

**PERFORMING URGENCY #3**  
**A HOUSE ON FIRE PUBLICATION**

# **JOINED FORCES**

# **AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION IN THEATRE**

**EDITED BY**  
**ANNA R.**  
**BURZYŃSKA**

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*Edited by*  
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## INTRODUCTION

The nineteenth century was a century of actors. The twentieth century was a century of directors. The twenty-first century is a century of spectators. With Jacques Rancière's *The Emancipated Spectator* (2009) being the most discussed theatre-related text of the last decade, there is an increase in scholarly and curatorial interest in the most mysterious, potentially dangerous and, in fact, most important participant of the performance, who stays silent, motionless, and hidden in darkness: the audience. And similarly, artists desire to finally 'meet the spectators': to let them speak, get into a dialogue with them, invite them to involve themselves in pursuing the performance. To liberate the audience.

There are many different factors that contribute to this unexpected turn. Probably the most important one is the importance of political theatre today: artists engage in contemporary social and political issues, and scholars highlight performative aspects of political life and political aspects of theatre performances. In the world where democracy, activism, and freedom of speech become more and more important (and more and more endangered) values, theatre shouldn't be a place where one is supposed to remain passive and silent and to accept everything that is said. Just the opposite: theatre has the potential to become a kind of 'rehearsal space' for democracy, a place where one's encouraged not only to observe, but to be critical, active, and responsible for what is happening (like in Bertolt Brecht's 'Lehrstücke' ('Learning Plays') and in Augusto Boal's idea of 'spect-actors'). Instead of traditional theatre that focused on the idea of passive people whose fate and destiny was decided by the gods (like puppets on strings controlled from above by artists), the contemporary world demands a different



model: showing people that fate and destiny is their hands and they can change the plot of their lives (and change the world) in each moment. Just as they can change the shape of performances participating in them.

But there are other important factors as well. One of them is how new media have changed the way information is received – in interactive, selective, and dialogical ways. The gap between ‘old-fashioned’ spectators sitting in front of the radio or television and today’s video game players and internet users is huge – new consumers of information and entertainment literally take matters into their own hands, choosing preferred content, navigating the story in non-linear, network style, commenting, and adding their own content.

There’s also been a significant shift in theory that has put the audience into the spotlight. Performance studies stretched the meaning behind the word ‘performance’ far beyond traditional theatre with stage and audience, incorporating ideas of contemporary anthropology, sociology, and philosophy of language into theatre studies, proving that in our everyday life we are all performers and spectators – at the same time. Also postdramatic theatre – as described by Hans-Thies Lehmann (2006) – very often requires the spectators to become active co-writers of the performance.

For a very long time, one of the most powerful weapons of political theatre (from *fin-de-siècle* cabaret through Dadaists, Futurists, and Bertolt Brecht to Christoph Schlingensief) was offending the audience (to quote the title of the Peter Handke’s play from 1966). Revolted, left-wing artists tried to provoke conservative middle class audiences in the principle of ‘épater le bourgeois’. Now strategies are different: more and more, artists try to invite members of the audience – especially those who are for some reason (economic, racial, cultural, religious, gender, language, etc.) excluded from society, have no political power and no chance to make their voices heard – to make theatre together. Art becomes much more powerful when performers and spectators join forces. Hence the title of this book.

*Joined Forces: Audience Participation in Theatre* presents various examples of audience participation in theatre linking them to problems of participation in democracy and to socially engaged art. Making theatre is always a political statement – asking about audience participation practices is asking about the possibilities of making changes both in art and in politics.

The book opens with three introductory texts that serve as the theoretical foundation for the rest of the publication. Jan

Sowa reflects upon political modes of participation, analysing how the notions of 'the public' and 'the common' change in the era of Occupy movement. Dominique Nduhura diagnoses the uneasy and ever changing relationship between forum theatre and politics in the African context, and Antoine Pickels examines the current revival of participatory art forms in Europe as a big opportunity and a big risk at the same time, since making participation 'fashionable' leads to destroying the very sense of the idea.

The core part of the book consist of 11 essays and interviews. Artists from different countries were asked to reflect on the idea of participation, to share their experiences and write about their successes and failures, hopes and doubts. While it's impossible to create a map of participatory art, choosing (nearly) a dozen various representative and remarkable examples can help to outline the situation of contemporary political, audience-engaging theatre as seen by its creators themselves.

The first two texts focus on places: institutions that became meeting points and enabled potential spectators, who had previously been excluded, not only to watch performances but to actively participate in them. Justine Boutens introduces a group of different artists working at the Flemish CAMPO art centre in Ghent, and Miriam Tscholl in conversation with Elena Basteri presents Bürgerbühne in Dresden as a place that enables direct communication between 'punks, bankers, followers of Judaism and Islam, midwives, undertakers, fans of the Dynamo Dresden football team and men in the midst of a midlife crisis'.

The next part of the book is entitled 'Anti-manifestos', as it challenges apparent dichotomies between a mechanism of participation as a promise of emancipation and a traditional mechanism as a guarantee of oppression (Roger Bernat and Roberto Fratini Serafide), individual and collective (Ophélie Patricio Arrabal), political and aesthetic (Ana Vujanović). The authors balance artistic, curatorial, and academic point of views, setting together different theories, notions, and ideas and calling the 'participatory utopia' into question.

The final six contributions describe artists' experiences, including successful and failed attempts to invite the audience to co-create theatre. Tobi Müller interviews Rimini Protokoll members (Helgard Haug, Stefan Kaegi, and Daniel Wetzl) whose idea of replacing professional actors with 'experts of the everyday' has become emblematic for contemporary documentary theatre. Lotte van den Berg writes about her long-term project *Building*

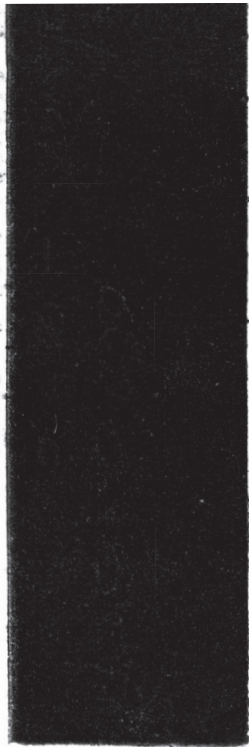
*Conversation*, that examines conversation ‘as a joint creation, a collective improvisation, a work of art’. Tea Tupajić recalls her work in Israel and events that inspired the creation of a performative installation *The Disco*. Adelheid Roosen speaks to Tom Sellar about projects created via her foundation Adelheid|Female Economy that challenge the new ethos of intercultural exchange. Wojtek Ziemilski makes a list of different problems with participation that he has encountered when trying to activate his audience and create a common space for both artists and spectators. Finally, Johanna Freiburg and Bastian Trost from Gob Squad in conversation with Adam Czirak discuss different strategies of involving not only theatre-goers, but also passers-by into their performances.

Of course, the book lacks many important names: from ‘founding fathers’ (and mothers) like Augusto Boal, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, and members of the Living Theatre through Jeremy Deller, inviting huge masses of people to take part in his reenactments of historical events, to diverse young artists such as duo deufert&plischke, experimenting with participative choreography, and Laila Soliman, whose performances are genuine ‘lessons of revolting’ for spectators in Arab countries. Some of these artists already appeared in *Not Just a Mirror: Looking for the Political Theatre of Today* and *Turn, Turtle! Reenacting the Institute*, the first and the second part of the publication series *Performing Urgency*; the list of important politically involved theatre artists around the world, whose work deserves analysis, could go on and on. I hope that the end of this book will be a beginning of another.

Anna R. Burzyńska



# IT'S POLITICAL ECONOMY, STUPID!



**TOWARDS  
PROGRESSIVE  
MODES OF  
PARTICIPATION**

### **Crisis, or a moment of judgement**

The feeling of crisis and exhaustion of the mainstream politics has become widespread in contemporary societies and as such it cuts across the spectrum of social positions and ideological worldviews. Patterns of socio-political life deeply entrenched in many societies in the postwar period are eroding among a popular conviction that the politicians of various levels – from local to international – elected to represent us and to govern in our interest fail to enact this obligation in their everyday decisions.

Symptoms of this exhaustion take various forms. The most visible one is the career of the so called anti-establishment candidates and parties that successfully challenge well established figures and formations of mainstream politics. It is happening all over the world from the United States to the Philippines, to Austria, to Spain, to Poland. Other symptoms include calls for restitution of monarchy, conservative attempts to save the remains of the past from ubiquitous and accelerating transformations, right-wing populisms successfully conquering the votes of those who fall victim to the *status quo* yet do not have enough social and cultural capital to opt for a more progressive solution and – last but not least – actions of individuals and groups striving for more participation as a solution to the chronic political crisis we have found ourselves in. These progressive demands prove that we are also facing an opportunity. The word ‘crisis’ derives from Greek *κρίσις*, meaning also ‘a turning point’ and ‘a moment of judgement’. Any future turn of events depends ultimately on our ability to properly judge the situation we are in.

Paradoxically enough, the demands for more participative social and political arrangements come from two fundamentally opposing political positions and for this reason they convey a radically different message, even if they use the same words such as ‘citizen’, ‘bottom-up’, ‘civic activity’, ‘autonomy’, ‘initiative’, etc. On the one hand participation is a buzzword for the liberal centre and, in this tradition, it is best articulated by the concept of ‘civil society’ (as explored by such authors as Seymour Martin Lipset in his book *Political Man*, 1960, or Robert D. Putnam in *Making Democracy Work*, 1993). On the other, inclusion and participation occupy a central position in the leftwing rhetoric and epitomise a broader project of ‘radical’ or ‘real democracy’. Even if these terms may refer to various practical solutions (for example, see C. Douglas Lummis, *Radical Democracy*, 1997; David Trend (ed.), *Radical Democracy: Identity, Citizenship, and the State*, 1996; and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, ‘The Fight for “Real Democracy” at the Heart of Occupy Wall Street’, in *Foreign Affairs*, 2011), its main goal boils down to reinvigoration of ailing democratic institutions by encouraging and enabling people to take part in a more open political process. This complex and in many ways paradoxical theoretical and ideological landscape is mirrored closely in rhizomatic nature of global social and political struggle as it was revealed by the events of 2011 in Middle East, Northern Africa, Europe, and the United States. It was the year that can justly be called ‘the year of the people’ as it was marked by intense and widespread mobilisation against the powers that be and ubiquitous calls for more participation in political decision making. Its synchronization within a space of a dozen months should come as no surprise. We are dealing here with a global cycle of struggles starting with anti-globalisation protest in 1999 in Seattle, developing through opposition to wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, amplified by failures of mainstream political, social, and economic institutions revealed by the financial crisis of 2008, and culminating in the formidable ‘year of dreaming dangerously’ – as Slavoj Žižek in *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously* (2013) called this period – in 2011.

The link between the movements in the Middle East/North Africa and Europe/United States has been underlined and expressed by activists, such as Anna Curcio and Gigi Roggero, or a multitude of occupiers on Liberty Plaza in New York on many occasions (see Curcio and Roggero: ‘Tunisia is our University – Notes and Reflections from the Liberation Without Borders Tour’, in *University in Crisis*, 2011; and ‘Protests of 2011 Timeline’, in *The Occupied Wall*

*Street Journal*, 2011). However, putting various events of the year 2011 in a unified conceptual frame may seem a little bit far-fetched, to put it mildly. We can very well understand why, for example, people in Egypt or Tunisia were fighting for democracy – in other words, for a bigger participation in political life. They were citizens of brutal dictatorships deprived of liberties typical for western democracies, especially of the right to take part in unbiased electoral process. But how is it possible that citizens of democratic states were fighting for democracy? After all, the protests erupted within the European Union and the United States – political formations believed to be democratic and thus allowing for their citizens to participate in political process in various forms: voting, engaging in election campaigns, running for office, petitioning media, taking concerns to court, etc. The democratic Western regimes seem to be built on the idea of political inclusion and participation, so how can one ‘fight for democracy’ there when it does not come to pathologies such as corruption or stolen elections? This widespread political commonsense clearly coincides with the equally common conviction that political systems in the West have become alienated, do not allow for proper participation, and thus should be regarded as un-democratic. In order to make something out of this confusion we need to briefly trace back in time development of Western parliamentary regime. It will also allow us to articulate the difference between the liberal and progressive modes of participation, casting more light on the contemporary social, political, and ideological landscape surrounding the ideas and practices of participation.

### **Democracy versus parliamentarism, or two modes of participation**

Popular convictions and linguistic usus tend to equate parliamentarism with democracy. This confusion goes sometimes as far as identification of parliamentarism with the ‘rule of the people’ as the very term ‘demo-cracy’ conveys. As a matter of fact the latter existed in Ancient Greece and had little to do with contemporary democratic regimes. Not only because the large part of the Greek demos was excluded from any participation in political power – mostly women, slaves, and ‘foreign residents’ or μέτοικοι – but mainly due to a very particular and singular organisation of political life. Ancient Greeks did not vote. They exercised a combination of direct democracy – mass rallies – and administrative rule, however the members of administration were not voted in, they were chosen by lot. For this reason contemporary attempts to put our political institutions



in line with Greek inspirations – such as, for example, the idea of ‘demarchy’, put forward by Australian philosopher John Burnheim (cited in Brian Martin, ‘Demarchy: A Democratic Alternative to Electoral Politics’, 1992) – sometimes go under a wholesale label of ‘lottocracy’ (see Alexander Guerro, ‘The Lottocracy’, 2014). Contrary to contemporary notions of what democracy is, the Ancient Greeks did not consider election process to be the best embodiment of the idea of equal participation in power. It looks like they were very aware of the same dangers that devour contemporary parliamentary regimes. They wanted to get rid of demagogy – which literary means ‘a leadership of the mob’ – by which outspoken and cunning individuals exercise power via rhetorical means over uneducated masses, making them act in the interest of the demagogue and thus fatally influencing any electoral process (we do not need to look far to see what they dreaded: Donald Trump). They were aware that rich, intelligent, and good-looking people have a much better chance of succeeding in elections than the poor, uneducated, and ugly – due to, precisely, their wealth (i.e. resources and influence), knowledge (tools to manipulate the masses), and physical appeal (see John Dunn (ed.), *Democracy: The Unfinished Journey 508 BC to AD 1993*, 1993). What’s more, the election process opens up a career path for the most power hungry individuals and the Ancient Greeks believed, as Jacques Rancière points out in his book *On the Shores of Politics* (2007), that the most eager to rule should not be allowed to hold power as they are the ones who become tyrants. Choosing the rulers by lot eliminated all these dangers and allowed for construction of a government more representative of people’s opinions and ideas. We can right away grasp what the Greeks meant if we refer to the methodology of contemporary social research (in academia or in opinion polls): the most representative research sample is the one randomly composed.

It would be difficult to find procedural resemblances between the ancient and modern democracies. They are mainly connected by the word ‘democracy’ used to describe both of them and by a general conviction that people should take part in exercising power. Besides this very vague similarity we live in a very different system. Its essence lies not in ‘government of the people’ but in balancing the influence of various social agents – individuals, classes, organisations, status groups, etc. – and as such it stems from the feudal practice of consultation between the king and the nobles that evolved into liberal representative institutions known as national parliaments. The founding document of contemporary

democracy did not originate in ancient Greece or Rome but in Northern Europe – it is the Magna Carta from 1215, a testimony of a compromise between the king and aristocratic class.

Exploring the genealogy of parliamentarism goes far beyond the scope of this text. However, one detail needs to be underlined: the mechanism of parliamentary representation through universal suffrage was devised as a compromise between the emerging political subjectivity of the people and elites' eagerness to keep it under control. It is clearly visible in discussions that led to the establishment of the first fully functioning parliamentary regime – the United States of America. Its founding fathers made a definite distinction between democracy and republic, deliberately distancing themselves from the former and aiming at the latter. Democracy was the rule of the people, republic – rule of their representatives. Alexander Hamilton and James Madison were particularly clear about it (see Hamilton, 'The Union as a Safeguard Against Domestic Faction and Insurrection', 1787; Madison, 'The Same Subject Continued', 1787, and 'The Senate Continued', 1788). As Madison suggests, what characterised the American representative government was 'the total exclusion of the people, in their collective capacity, from any share in the latter [i.e. in the government]'. This is the reason why the US Constitution does not envision a possibility of conducting a federal referendum as it is a form of popular power in its 'collective capacity', while on the federal level, power resides solely in the hands of the representatives, thus people do not participate directly in power.

To complete this image we have to ponder for a moment upon the voting process itself. Isn't it the very mechanism of participation, of expressing our will and of directly shaping the government? We have, after all, also passive voting rights, which means that technically any and each of us can be elected to any position. There are several problems here that help to explain why the demands and ideas of participation are so appealing to critics of Western democracies.

Let's start with the question of general eligibility to run in elections. This is precisely where we seem to be much dumber than the Ancients: guarantee of equal passive suffrage – right to be elected – for everyone is an empty formal rule never fulfilled in any actual existing society. If we want a genuine and general participation in power as the factual outcome of the political process and not just a formal presupposition devoid of any meaning, electing representatives is not the way to go. It is rather an opportunity for

the rich, the good-looking, and the outspoken to obtain unproportioned share in power. Theoretically every citizen can become a president or a prime minister, however the situation is very different in practical terms. Money translates into more impact in the media and more outreach in direct campaigning. Cultural and social capital also matter and it is not an accident that an important part of British political establishment comes from Eaton and many French politicians, regardless of their political convictions, graduated from *École nationale d'administration*.

There are pertinent sociological and political theories that grasp this anti-democratic element of parliamentary regimes. Joseph Schumpeter in his book *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (2008) coined the term 'competitive leadership', suggesting that the election process allows citizens not to rule but to decide which contesting candidate they want to be ruled by. Parliamentary government is not an expression of people's will or sovereignty, but of their consent. It is a major difference that we understand right away when it is put in these terms: actively willing something is very different from just passively agreeing on something to happen. The latter is very far from participation and it is precisely this feature of parliamentarism that creates a feeling of alienation – the opposite of participation – so widespread among citizens of contemporary democracy.

American political scientist Robert Dahl suggested, in his book *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (1971), a better name for what we call democracy: a polyarchy. 'Poly' stands for 'many' and 'archy' for loci of power – parliamentarism is a combination of many heterodox forms of power. It has got a democratic component, but also an oligarchic one (for example the influence of money on politics) and aristocratic one (unproportioned influence of social elites). As a result, only a fraction of actual power lies in the hands of popular sovereign. Citizens of a parliamentary state participate in power, but only to a limited degree, as they have to share it with other undemocratic groups and institutions; not what we have in mind when we talk about parliamentarism as 'sovereignty of the people'.

This slightly long historical account has been necessary as it allows us to articulate the basic difference between liberal and radical (or progressive) ideas of participation as well as the clash between them. I deliberately do not use the terms 'right' and 'left'. Despite its intense criticism I believe they remain useful to some extent, especially if understood in Hegelian terms as different



The Occupation of Teatro Valle (Rome), 18 April 2012

approaches to the relation between reality and rationality (boiling down to question: 'Does reality have to adjust to rationality, as the left believes, or vice versa as holds the right in conservative or liberal versions?'). However, in the present context I find it more convenient to use a different set of terms: 'conservative', 'liberal', and 'progressive/radical' to describe what is called, respectively, 'the right', 'the centre', and 'the left' of the political spectrum.

The liberals see participation as a complimentary mechanism, useful in carrying out those collective tasks that are best managed by local community of citizens. Participation is not seen as alternative to political representation but as a part of socio-political mix, where representation and participation belong to two distinct spheres: the ones of political society and the civil society, respectively. Contrary to this view the progressive ideology defines participation as a way of at least reforming the mechanisms of power – i.e. of political society – and at best of getting rid of them altogether in their present form while replacing them with more participatory and thus less alienating arrangements. Let's take a brief look at these two modes or concepts of participation.

### The uses and abuses of civil society

The liberal reflection on participation and bottom-up activities has got quite a long tradition and has been developed mostly by the scholars, thinkers and researchers within the Anglo-American tradition. As a matter of fact, it was a journey undertaken by a European to the United States in the early nineteenth century that gave birth to this current of reflection and investigation. For it was precisely people's eagerness to participate in civic activities via various kinds of associations that fascinated the French aristocrat, Alexis de Tocqueville during his trip to America. As he wrote in his opus magnum, *Democracy in America* (1835):

Americans of all ages, all conditions, all minds constantly unite. Not only do they have commercial and industrial associations in which *all take part* [emphasis added], but they also have a thousand other kinds: religious, moral, grave, futile, very general and very particular, immense and very small; Americans use associations to give fêtes, to found seminaries, to build inns, to raise churches, to distribute books, to send missionaries to the antipodes; in this manner they create hospitals, prisons, schools. [...] Everywhere that, at the head of a new undertaking, you see the government in France and a great lord in England, count on it that you will perceive an association in the United States.

Tocqueville's fascination with this enormous citizens' participation and its importance for general society found its continuation in widespread research on what came to be known as social capital and associate with interpersonal trust, one of the key concepts of contemporary social theory. It was mainly American anthropologist, Edward Banfield, whose research on underdevelopment conducted in Southern Italy in the 1950s (see Edward C. Banfield, *Moral Basis of a Backward Society*, 1958) paved the way for making willingness to participate, associate, and cooperate one of the key research topics in twentieth-century sociology. The single most important investigation into the significance of citizens' bottom-up grassroots participation was also undertaken in Italy in the 1970s by American sociologist Robert D. Putnam and presented in the above-mentioned book *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (1993). This meticulous research provided the empirical proof that the level of civic participation as mirrored by the number of NGOs in a given region correlates very closely with various indicators of

social, political, and economic growth. The places, where people participate in common tasks are better organised, wealthier, and have happier populations than the regions where the level of participation is low (see Pierre Bourdieu, 'The Forms of Capital', 1986; James S. Coleman, 'Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital', 1988; Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, 1961; and Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, 2000).

### **Progressive participation**

Although there should be no doubt that participation, trust, and social capital make societies work better, there's also a series of limitations and problems linked with this tradition of thought and activism. The oldest and the most important line of criticism goes all the way back to Marx and to his attack on Hegel's concept of civil society as such (Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy Of Right*, 1844). The basic flaw that Marx saw there was a complete lack of interest in the questions of political economy. The notion of 'civil society' creates a vision of formal equality among citizens and of their agency that remains an illusion, because it does not take into account asymmetries of wealth and status among various social classes. It is reflected in a complete lack of interest in the question of property and of means of production and redistribution among the advocates of civil society. Marx and his followers believed that a huge part of the problems within modern capitalist societies stems precisely from the unjust distribution of fruits of labour among various agents participating in the production process. Despite liberal claims of empowerment of individuals, citizens have no say over the property relations within capitalist society, while the entire concept of civic participation serves to manage problems created by this predicament. To put it in concrete and up-to-date terms with an example, the bourgeois strategy would be, for instance, to organise cities in ways best suited for capital owners – car makers, developers, real-estate agencies, etc. – leaving citizens with an option to self-organise in a participatory way to deal with the fallout of such policies such as air pollution, rent hikes, foreclosures, evictions, conversion of green areas into parking lots, etc. Any solution that the civil society comes up with has to be in line with the most sacred element of the bourgeois order: the private property; progressive and radical solutions – like, for example, abandoning private property of land within cities in order to better manage collective interests of their dwellers – are not on the table. Participation stops at the door of property.

Another, more practical problem, is a wide rift separating the liberal idea of citizens' participation from its contemporary practice. It is epitomised in the fate of the NGO model that has suffered a fundamental distortion. Buzzwords such as 'citizens' participation' or 'grassroots activity' serve as an excuse for the government to shift a huge chunk of its duties and responsibilities to the shoulders of civil society. The process has been researched in detail in the United States and elsewhere (see Steven Rathgeb Smith and Michael Lipsky, *Nonprofits for Hire: The Welfare State in the Age of Contracting*, 1993; and Agnieszka Rymśza, 'Partnerzy służby publicznej? Wyzwania współpracy sektora pozarządowego z administracją publiczną w świetle doświadczeń amerykańskich', 2005). It boils down to making civic organisations dependent on state and regional authorities via a system of grants. It turns NGOs into de facto para-companies, a sort of government contractor receiving money to work along priorities they have no part in shaping. This negative development is called 'governmentalisation' of the third sector and has been mocked by the invention of the term GONGO: a Government Organised Nongovernmental Organisation. The supposed autonomy of civil society turns out to be a fiction. Civil society has become, as a matter of fact, a part of political society disguised in participative slogans.

The progressive take on participation stems from different assessments, aims at different goals and uses different strategies. Firstly and most often, the progressive idea of participation does not treat participation as a mechanism complementary to political representation, but as a major game changer in the political game as such. From this perspective the very institution of parliamentary representation is regarded as the main enemy of participation. It needs to be underlined that the progressive tradition looks at the history of representative institution in a different way than the liberal one. For the liberals, parliamentarism is mainly a result of compromise between the old aristocratic elite and the new social hegemon, the bourgeoisie, and was developed in the interests of general society as a universal conflict solving tool (see Norberto Bobbio, *Liberalism and Democracy*, 1990). The progressives point to the fact that there was a third party in this bargain – the people. The interests and goals of the popular classes were in conflict with both the aristocracy and bourgeoisie. The liberals believed that the conservative attitude towards the masses was impractical and would lead to some sort of popular revolution that would turn the world upside-down destroying all property relations. On the other



hand, the popular hatred towards aristocracy was a force acting in favour of the bourgeoisie and was used on many occasions to further the own goals of the new propertied classes against the old ones. Parliamentarism seemed a perfect tool to empower popular classes in such a way as to keep them safe for the bourgeoisie: by incorporating them in the process of constituting power in such a manner as not to let them actually participate in the everyday functioning of government, as it was deliberately put by Madison in the passage quoted above (see Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Agonies of Liberalism: What Hope Progress?*, 1994). For the progressive radicals participation is not an idea and practice that should ameliorate the liberal institutions by complementing them, but a revolutionary postulate aiming at fundamental transformation of societies. For this reason the progressive vindications of the right to participate go further than the liberal ones, both in theory and in practice.

Firstly, the progressive tradition demands participation in the actual, everyday functioning of political institution. To put it in precise philosophical terms, the progressives do not accept the fact that the constituent power of the people is realised uniquely in the act of establishing a constituted power. This distinction goes back to the philosophy of Baruch Spinoza. Though there is no place to explore it in detail here, it has been formidably analysed by others on various occasions (see Antonio Negri, *Insurgencies: Constituent Power and the Modern State*, 1998; and Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*, 2004). The most important fact that stems from this revolt is the questioning of the liberal idea of parliamentary representation, where the representative is not bound by its constituency's opinions or instructions (he or she can vote as they please) and cannot be recalled from office before their mandate expires at the end of each electoral turn.

As a result of all above-mentioned problems, the progressive advocates of political participation would like to see parliamentarism abolished, but they want it to happen in an emancipatory way, giving place to more democratic forms of organising political power. It's an attempt to democratise polyarchy – to use Dalh's terms – by enhancing its democratic element via means of participation and diminishing the role of undemocratic elements such as status, wealth, etc. It does not mean a direct, rally democracy. Representation is not rejected but reformed along more controllable lines – representatives ought to be guided and limited by instructions from their constituencies to take certain positions, they



can be recalled for mandatory consultations by those who elected them and their mandate can be revoked by those who entrusted the given representative with it if he or she does not act according to terms agreed.

This way of participating in power via representatives is different from direct democracy. According to its proponents this more participative and more democratic solution would allow the curbing of several major malaises of parliamentarism: the damaging influence of money in politics, the problem of lobbying, and the pest of broken campaign promises. The politicians would not be able to say whatever pleases their constituencies during campaigns and then do whatever they find personally suitable for reasons they do need to disclose. Representatives would be elected to enact their promises and could be deprived of their mandate by those who trusted them if they fail to act along these promises.

The second most important distinction between liberal and progressive view of participation goes back to the question of political economy put forward by Marx more than 150 years ago. Liberal democracy seems to be enacting the notion of popular control over social life, however, it leaves one zone completely outside of any democratic control: the economy. On the general level we have no say in setting the goals of economic activities that remain ruled by the market mechanisms (constructed, to be sure, by states, so by collective agents; there is no such thing as a natural market as was recently demonstrated by David Greaber in his book *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*, 2012). We may want material resources at our disposal to be put into fighting cancer or getting rid of world hunger and not into developing 3D touch technology for smartphone screens or constructing fuel inefficient luxury cars, however, we have no control over how these resources are used, because they remain completely in private control. Should it be so if our collective fate depends on it? For the liberals – yes, because private property is the cornerstone of society and it originates from individual achievements. For the progressives – no, because control over material production is in the interest of entire community – or even humanity as such – and the individual property derives ultimately from some form of arbitrary privatisation or exploitation, be it either common natural resources plundered by multinational corporations or the collective effort of workers exploited by owners.

How do these two models of participation – the liberal and the progressive – function in practice? The liberal one is much more widespread and better known. It's a common wisdom that citizens

should participate in public life, form associations and engage in solving social problems along the institutions of political society. This is, however, a normal mode of social and political life. The liberal idea of participation has got a flavor of social progress, but only in some particular places – like in the so called post-communist countries or in the post-colonial reality – where civil society has been underdeveloped for historical reasons. In highly developed countries of the capitalist core the liberal, civic mode of participation via NGOs and similar organisations with its limited scope remains a part of the status quo and for this reason is regarded by the progressive activists rather as part of the problem than a solution. Their progressive ideas of deeper, wider, and more intense forms of participation are less known, but also more promising in terms of future developments. For this reason I'll confine a brief overview of the practical instances of participation to the examples coming from the field of radical and progressive activism.

### **Making participation work: occupations**

A widely used and relatively well known form of radical, progressive participation is the strategy of occupation. In some respects it resembles an older tradition of active occupational strike: workers declare a strike, they stay within the factory, but they continue production, running the plant according to their opinions. However, occupations are aimed at different milieus – mainly the public spaces and educational institutions, like universities, which brings to mind another tradition of political activism: the sit-ins movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

What makes the Occupy movement interesting and inspiring from a progressive point of view is not only its ideological content, but also its organisational form. Alain Badiou, commenting on the events of 2011 in his book *Le réveil de l'histoire* (2011), underlined the importance of this practical aspect. The point the activists tried to make was not to articulate certain demands *vis-à-vis* existing power structures or to complement them with grassroots civic activism aimed at resolving concrete problems. This way the Occupy movement does not fit into the liberal framework of civil society. What was more important was to enact in a mini-scale possible procedures and power mechanisms of future society. The clue to the occupation strategy, as Badiou put it, lies in a direct control that a group of people exercises over a piece of public space. The occupied space becomes a laboratory of the future in what has been called 'prefigurative politics' and boils down to creating a small scale

version of the organisational frames of possible future politics (see Carl Boggs, 'Marxism, Prefigurative Communism, and the Problem of Workers' Control', 1977; and Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work*, 2015).

Once the occupation areas were established, concrete democratic mechanisms of self-organisation and self-management were being implemented. The most important of them is the participatory practice of so called 'General Assembly' – a daily reunion of all whom it may concern devised to discuss whatever needs to be discussed and to take decisions by majority voting. Everyone is entitled to speak out, there are no representatives and no superior authority, only a group designated to practically organise and moderate the rally. They are usually called the 'Facilitation Team' and have no actual power beyond tasks like maintaining a list of speakers, counting votes, making sure eventual conflicts are resolved in a peaceful way, etc. The assembly's participants are alert regarding any abuses of power by the facilitators. (This brief description is based on my participatory observation of Occupy Wall Street that I conducted in New York in October 2011).

What is very interesting is the performative aspect of the movement. The assemblies are vivid and dynamic events, very different from usual sessions of parliaments, where boring speeches of most MPs are met with the yawning of others. There is a system of simple hand gestures used to express basic opinions like 'I'm in favour', 'I'm against', 'I'm not decided', 'I'll absolutely oppose the move', or 'Wrap it up, you are taking too long'. They are used to provide a speaker with immediate feedback, so everyone can see what the majority opinion is (if there is one). In the case of complex issues that are difficult to debate in a general forum, there is a 10-15 minute break before voting during which everyone is encouraged to discuss the problem in small groups with their direct neighbours in the assembly.

What emerges from these sessions is a peculiar image of a multitude of subjects engaged in constant exchange. It's like a self-managing and self-regulating swarm. The feeling is amplified by oft-used voice technique called the 'human microphone': people sitting closer to the speaker repeat her sentences in short series, so people further away can hear what is being said. The operation is repeated in waves so the word can spread around the entire assembly (see Ashley Norris, 'Occupy Wall St – Human Microphone', on YouTube, 2011; and Jan Sowa, 'Les hommes et femmes de la démocratie. La multitude en tant que sujet des

révolutions démocratique', 2014). This technique is used by activists to overcome a ban on loud speakers and sometimes to jam megaphones that police or other authorities may have on the site. It's surprisingly effective in this respect, showing the strength of hundreds of voices united.

The choice of public spaces – and not factories or government offices – for the occupation is not a random one. The key issue brought up by the Occupy movement is that of the commons (see Gigi Roggero, 'Roggero, 'Five Theses on the Common', 2010) – various kinds of resources and goods that should be made available to everyone, but are instead enclosed and used in the interests of the few. Examples include both material and immaterial commons: city space dominated by real estate developers and other private interests or scientific knowledge imprisoned in an ever growing system of patents, copyrights, paywalls, etc.

What is redefined here is the very notion of 'the public'. It may be said that 'the common' comes as a radical, much more participatory replacement for the liberal 'public', as the latter has become a deceptive term masking alienation underneath a formally inclusive system. The difference boils down to refusal of participation in the liberal, parliamentary sense. Its critiques believe it puts public goods and resources not under the control of the people, but of alienated members of parliament and governmental bodies, depriving the public of what is their rightful possession: the commons.

Participation is seen in the frame of Occupy movement as a way of overcoming alienation that is formally inclusive, but practically exclusive of the liberal democratic system that representation entails. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in their insightful book *Declaration* (2012), devoted to the events of 2011, claim that what the Occupy movement opposes in general is alienation of contemporary capitalist societies epitomised in four subjective positions: the indebted, the mediatised, the securitised, and the represented. It's worth noting in the present context that two of these predicaments – mediation and representation – refer directly to the question of participation, or rather, to the lack of it.

### ***An interlude: occupy art!***

What makes the Occupy movement very interesting given the theme of this book, is its resonance within the artistic community. A group of artists and activists associated with 16 Beaver – an artist-run space in lower Manhattan located a couple of hundred

metres from the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE) – was directly engaged in the practical preparation and running of the occupation of Liberty Plaza close to the NYSE. A renowned American artist, Martha Rosler, created a series of pictures documenting a myriad of Occupy initiatives in the United States and in Europe and expressed her support for the movement in an article called ‘The Artistic Mode of Revolution: From Gentrification to Occupation’ published by the online art journal *E-flux* (2012). Occupy activists were invited by to take part in the 7th Berlin Biennale of Contemporary Art in 2012, which was curated by Artur Żmijewski. There are many more examples requiring a separate, more systematic study.

Interesting things happened in the theatre world as well. In many places around the world art activists decided to vindicate public theatres, believed to be an important part of the common wealth, and attempted their occupation by transforming them into institutions of the common. The best known examples from Europe include Valle Theater in Rome and Embros in Athens (see Joanna Panagiotopoulou, ‘Embros Theatre’, in *The Occupied Times*, 2014). I’ll briefly focus on the first of them for the sake of illustration.

Occupation of Teatro Valle started in 2011 in response to the plans of privatisation of the theatre made by the municipal authorities. The historical status of Teatro Valle played an important role – it is considered a part of common cultural heritage (it was established in 1726 and has also been used as an opera house) so the idea for its privatisation provoked a public anger. The activists decided to occupy the space and to convert it into a theatre of the commons, run and supervised by a democratic collective. They expressed their political position in a statement posted on their web page: ‘We are interested in commons, mutualism, co-working and we would like to base all the actions on the quality of relationships. We believe in a world built on bottom up quality processes’ (Jay Walljasper, ‘Theater Belongs to the People: Occupying Rome’s Teatro Valle’, 2014).

The experiment proved successful in terms of keeping the theatre open and providing it with a quality programme. As it was once observed by Igor Stokfiszewski, what proved to be the most difficult was devising a new, participatory, and democratic way of creating stage content. Not in terms of allowing people to influence programming by having their say in who gets to put what on stage, but in terms of actual artistic creation. The former was successfully realised, the latter, despite some experiments, was not fully satisfying and never really worked. Despite a progressive, participatory organisational form, most of the actual artistic

content, although democratically programmed, was traditional and individual realisations.

It is a paradoxical development. Despite a romantic vision of artistic creation as utterly individual, every creative act is in many respects collective. It can only happen in a network of communicating singularities, where ideas get elaborated in a circulation among a number of subjects, hence the importance of milieus and groups for artistic creation. However, it looks like these new artistic creations, although generated by a multitude, can be realised in the most interesting form only by separate individuals. It makes art similar to football, where goals come as a result of collective effort, but can only actually be scored only by individuals. Interestingly enough, it is not the only resemblance between art and sport, as both domains function according to the rule of 'the winner takes all': the gap separating the best from the mediocre is much wider than the one between, let's say, the best and just ordinary plumbers, taxi drivers, teachers, and even academics. It may be the key condition to explain failed attempts at participation in artistic creation, this is, however, a separate issue requiring its own investigation.

### **Making participation work: workers democracy and participatory budgeting**

The Occupy movement is neither the first nor maybe even the most important example of participatory practices, so I'll briefly ponder two lesser known forms of progressive participation: workers' democracy and participatory budgeting.

The idea that the workplace should be collectively controlled by the workers is very old, actually older than the industrial production that it is usually associated with. The first known attempts to enact workers' democracy – control over both day to day functioning of a given organisation and of distribution of profits deriving from undertaken activities – were introduced on... pirate ships! However strange it may sound to our righteous ears, pirates were the first to systematically introduce very participative and democratic management of their workplaces: on many vessels, captains were elected and important decisions outside of the battlefield had to be taken by majority voting including the crucial question of how to split the loot (see Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic*, 2000; and Peter Lamborn Wilson, *Pirate Utopias: Moorish Corsairs & European Renegades*, 2003). As a result, pirate communities were quite equal on a material level:

‘management’ of the ship – meaning the captain and his (or hers, as pirates were also progressive when it came to gender and accepted women within their ranks, even as captains) aids – could receive a maximum of twice the amount given to a regular crew members.

The workers’ control had been enacted and tested on many occasions in more ‘standard’ circumstances. It proved practical and efficient in purely material terms. Many factories owned and controlled by workers functioned at least as efficiently as they did before in private hands. The most famous examples are probably the Zanon ceramic factory on the outskirts of Buenos Aires in Argentina and the Flasko chemical plant near Campinas in Brazil (see Esteban Magnani, *The Silent Change: Recovered Businesses in Argentina*, 2009; and Avi Lewis and Naomi Klein (dir.), *The Take*, 2004). They sometimes produce cheaper products and always provide better wages for the workers, however the benefits go far beyond the question of income. A very important aspect of participation is a liberating feeling of agency among workers that leads not only to better performance, but also to their healthier psychic functioning. They do not feel alienated and even if they have to make sacrifices to keep the factory running by working overtime or earning less for the sake of necessary investments, they feel it is their decision that would also benefit them in the long run.

The practice of participatory budgeting is a form of progressive participation being implemented in many cities around the world, however mostly in its very limited form, where only a small fraction of city’s budget is distributed via participatory mechanisms and citizens’ projects even if voted for realisation can always be cancelled by the city administration as ‘unfeasible’ or ‘undesired’ for some reasons (for example, many cyclists’ initiatives in Warsaw were struck down despite being voted as harmful for the circulation of cars).

The broadest experiment with participatory budgeting has been undertaken in the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre since late 1980s, where most of city’s budget was shaped in a participatory way. A process of long and complicated negotiations is starting in neighbourhoods and goes through districts, ending on a city-wide level. The potential investments are first put forward by citizens themselves and later voted by them. The endeavour includes representatives but they are bound by instructions from their constituencies in the way described earlier in this text (see Yves Sintomer, Carsten Herzberg, and Anja Röcke, ‘Participatory Budgeting in Europe: Potentials and Challenges’, 2008). Any experts involved in