itself—a formulation borrowed from Marx on the Paris Commune—that comprises both the essence of the protest movements under scrutiny and the worth of remembering them for democratic action in future time.

The insistence that we miss the point when we read actions like Gezi Park as failures because activists did not get what they want may attune us to a more theoretically honest picture of protest movements from the late 20th century till today. But I leave *In the Street* wondering if the urgency of the effectiveness of political action might destabilize Çidam’s project, which in part seeks to defend and redeem movement-politics against decades if not centuries of strident critique. If the working existence of democracy itself is not the sort of thing we can depend on to affect the satisfaction of demands—to be a cause for which there is an effect which outlasts spontaneous constituency and exceeds the practices of persistent political friendship which characterize those constituencies—are mass protest and demonstration as forms left in abeyance amongst other modes of political action, despite the reconfigured appreciation Çidam calls for?

The three chapters which precede the analysis of Gezi Park may be of greater interest to scholars of their respective *foci* than those invested in theories of protest and action more generally. For the latter, the reorienting work that *In the Street* contends is necessary for our understanding of contemporary protest will be an important account to grapple with. Scholars of civil disobedience, social movements, and democracy will find significant and thoughtful contributions in Çidam’s redirection from evaluation by success to evaluation in terms of democratic intersubjectivity and will do well to seriously engage her argument even and especially if they remain attached to more instrumental interpretations of contemporary protest.



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