American Dramaturgies

For the 21st Century

Julie Vatain-Corfdir (ed.)

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If all the world is a stage (as the title of this series supposes), the stage of the 21st century must be a site of remarkable anxiety—at once global and splintered, intensely up-front and relentlessly mediatized, ever fragmenting the collective and seeking to build it anew. How can theater, an art of intimate presence, rethink its aesthetics and reassert its mission on such a stage? More specifically, how have American dramaturgies chosen to engage with our new millennium? Relying on a broad understanding of "dramaturgy" as a dynamic process, this book explores some of the inspiring trends and arresting innovations of contemporary theater in the US, investigating both playwriting and performance-making in order to delineate formal experiments, the imprint of socio-political themes, and new configurations in spectatorship.

The chapters of the present volume delve into various aspects of theater-making, from courses in playwriting to controversies in casting or discussions about the democratic function of theater. The wide range of examples studied include development practices at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center, the work of experimental companies (Ping Chong + Company, The Industry, New York City Players), and many plays by contemporary authors (Clare Barron, Jackie Sibblies Drury, David Levine, Charles Mee, Dominique Morisseau, Sarah Ruhl, Andrew Schneider, Paula Vogel, Mac Wellman). Conversations with Young Jean Lee and Richard Maxwell add the playwright's viewpoint to the prismatic perspective of the volume, which is dedicated to performances in the US but written from a decidedly international angle, thus implicitly querying what makes up the American identity of this rich body of work.

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SUP
Maison de la Recherche
Sorbonne Université
28, rue Serpente
75006 Paris

tél. : (33) (0)1 53 10 57 60

sup@sorbonne-universite.fr

https://sup.sorbonne-universite.fr

PART III

The Pursuit of Community

ON NEOCLASSICISM: THEATROCRACY, THE 1%, AND THE DEMOCRATIC PARADOX

Pierre-Héli Monot
Ludwig Maximilians University of Munich

During the December 2018 upheavals in France, major public and private theaters in Paris, such as the Théâtre de la Ville and the Théâtre du Rond-Point, cancelled their program and closed their doors to the protesters. The ancient conception of the theater as a place where the audience could deliberate and practice its democratic competences seemed far remote, especially given the protesters' avowed need for a collective discussion and collective clarification of their political aims, and their need for locations where this could occur.[1] However unfortunate, and however rationally motivated, the decision to shut down and exclude was hardly surprising, for much of the institutional, Western theater circuit has taken a sharp turn toward a monological, authoritarian conception of democratic culture, while at the same time expressly invoking an often ill-assorted compound of democratic, socialist, and libertarian ideals. This shift is observable in other major European cities, too. In Berlin, for instance, the ongoing transformation of major institutions such as the Berliner Ensemble and the Volksbühne into profitable enterprises has brought about a string of highly publicized lawsuits, which in turn sparked a string of candid declarations according to which a "more diverse" and "younger" program would constitute a sufficiently robust opposition to "capitalism."[2] Also, the current intersection of politics and theatrical practice has mostly been discussed in light of the adoption of performative or histrionic techniques by politicians, hence almost completely overshadowing the way explicitly democratic theatrical productions actually use the idea of democracy as an aesthetic and political device.

In what follows, I would like to trace the perennial democratic horizon of the theater back to a dilemma whose resolution Plato considers to be one of the conditions of possibility of sustainable democratic life. I will then discuss one of the most frequently

1 See: Evelyne Pieiller, "Théâtre des émotions", *Le Monde diplomatique* (blog), December 10, 2018.

2 See: Christine Dössel, "Was für eine kleinmütige Entscheidung der Berliner Kulturpolitik", *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, June 13, 2019.

staged plays of the post-2008 era, Howard Zinn's neoclassical, or neo-Sophoclean *Marx in Soho* (premiered in 1995), and argue that much of the purportedly autonomist intention of post-financial crisis aesthetics confirms, rather than infirms, one of Plato's most insidious arguments against popular rule. That this situation is regrettable should go without saying.

AUTONOMY AS A PUN

The philosophical tradition has long punned on the various uses and semantic layers of "nomos." *Nomos*, as a "law," a "territory," or a "limit," features prominently in some of the crucial entries in the philosophical lexicon, "autonomy" being perhaps the most contentious and ancient one of them. In the *Laws* (Νόμοι), for instance, Plato points

out a more uncommon meaning of *nomos* in order to discuss the relationship between rationality and normativity in the orderly political city: *nomos* as "song," "melody," or "tune." In 700 a–d, Plato famously lays out the reasons why corruption befell the political and aesthetic norms of a once orderly political community:

> Anthenian Stranger – [...] Among us, at that time, music was divided into various classes and styles: one class of song was that of prayers to the gods, which bore the name of "hymns"; contrasted with this was another class, best called dirges; "paeans" formed another; and yet another was the "dithyramb," named, I fancy, after Dionysus. "Nomes" also were so called as being a distinct class of song; and these were further described as "citharoedic nomes." So these and other kinds being classified and fixed, it was forbidden to set one kind of words to a different class of tune. [...] It was a rule made by those in control of education that they themselves should listen throughout in silence, while the children and their ushers and the general crowd were kept in order by the discipline of the rod.[3]

This paragraph is less transparent than it may appear at first sight, for Plato makes a highly ambiguous use of the homonyms *nomoi* as "citharoedic nomes" and *nomoi* as "laws" or "enclosures." I would like to argue that this play on homonymy is unavoidable, and that this passage reveals a vastly more insidious ambiguity in Plato as to the origins of "theatrocracy" which, according to the *Laws*, brought about the corruption of laws. To paraphrase Plato, *Nomoi* or "Nomes," a particular class of songs, were called

3 Pl. Leg. 700a–d. All translations, unless otherwise noted, are from the somewhat outdated, yet standard Loeb edition: Plato, *Laws, Books 1-6*, trans. R. G. Bury, Loeb Classical Library 187, Cambridge, MA, Harvard UP, 1926, pp. 245-246.

thus because they were so distinct from other classes of songs as to appear to be *nomoi* in all *other* senses of the word too: because "Nomes" were clearly identifiable as a particular class of songs, they resembled particular "laws" or particular "enclosures." But "Nomes" were called also thus because they implied that laws ("*nomoi*") derived their existence and, to a qualified degree, legitimacy, from *song* itself. In other words, "nomes" (tunes) were not only the illustration of "*nomoi*" (laws), they were also their origin. Occasionally, Plato suggests as much, for instance in 799e ("our *nomes* ["tunes"] have become *nomoi* [laws]")[4] and in the lines that follow:

> Anthenian Stranger – [...] In the matter of music the populace willingly submitted to orderly control and abstained from outrageously judging by clamour; but later on, with the progress of time, there arose as leaders of unmusical illegality poets who, though by nature poetical, were ignorant of what was just and lawful in music; and they, being frenzied and unduly possessed by a spirit of pleasure, mixed dirges with hymns and paeans with dithyrambs, and imitated flute-tunes with harp-tunes [...]. By compositions of such a character, set to similar words, they bred in the populace a spirit of lawlessness in regard to music, and the effrontery of supposing themselves capable of passing judgment on it. Hence the theater-goers became noisy instead of silent, as though they knew the difference between good and bad music, and in place of music there sprang up a kind of base theatrocracy. For if in music, and music only, there had arisen a democracy of free men, such a result would not have been so very alarming; but as it was, the universal conceit of universal wisdom and the contempt for law originated in the music, and on the heels of those came liberty.[5]

The last sentence makes his argument explicit. The "populace" cannot judge the possible lawfulness of unmusical transgressions ("*amousos paranomia*" [700d]), yet wealthier citizens who have received an education may be more qualified to do so. A condition must be met, however: their expertise and authority must be limited to the Muses and the arts they inspire—the theater, oratory, and music itself. This condition was breached, however, and the categories by which the arts of the Muses were formerly ordered and perceived came to be dismantled. In turn, chaos spread to the political institutions of the city in the narrower sense of the term. A "theatrocracy" arose in which laws were thought to be as mutable as hymns and paens: the theater became the absolute metaphor of democratic political participation.

4 My translation.

5 Pl. Leg. 700d–701a, Plato, *Laws, Books 1-6*, *op. cit.*, pp. 245-246.

Several political theorists and classicists have described the role the theater was subsequently to play in the formation of "democratic knowledge"[6] in democratic Athens. Intellectuals more precisely devoted to the project of radical autonomy as a political regime typically discuss the theater as a place where the democratic political imaginary becomes prehensible, and where political attitudes attuned to the essentially opinion-driven nature of democratic knowledge are trained. They attribute a political function to the theater that is consubstantial not only with its mode of staging discourse and events, but also with the communicative situation it entails. Cornelius Castoriadis for instance describes how Sophoclean tragedies mobilized the members of the audience to formulate their own *opinions*—opinion as opposed to knowledge, but also as opposed to violence, as Plato suggests in the *Gorgias*.[7] The example of Sophocles' *Antigone* is archetypal for scholarship on Greek political theory.[8] Several questions arise in the midst of the audience: is Antigone acting justly when she attempts to give funeral rites to her brother against the orders of the King, Creon? Is "natural"[9] or filial law above political law? Does this natural law turn out to be just another political law after all? On which grounds, then, is Antigone's political law more legitimate than Creon's? Is Antigone guilty of having tried to pass off her political law as a question of imperative familial duty? Is this a worse crime than letting a corpse rot in the sun? Or again, is this a worse crime than breaching kingly law? Can both Antigone and Creon be right at the same time? In this radical democratic model, the audience ponders these questions as what Plato denounces as "noisy," rather than "silent" theater-goers; doing so, they develop their ability to participate in Athenian democracy as reflexive political actors.[10]

6 Josiah Ober, *Political Dissent in Democratic Athens: Intellectual Critics of Popular Rule*, Princeton, Princeton UP, 2001, p. 33. See also: Juliane Rebentisch, *Die Kunst der Freiheit: Zur Dialektik demokratischer Existenz*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 2014, pp. 69-76. Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2008, pp. 130-167.

7 Cornelius Castoriadis: "Anthropogonie chez Eschyle et autocréation de l'homme chez Sophocle," *Les Carrefours du Labyrinthe*, vol. 6, Paris, Seuil, 2009, pp. 17-42. See also: Cornelius Castoriadis, *La cité et les lois, Séminaires 1983-1984: Ce qui fait la Grèce*, Paris, Seuil, 2008, pp. 71-90.

8 See also: Michael Pauen, Harald Welzer, *Autonomie: Eine Verteidigung*, Frankfurt am Main, Fischer, 2016, pp. 70-80.

9 Very generally, see also: Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1965, pp. 120-164.

10 See also Hallward's discussion of Rancière's often muddled attempts at rephrasing theatrocracy in radical democratic terms: Peter Hallward, "Staging Equality: On Rancière's Theatrocracy." *New Left Review*, vol.37, 2006, pp. 109-129.

The suggestion that Plato's argument is a constructive contribution to, rather than a radical critique of the democratic system is in line with a tendency in Plato scholarship that has gained visibility in recent decades.[11] Following this line of reasoning, Plato points out that any democracy which rejects the primacy of philosophy as a legislative instrument must deal with the consequences of publicly disclosing the aesthetic, or at the very least non-philosophical origins of *nomoi*. Disclosing the independence of a just political order from both philosophical inquiry and metaphysical (or more plainly: God-given) normative orders hence forces the political community to come to terms with its alleged consequences: the destruction of the political city. Democratic cities must hence develop a *politics* of the publication and democratization of paranomic knowledge. Every democratic society must develop a *politics* of "autonomy", that is a politics of the institution of laws by the legal and extra-legal (for instance: musical or theatrical) practices of the *polis* itself. This politics must both preserve and authenticate the knowledge of the non-philosophical origins of laws and make sure this knowledge does not spread to all segments of the population and to all domains of political life.[12] Plato's understanding of democratic law-making, or democratic *nomothetics*, is, I take it, one that inevitably leads to instituting a dialectics of partly showing and partly hiding the power of the citizens to institute the new measures by which they will henceforth live politically.

FROM DELIBERATION TO CONSENT

How explicitly and openly can a democracy admit to itself (or "institute explicitly," in Castoriadis's terms)[13] its own dependency on radical autonomy as its only way of instituting rules and expectations of behavior? To which degree can the knowledge of the fundamentally paranomic, that is, extra-legal (for instance: musical, doxic, theatrical, or democratic) nature of autonomously instituted laws be made public? These questions, which Plato hints at and tacitly admits on theoretical grounds (because any democracy must come to terms with their implications) while rejecting them on account of them not being correlated to the nature of just laws (because laws that are *consistently just* cannot be the product of "tunes"), benefit from being rephrased

11 Ober, *Political Dissent in Democratic Athens*, pp. 156-247.

12 On this point, see: Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1998, pp. 22-78, as well as: Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2003, pp. 132-140.

13 Or: "institute itself explicitly." Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1987, p. 215

in the terms chosen by Plato in the text of the *Laws*: the theater, theatrocracy, noise, liberty, and contempt.

Since the global financial crisis of 2007-2008, several peripheral American and European theatrical productions have been brought back to light on the college circuit and, in turn, on major stages. Such a structure of mutual authentification and legitimation, of which Zinn's *Marx in Soho* is a paradigmatic example, is well-established: while major public or private theaters bestow official and financial recognition on student productions, the college circuit bestows "civic" or "political" legitimacy on major theaters and their criteria of consecration. Many of these student plays or—equally importantly—many of these plays intended to be staged by students expressly intend to rejuvenate the Sophoclean conceit of a participatory, deliberating audience keen on developing its doxic, democratic competences. Despite their often flamboyant professions of faith in radical democracy and anticapitalist activism, these productions are especially enlightening in terms of their conceptual contradictions.[14] Some productions for instance invite the audience to express its opinions, value-judgments, and choices of plot-development by way of digital interfaces handed out before the show;[15] in such examples, the classical mode of dramatized democracy, as described by Castoriadis, is relocated within the framework of spectacular liberalism: the political horizon at work on stage commutes democratic deliberation into a permanent survey, hence confirming Paul Kellogg's near prophetic insights (1912) into the ultimate transformation of democracy into governance through the emergence of a survey and surveillance culture.[16] Another, perhaps more insidiously monological, antidemocratic tendency in expressly democratic, neo-Sophoclean theater can be outlined by taking the example of a patently antidemocratic staple of the college campus circuit: Howard Zinn's *Marx in Soho*, which nevertheless invokes the specter of a deliberating, reflexive "people." Zinn is the best chronicler of his own play's popularity:

> [...] it was performed in 1995 in Providence, Rhode Island, and then in Washington, D.C. Since then it has been staged in several hundred venues in the United States, performed variously by Brian Jones, Jerry Levy, and Bob Weick. In 2009 it was performed at the Central Square Theater in Cambridge, Massachusetts, directed by David Wheeler. Translated into Spanish, French, Italian, and German, it has played in

14 See also: Bradley J. Macdonald, *Performing Marx: Contemporary Negotiations of a Living Tradition*, Albany, State UP of New York, 2006, pp. 4-12.

15 For instance Rimini Protokoll's *Best Before* (2010).

16 Paul U. Kellogg, "The Spread of the Survey Idea", *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science in the City of New York*, vol. 2, no. 4, 1912, pp. 1-17.

a number of European cities, as well as in Havana and other venues in Latin America. After being translated into Greek it was done in various cities by the distinguished Greek actor Aggelos Antonopoulos and directed by Athanasia Karagionnopoulo. I was invited to Athens in 2009 to see the performance, before an audience of a thousand, at the University of Athens. [17]

A one-person play with a single scene (in itself a generic staple of the post-2008 circuit and of spontaneous street-performances, [18] as well a prime device for monological politics), the play involves minimal staging costs and is hence primed for performances in the shackles of austerity. The play recounts biographical anecdotes about Marx, brings Marx back to life in the early 2000s, repeats a few basic tenets of Marxist doctrine, and concludes, in its final line, with the second-coming of Marx: "Christ couldn't make it, so Marx came." Needless to say, nothing of the sort has happened in Greece in the last decade, with the exception of the punitive effects which economic austerity and Christian ethics sometimes have in common. [19] Despite its certain aesthetic failings and an archaic conception of the relationship of Marxism and radical democracy, the play is noteworthy for its early use of the rhetoric of the 1% that became central in the Occupy Wall Street movement a decade later:

> Karl Marx – All right, let us say only a hundred people in world history have ever understood my theory of surplus value. But it is still true! Just last week, I was reading the reports of the United States Department of Labor. There you have it. Your workers are producing more and more goods and getting less and less in wages. What is the result? Just as I predicted. Now the richest one percent of the American population owns forty percent of the nation's wealth. And this in the great model of world capitalism, the nation that has not only robbed its own people, but sucked in the wealth of the rest of the world. [20]

Symptomatically, the play identifies the 1% as a *national* group, and at the expense of Marx's internationalist paradigm, while still nodding towards "the rest of the world"

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17 Howard Zinn, "Introduction", *Three Plays: The Political Theater of Howard Zinn*, Boston, Beacon Press, 2010, p. xi.

18 Marcel Spaumer, Bernard Odendaal, "Die eenpersoondrama as (steeds ontluikende) subgenre: 'n skets van sy ontwikkelingsgang en kenmerke", *LitNet Akademies*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2018, pp. 162-208.

19 For an (often implicit) reformulation of Weber's thesis, see: Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, London, Verso, 2005, pp. 482-528.

20 Howard Zinn, *Marx in Soho: A Play on History*, *Three Plays: The Political Theater of Howard Zinn*, Boston, Beacon Press, 2010, p. 129.

as belonging to the 99%, forming an international order of magnitude that, nominally, is on purportedly equal terms with the US-American national 99%. In recent years however, economists and financial institutions across the political spectrum[21] have pointed out that the income of the Western "middle-class"—that is, the income of the typical audience in a university theater, either in terms of factual salary or in terms projected salary expectations—is sufficient in order to belong to the *global* 1%, and hence participate in what Zinn calls "suck[ing] the wealth of the rest of the world."[22] Simultaneously, such comparisons between national, international and global figures are routinely drawn on in order to muddle otherwise evident class antagonisms and the growing income inequalities within Western societies.[23] Yet these reservations, enlightening as they might be as to the political callowness of Zinn's conception of a global opposition to capitalist exploitation, miss the essential mark set by the classical conception of "theatrocratic" autonomy referenced throughout *Marx in Soho*. Zinn, for instance, conjures up *Antigone*'s classical disposition of competing legal, or *nomic* paradigms, evoking its rotting corpses and competing territorial jurisdictions:

> Marx – [...] (*Picks up newspaper again, reads*) "Anniversary of Gulf War. A victory, short and sweet." Yes, I know about these short, sweet wars, which leave thousands of corpses in the fields and children dying for lack of food and medicine. (*Waves the newspaper*) In Europe, Africa, Palestine, people killing one another over boundaries. (*He is anguished.*)
>
> Didn't you hear what I said a hundred and fifty years ago? Wipe out these ridiculous national boundaries! No more passports, no more visas, no more border guards or immigration quotas. No more flags and pledges of allegiance to some artificial entity called the nation.[24]

Zinn's transformation, or controversion of the questions Sophocles raises in *Antigone* amounts to a form of mild epistemic blackmail. On the one hand, the urgency of producing a response to a political impasse (*Antigone*) or geopolitical crisis (*Marx in Soho*) is resolved by suspending all instituted *nomoi*—in the territorial sense of the term—and by reintroducing *rhetorically* the internationalist horizon of revolutionary

21 Facundo Alvaredo *et al.*, World Inequality Report 2018; Credit Suisse Research Institute, Global Wealth Report 2018.

22 Generally, see also: Danny Dorling, *Inequality and the 1%*, London, Verso, 2014.

23 See also: Thomas Piketty, Emmanuel Saez, "The Evolution of Top Incomes: A Historical and International Perspective", *American Economic Review: Papers and Proceedings*, vol. 96, no. 2 (May 2006), pp. 200-205.

24 Howard Zinn, *Marx in Soho*, *op. cit.*, pp. 139-140.

Marxism: "No more flags and pledges of allegiance to some artificial entity called the nation." On the other hand, the play suggests that this internationalist horizon may best be realized by instituting another *nomos*—in the sense of a conceptual "enclosure" or, in Zinn's wording, "some artificial entity"—, that is, by identifying the richest 1% of the US-American population as a target group, thus correlatively creating a homogenous, transnational group uniting the West and, I take it, the rest.

What is the audience of *Marx in Soho* given to see? The mutability of *nomoi*, their origins in harangue, but not their constitutive arbitrariness, nor their dependence on deliberation, reflexivity, contestation, and consent. Indeed, playwrights such as Zinn, on the one hand, and protest movements such as Occupy, on the other hand, have occasionally thwarted attempts at a discussion of who, precisely, "we" are, if we are not the "99%", but rather, maybe, the national upper 40% (a proposition which would be factually true with respect to the effective audience of the college circuit, with respect to a minoritarian segment of the effective participants in the Occupy Movement, and with respect to the overwhelming majority of the authors and readers of academic articles)[25] and whether, consequently, the bottom 60% are justly accounted for in Howard Zinn's *Marx in Soho* and in the Occupy Movement's rhetoric of the 1%. These numbers mean nothing in themselves, and that is precisely the point: the formation of a political opinion on such crucial questions is excluded from the realm of contemporary theatrocratic politics.

FROM CONSENT TO DECISIONISM

By excluding the question of the formation of political interest groups—or, in the jargon of what has become neoliberal governance, by excluding "identity" politics—from the object of theatrocratic deliberation, Zinn tacitly endorses the Platonic argument in favor of the exclusion of the public from an important part of nomothetic work. By forsaking the radical autonomy that remains the horizon of Sophoclean or neo-Sophoclean theater, and by conjuring political bodies that serve doubly as political universalizations (a global "we") and as forms of ideological dissimulation, Zinn's dramatized opposition to capitalist exploitation merely reinstates the monological, non-

25 The epistemological blind spots entailed by this willful self-inclusion in a global 99% have given rise to a whole critical genre that—often straight-facedly—includes the Western, highly educated middle class as a member of global subalternity. See for instance Marielle Macé's explicit references to Occupy Wall Street, Gramsci, and Castoriadis, and her outline of an ultimately politically innocuous "stylistics of existence." Marielle Macé, *Styles: Critique de nos formes de vie*, Paris, Gallimard, 2016, pp. 86-115.

deliberative politics it otherwise professes to undermine.[26] It also more consequentially forsakes the integration of democratic theater in an educational framework.[27] Indeed, if Zinn is justly suspicious of claims of political universality, he nevertheless forsakes the role democratic theater can play for the "universalization of the conditions of access to universality",[28] that is, the role democratic theater can play for the democratization of the means of access to political agency, rationality, and the effective self-description[29] of populations in Western societies, whether such self-descriptions draw on percentages or not. Such a democratic conception of the theater would entail expressly thematizing the possible political contradictions of an intranational and an international politics of inequality and redistribution (or: distribution), their possible convergence, the value and legitimacy of empirical data on wealth distribution, and the criteria presiding over the self-description and self-categorization of the audience as members belonging to a political group or "percentage" (such criteria might include political effectiveness, empirical substantiation, and the adequation of both).

In the greater context of the most visible movements for greater social justice and equality (loosely, often contradictingly, but also often unproblematically encompassing both revolutionary and reformist strains) that have emerged since the financial crisis of 2007–2008, Zinn's *Marx in Soho* hence announces a crucial shift in theatrical, or theatrocratic politics: rather than disclosing the radical *nomic* (or *musical*) origins of the law, as well as its arbitrariness and dependence on popular assent, Zinn's play provides affirmative *propositions*, that is, designates an opponent, or enemy. It also does so without pointing out that propositions of this kind are essential to monological—and hence self-contradictory—conceptions of democratic politics, and does so without offering even the semblance of grounds for deliberation or debate among citizens, that is, its audience. There is no category error in this juxtaposition of civic and aesthetic frames. While the Sophoclean tradition referenced throughout the play incites the audience to ponder the normative options presented on stage and to make a political, instrumental reading of the action *as citizens*, Zinn overturns the political premises of democratic theater; the fundamentally antagonistic and competitive nature of opinion-

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26 See also: Barbara Cassin, *Sophistical Practice: Toward a Consistent Relativism*, New York, Fordham UP, 2014, pp. 111-135.

27 See also: Teresa L. Ebert, *The Task of Cultural Critique*, Urbana, Univ. of Illinois Press, 2009, pp. 71-87.

28 I am somewhat freely adapting one of Bourdieu's most incisive aphorisms. Pierre Bourdieu, *Raisons pratiques: Sur la théorie de l'action*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1994, p. 227.

29 On this particular subject, see: Marcello Tarì, *Autonomie! Italie, les années 1970*, Paris, La Fabrique, 2011, pp. 36-50.

driven democracy is externalized or projected onto a segment of the population which is implicitly excluded from nomothetic work, that is, among others responsibilities, from the formation and definition of political bodies. By contrast and as a logico-political consequence, assent and neo-Platonic "silence" reign supreme within these political bodies. Again, the question whether such exclusions are justified or justifiable is entirely beside the point in this discussion.

It is helpful to think of this "decisionist"[30] turn in the context of the simultaneous reemergence of Zinn's play and of the recent reemergence of an explicitly "Schmittian" Left which, it should be noted in passing, shares little with the American and European Populisms of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Alternatively proposing enclosures, territories, limits, that is, *nomoi*, this particular Left has attributed an important role to the polysemy of *nomos* and, more generally, to the arts. In this tradition, rather than providing reasons for competing conceptions of what should constitute a just norm, the arts are reoriented towards providing reasons for kinds of social cohesiveness that are based on exclusion. While the explicit reference to antagonisms within specific social groups, however multiple and overlapping these antagonisms may be, is maintained under the name of "agonisms", these agonisms nevertheless resort to the kind of willful decisionism that is characteristic of Schmitt's solution to the problems of parliamentarism and consensus-oriented democracy: "This requires that we do not elude the moment of decision, and this will necessarily imply some form of closure. It might be that an ethical discourse can avoid this moment, but a political one certainly cannot."[31] In even more marked terms, this decisionist moment forsakes the need for consensus-based, rational justifications of limits and laws: "By bringing to the fore the inescapable moment of decision—in the strong sense of having to decide within an undecidable terrain—what antagonism reveals is the very limit of any rational consensus."[32]

This is surely a legitimate move—if only on account of the descriptive powers of such a decisionist political culture. Western societies are indeed the scene of violent divisions and antagonisms which, in certain cases, lack modes of resolution that are themselves grounded in consensus. Yet what counts as "rational" consensus here? And why should the deliberative rationality of democracy entail such a rigid condemnation

30 The critical literature of an important part of the "populist Left" acknowledges the Schmittian origins of the term. Schmitt discusses decisionism ("Dezisionismus" or "Entscheidungsdenken") most concisely in: Carl Schmitt, *Über der drei Arten des rechtswissenschaftlichen Denkens*, Berlin, Duncker & Humblot, 2006, pp. 20-24.

31 Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically*, London, Verso, 2013, p. 15.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

of "any rational consensus" in the first place? The Sophoclean-democratic tradition provides precisely the kind of rationalities Chantal Mouffe seems to call for. Rather than justifying the need for decisionism on account of a stale continuum fallacy—the good old "undecidable terrain" of politics and the fetishization of "norms" it engenders—, the democratic tradition grounds political decisions in collective processes to which it decides to attribute legitimacy; this, if anything, is indeed a political decision. The focus here is on the processes by which a political community may institute those *nomoi* which are best accorded with its imperatives (for instance its interests, or moral norms, or values), rather than on the decision which these processes inevitably lead to according to instituted legislative-political frameworks (majority vote, for instance). Hence, the central importance of such art forms which incite citizens to train their nomothetic abilities.

The reemergence of Zinn in this context is hence significant in more than just a literary-historical sense: it is indicative of an ongoing decline of democratic political culture among proponents of democratic ideals, as well as of the increased ease with which classical, or even classicist anti-democratic arguments gain credence among democratic audiences once these arguments are cloaked in the garb of popular rule.

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Notice

Pierre-Héli Monot is Professor of Transnational American Studies (Political Theory, Aesthetics, and Public Humanities) at the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich, Germany. He is also the Principal Investigator of the ERC Starting Grant research project "The Arts of Autonomy: Pamphleteering, Popular Philology, and the Public Sphere, 1988-2018). He has been a Visiting Fellow at Brown University (2009), Harvard University (2012-2013), the University of Oxford (2017), and King's College London (2018-2019).

Abstract

This article examines one of the most widely staged, and least discussed plays of the past 25 years, Howard Zinn's *Marx in Soho* (1995). Zinn's transparently neoclassical aesthetics, as well as his numerous references to Sophocles' *Antigone* throughout the play, jar with his authoritarian reading of the tradition of democratic theater. Beginning with a discussion of the "democratic paradox" of Plato's *Laws*, this article outlines major and still operative transformations in the democratic theater in the United States, as well as its move away from the horizon of democratic deliberation and toward democratic decisionism.

Keywords

Howard Zinn; Sophocles; Antigone; Occupy Wall Street; democracy; decisionism

Résumé

Cet article se penche sur l'une des pièces les plus fréquemment mises en scènes et les moins commentées de ce dernier quart de siècle, *Marx in Soho* de Howard Zinn (1995). Les choix esthétiques clairement néoclassiques de Zinn, ainsi que les nombreuses références à *Antigone* au fil de la pièce entrent en contradiction avec la lecture autoritaire que propose Zinn de la tradition du théâtre démocratique. Partant d'une lecture du "paradoxe démocratique" qu'esquisse Platon dans les *Lois*, cet article se propose d'ébaucher les transformations majeures et toujours actuelles du théâtre démocratique aux États-Unis, ainsi que son abandon d'un horizon délibératif au profit d'un horizon décisioniste.

Mots-Clés

Howard Zinn ; Sophocle ; Antigone ; Occupy Wall Street ; démocratie ; décisionnisme

CRÉDITS PHOTO

Visuels de couverture : *YOUARENOWHERE*, créé et interprété par Andrew Schneider, 2015 (photographie de Maria Baranova) ; Adina Verson dans *Indecent*, créé et mis en scène par Paula Vogel et Rebecca Taichman, 2015 (photographie de Carol Rosegg) ; Elizabeth Jensen dans *Eurydice* de Sarah Ruhl, mise en scène de Helen Kvale, 2017 (photographie de Jasmine Jones) ; Quayla Bramble dans *Hopscotch* créé par Yuval Sharon pour The Industry, 2015 (photographie de Anne Cusak / *LA Times*, droits réservés). Avec nos remerciements aux artistes et photographes.

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