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## Review

# The democratic sublime: On aesthetics and popular assembly

Jason Frank,

Oxford University Press, 2021, xi-255 pp,

ISBN: 978-0190658168

*Contemporary Political Theory* (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296-023-00614-8>

Jason Frank's *The Democratic Sublime: On Aesthetics and Popular Assembly* is a beautifully written, elegantly organized book that powerfully counters what Frank calls the 'tales of democratic disenchantment' told by many democratic theorists. According to this influential account, which finds its clearest articulation in Jürgen Habermas's work, the democratic age dismantled the dazzling aesthetics of monarchical authority that created passive subjects captivated by the spectacle of power, replacing it with a deliberative public composed of 'free and equal ratio-critical citizens' (p. 73). As Frank convincingly demonstrates, this familiar narrative fails to account for how the replacement of the personal rule of the king with the self-rule of the people created the need for, in Sheldon Wolin's words, 'new images and mythologies of collectivity', and a new aesthetic sensibility (p. 69). Accordingly, contemporary democratic theory ignores a central question that occupied both the theorists and actors during the age of democratic revolution and continues to haunt modern democratic theory today, namely the question of 'how to image and envision the people as a collective actor' (p. 25).

What makes Frank's approach to this 'aesthetic' question so unique is his turn to popular assembly as a distinctive mode of democratic representation. It is in and through revolutionary crowds and popular assemblies, Frank argues, that 'the people' manifests its collective power and makes itself tangible to the senses, 'while also and at the same time remaining ineffable and forever transcending any given form' (p. 14). For Frank, this dynamic tension both lends popular assembly its uniqueness as a site of democratic representation and helps us understand the significance of the frequent references to 'the sublime' in the political discourses of the French Revolution. For both Immanuel Kant and Edmund Burke, Frank writes, 'the sublime involved an encounter with the ineffable and posed the central question of how that which is beyond our sensory gap...can nonetheless be presented *through* sensory and aesthetic representation' (p. 14). In this regard,



when the people were described as sublime during this period, that description did not simply point to ‘their greatness, eminence, or majesty’ (p. 12); in the discourse of democratic sublime the people came to stand for ‘that initiatory plenitude that remains inexhaustible’ (p. 15) and their limitless creative capacity turned into a source of ‘sublime awe’, a feeling of ‘delightful horror’ (pp. 13–14).

*The Democratic Sublime*’s exploration of the aesthetics of popular assembly covers both its historical emergence as a problem of popular sovereignty and the dilemmas it continues to pose to democratic politics today. Thus the volume is book-ended with a series of discussions on theorists of modern democracy. In the Afterword, Frank offers a theoretically rich analysis that puts Jacques Rancière’s everyday theory of political subjectivization into conversation with a series of images by the contemporary artist Glenn Ligon and powerfully shows how, contrary to Rancière’s notion of democratic appearance, which refers to political actors opening up a new world where they can no longer be ignored, protests that operate within the framework of democratic visibility ‘can work to sustain the dominant distribution of the sensible even as they contest it’ (p. 197).

In Chapter 1, Frank opens by arguing that both Carl Schmitt and Claude Lefort recognized the aesthetic dimensions of the role that popular assemblies played as manifestations of popular will, only to translate the problem of manifestation that they identified so deftly to a political theological problem of incarnation. This chapter’s engagement with Lefort shapes much of the conceptual framework of the rest of the book. Frank agrees with Lefort that in democracies the locus of power remains an ‘empty space’ where ‘no single group or individual can claim to wholly embody the people’s power’ (p. 34). And while he appreciates Lefort’s emphasis on the ‘challenge of figuration’ that is at the heart of modern democracy, Frank also finds that Lefort’s concern regarding democratic terror has led him to approach all mass assemblies as dangerous enactments of the ‘incarnational logic’ of the People-as-One (p. 35). Rejecting this theoretically too quick move that turns an aesthetic-political problem into a theological one, in the remaining chapters Frank investigates both the historical dynamics of popular manifestation and how individual theorists, namely Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Burke, and Alexis de Tocqueville, addressed the dilemmas that popular assemblies gave rise to at the time of the people’s revolutionary triumph.

These middle chapters of the book are exceptionally effective as they seamlessly alternate between ones on single theorists and those that offer broader historical/theoretical overviews of how popular assemblies came to be considered sublime manifestations of the people’s authority. Frank’s analysis begins with a presentation of Rousseau as a foundational figure whose idea that the people ‘come to grasp itself as collective actor’ through the practice of collective assemblies was enacted in myriad ways during the transition from royal to popular sovereignty (p. 68). In Frank’s reading, Rousseau’s lawgiver is ‘the unrecognized condition of the people’s emerging sense of autonomy’ (p. 55); for the art of the lawgiver involves



staging collective assemblies while hiding his own artifice, to provide to an inchoate people with an aesthetic education which elicits a sensation of delight in experiencing oneself as a part of ‘a unified and empowered collectivity with a common will’ (p. 63). Chapter 4 traces the development of Burke’s conception of the sublime; it also shows how he, unlike many of democracy’s most ardent supporters, could discern that ‘emerging democracy too...elicited the popular imagination’. For Burke, ‘the self-regarding spectacle of a people...beholding their own democratic capacities for willful innovation and being further enlivened by that sight was the threatening essence of the radical democratic sublime’ (p. 120). Chapter 6 shows how despite his acknowledgement of ‘the mysteriously ineffable springs of collective action’ which escaped representation (p. 173), Tocqueville insisted on denying ‘the people’s collective acts of any grandeur’ (p. 157).

While these exegetical chapters are impressive, the book truly comes alive in the overviews presented in Chapters 3 and 5, where Frank examines different popular representations of the ‘appearance of popular sovereignty at key moments of its emergence’ whether in the form of visual depictions of popular will during the French Revolution or through ‘the poetics of the barricades’ in the nineteenth century. In these chapters, Frank elaborates his compelling point that far from immediate expressions of popular will, ‘crowds, assemblies, and mobs’ are ‘potent and living’ political representations, whereby a relatively small number of ‘individuals physically gathered in a public space—whether it is called Tahrir, Zucotti, or Taksim—can be understood to speak and act on behalf a...forever disembodied entity called people’ (p. 70).

But, of course, each of these ‘sublime expressions’ of popular will has an ‘uncanny’ double, to use another aesthetic term that is, like sublime, ‘not restricted to theory of beauty’ (Freud, 2003, p. 123). While appearing like the earlier instances of insurgent public assemblies, whose vitality they seek to harness through mimicry, these mass collectivities do seek to fill the empty space of power with an image of a unified people with a single will. Consider, for instance, the massive popular protest that preceded the military coup in Egypt in 2013, or the 2016 ‘Democracy Watches’ that set the stage for Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s authoritarian rule in Turkey. The issue here is not as clear cut as the difference between the living of image of the people that bursts any given representation versus ‘party rallies, torch light parades’ (p. 36). And while Frank is correct that we should not let the fear of ‘democratic totalitarianism’ prevent us from investigating the aesthetics of popular assembly, it is also important for democratic theorists to ask what makes certain popular manifestations a part of the ‘contested economies of *democratic* representation’ (p. 40, italics mine) as opposed to authoritarian ones.

The answer to this question may lie in giving an account of the rich, varied, and creative practices that enable people to act together or, as Frank writes, in exploring ‘how political capacities for collective configuration emerge from within the simple fabric of our everyday lives’ (p. 204). But I wonder if undertaking such an



exploration requires a different aesthetic sensibility than the one offered by Burke's sublime with its emphasis on the delightful horror one experiences in the face of the grandeur of 'an epochal event of a Revolution' (p. 204). What makes art so revelatory, Marcel Proust writes, is not that it takes us to strange lands but that it helps us 'to possess other eyes, to see the universe through the eyes of another, of a hundred others, to see the hundred universes that each of them sees' (2003, p. 343); perhaps only such an aesthetic sensibility, which invites us to perceive the world with the senses of others, can bring to light, rather than erase, the self-organizing practices of ordinary people in spontaneous popular assemblies, thereby revealing the 'magic' in what appears to be mundane and familiar.

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