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Recognizing the Democratic Value of the Recent Public Sphere Movements

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Abstract
The paper considers the democratic value of the recent public sphere movements—from Occupy Wall Street to Taksim Gezi Park, from Tahrir Square to Sofia. It argues that the mainstream models of democracy fail to grasp the significance of these movements and the emergent political forms within these movements due to their narrow account of politics and democracy. To fully grasp the democratic value of recent public sphere movements, we should approach them from an agonistic perspective. Once democratic politics is viewed from an agonistic perspective, it becomes possible to recognize that while expressing their critique of existing liberal democratic institutions, the recent public sphere movements contested the dominant understanding of democracy and staged an alternative vision of democracy, democratic culture, and new forms of citizenship.

INTRODUCTION

What was the democratic value of the recent public sphere movements—from Occupy Wall Street to Taksim Gezi Park, from Tahrir
Square to Sofia? Was there any constructive legacy, or were the protestors in each engaged in a futile as well as pointless exercise? To fully grasp the democratic value of the recent public sphere movements, we should approach them from an agonistic perspective. Once democratic politics is viewed from an agonistic perspective, it becomes possible to recognize that while expressing their critique of existing liberal democratic institutions, the recent public sphere movements contested the dominant understanding of democracy and staged an alternative vision of democracy, democratic culture, and new forms of citizenship. Mainstream models of democracy therefore fail to grasp the significance of these movements and the emergent political forms within these movements, because their accounts of politics and democracy tend to be too limited in scope.

The recent protest movements—from Occupy Wall Street in the United States to “Dance with Me” in Bulgaria, from Gezi Park in Turkey to Tahrir Square in Egypt—challenged the dominant understanding of democracy and sought a re-definition of the concept by reintroducing public spaces, active citizenship, and democratic engagement. Occupying the streets, the squares, and the public parks, the people brought to our attention the global crisis of representative democracy. The protesters expressed their democratic demands and requested a more participatory democracy. The protesters’ call for linking the political public space with the political system has been ignored by their governments. Perceiving the idea of bringing the public back into democracy as a problem, the political and economic elite characterized the protesters as looters, fringe extremists, marauders, and enemies of democracy. The dominant political discourses that promote ballot-box democracy marginalized the protests while the police immediately took action to contain and discipline the protestors.

Appreciating the significance of the recent public sphere movements for democracy allows us to recognize the democratic value of the emergent political forms within these movements. In what ways do the recent public sphere movements contribute to existing democratic ideas? How should we understand the democratic value of the new repertoire of political performances staged in recent protests? I suggest that the mainstream approaches to democracy—Schumpeterian leadership democracy and Habermasian deliberative democracy—fail to recognize the democratic value of protests that have occurred all over the world. Overly occupied with various dimensions of institutional politics such as democratic procedures, rationality and legitimacy, self-interest and party politics, these models of democracy rest on an understanding of politics that is too limited in scope to recognize the significance of disruptive and expressive political actions and political performances in public spaces. The failure to understand the democratic value of the recent movement therefore contributes to their marginalization.

To grasp the democratic value of the recent public sphere movements and the emergent protest forms within these movements, we should approach them from
an agonistic democratic perspective. Once democratic politics is viewed from an agonistic perspective, it becomes possible to recognize that the recent public sphere movements and the emergent political practices are essential to a vibrant political democracy. In recent political movements, in addition to making their political claims, the protesters invented new forms of citizenship and fostered an alternative ethos of democracy centering on equality, civility, and plurality. Contesting common sense, developing a language of resistance, and performing an alternative vision of democracy are the most important contributions of the recent public sphere movements to democracy.

RECENT PUBLIC SPHERE MOVEMENTS AND THE EMERGENCE OF NEW FORMS OF POLITICS

A wave of demonstrations and mass protests started in Iceland and Greece in 2009. It then spread to Tunisia and Egypt and triggered a cycle of protests in North Africa and the Middle East in 2011. Simultaneously, mass protests erupted across the US and Spain. When the wave of protests seemed to come to an end, protests in Turkey erupted in May 2013. While the world was closely watching the unexpected protests across Turkey, in June 2013 mass demonstrations and anti-government protests began in Brazil and Bulgaria. Commentators disagree about whether these protests should be treated as instances of a global movement that react to a global problem or—given that each country has starkly different dynamics—whether each protest should be seen as a response to a specific situation, such as real estate bubbles; rising public transportation ticket prices; corruption; authoritarian regimes; police violence against demonstrators; and privatization of the commons. Despite the differences among these movements, however, they share two common characteristics.

The first characteristic is that, in all public sphere movements, the protesters challenged dominant forms of democracy and demanded a redefinition of the concept. Surprisingly, the protests exploded at a time when the global appeal of liberal democracy seemed to be peaking. It is not that democratic systems do not enjoy wide support of the public; on the contrary, democracy is effectively the hegemonic political regime. The issue is that the dominant form of liberal democracy has lead to a widening of the gap between the public opinion and the political system.

The gap between the public and the political system is an unavoidable weakness of representative democracy. This is why Jean Jacques Rousseau was hostile to the very idea of political representation. For Rousseau, representation of sovereignty meant surrender of moral agency since one cannot be free when one’s will is represented by another. The political assembly with its authority to legislate would be passing laws on various topics on which citizens have not agreed.
Thus, Rousseau asserted, people are only free only on the election day; once the members of the parliament are elected, a form of slavery overtakes democracy.\textsuperscript{iv} Rousseau recognizes the impossibility, however, of having direct democracy in modern societies. Declining citizen interest in politics, social-economic conditions that neither encourage political participation nor leave time for it, the inherent complexity of political issues, size and population of democracies and many other reasons could be stated to explain the necessity instead for political representation. The inevitability of political representation thus creates a gap between the rulers and the ruled. Political theorists have devised models to respond to this problem of power and legitimacy, but the problem Rousseau pointed out has never been successfully addressed. The problem has only become more acute and has now taken the form of a global legitimation crisis because of the growing gap between the public and the political elite. There is an increasing cynicism about politics, politicians and the overall political system. People do not consider themselves represented by the political system and they do not believe that they have a political voice.\textsuperscript{v} Protesters participating in the recent public sphere movements expressed their dissatisfaction with the existing democratic mechanisms and called for inclusion, equality, and the elimination of the gap between the public’s opinion and interests and the political agenda.\textsuperscript{vi}

The second common characteristic of recent political movements is the new form of politics staged during demonstrations. In addition to the conventional methods of protest, protesters occupied public spaces while using the occupied spaces as a stage for interaction, creativity, and performance.\textsuperscript{vii} Especially in the United States, Egypt, Turkey, and Bulgaria protesters have staged a new repertoire of political action in public squares, parks and streets that has challenged traditional methods of protest. These movements are grounded in physical spaces, which is why their names come from the space occupied: Tahrir Square, Gezi Park, Wall Street.\textsuperscript{viii} The movements were organized horizontally with no centralized leadership. The protesters rejected representatives and the hierarchical structure of traditional politics. The protests were accompanied by local fora where participants could freely express their concerns and share their experiences. The occupied public spaces were transformed into a collective space where protesters experienced a kind of communal life. In both Occupy Wall Street and Gezi Park protests, protesters created an autonomous infrastructure that involved a free food center, a free medical center and veterinary, a vegetable garden, a performance stage, free wi-fi, a playground, free lectures and a library. Protesters shared and exchanged blankets, medicine, books, yoga mats, gas masks, and even mobile phone chargers.\textsuperscript{ix}

The language of creativity and civility was at the core of all movements. In Tahrir Square, protestors demonstrated with books and flowers in hand, protected the shopkeepers from looters, and swept the square clean at the end of the day. When Coptic Christians celebrated mass, the Muslims formed a circle around
Christians to protect them; when the Muslims prayed Christians joined hand in a circle to protect the Muslims. In Sofia, rallies and demonstrations had a festival-like atmosphere. The protests in Sofia have become a part of the daily life of tens of thousands of citizens. People gathered in large numbers after work during weekdays and on weekends to join the protests and to socialize. Families came with their babies and strollers, others brought their dogs, and others bikes and flowers. Protesters staged yoga protests, signed songs, played music, and shouted slogans with books in hand while others staged peaceful and disruptive forms of protest. The creative and playful nature of the Bulgarian protests can be understood even from its name. The acronym of the National Security Agency in Bulgarian (DANS) is pronounced as ‘dance’ and that’s why the protesters named the movements ‘dance with me’. Taking the motto literally, many protesters danced during the protest, transforming it into a street party. In Taksim Gezi Park protests, creativity and humor were present in the songs, slogans, banners, and posters. It was a festival of satire, irony, and endless political jokes. Artistic performances with political themes such as street theatre, stand-up comedy, concerts, games, and other creative political performances were part of protesters’ repertoire of political action.

At a first glance the link between the two characteristics of the recent public sphere movements seems clear. To express their anger toward their political system and to highlight its problems, peaceful protesters occupied public spaces and staged various performances to draw the attention of the public. But, then how are we to understand the emergent forms of politics? What is political about exchanging and sharing blankets, dancing in a public square, or maintaining a vegetable garden? Are these “apolitical” practices? Do they have any democratic value beyond drawing the attention of the public? To recognize the political and democratic value of this new wave of protests, it is important to answer these questions. In the next section, I approach these questions from the perspective of two dominant models of democracy in order to show how the mainstream approaches fail to understand the democratic potential of the recent movements.

TWO MODELS OF DEMOCRACY AND THE RECENT POLITICAL MOVEMENTS

Joseph Schumpeter’s leadership democracy (or elite democracy) has been the most influential model of democracy in empirical political theory and political science since the 1940s. Habermasian deliberative democracy challenged the dominance of the leadership model and emerged as the new paradigm in normative political theory towards the end of the 20th century. When approached from the perspectives of these models of democracy, the recent protests are either
undesirable in a democracy or only instrumentally valuable. I argue that both models fail to recognize the real democratic value of the recent political protests.

POLITICAL CUSTOMERS AND THE POLITICAL ELITE

Schumpeter advanced his theory of democracy in his seminal work *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy.* In the section of the book on democracy, Schumpeter first criticized what he calls the classical doctrine of democracy and then defends his leadership model of democracy. Schumpeter argued that the flaw of the “classical doctrine” of democracy is that it is based on the idea that there exists a common good on which we may all agree. According to the classical doctrine, Schumpeter wrote, the common good is easy to define and every rational person can be made to see this common good by means of rational argument. For Schumpeter, there is “no such thing as a uniquely determined common good that all people could agree on or be made to agree on by the force of rational argument.” Different individuals and groups disagree over the most fundamental issues and the clash of ultimate values cannot be reconciled by rational argument. Even when we agree on the ends, disagreement on the means to achieve those ends persists.

The absence of a common good and the irreducible differences of ultimate values mean that conflict is permanent in democratic politics. Schumpeter’s second criticism targets the classical doctrine’s fundamental normative requirement that individual participation of each citizen in political decision-making is essential. According to Schumpeter, people are neither rational nor sufficiently informed to be able to make sound political judgments. Schumpeter noted that “even newspaper readers, radio audiences, members of a party even if not physically gathered together are terribly easy to work up into a psychological crowd and into a state of frenzy in which attempt at rational argument only spurs the animal spirits.” The ordinary citizen tends to yield to irrational prejudice and impulse in politics. What is shocking is that even the most educated is ignorant and lacks judgment when it comes to matters of politics. Thus, Schumpeter concluded, “the typical citizen drops down to a lower level of mental performance as soon as he enters the political field.”

For Schumpeter, given that people cannot be carried up the ladder of politics, citizen participation beyond voting in elections is not desirable. Democracy is not about deliberation or participation in the decision-making process; rather it should be understood as an "institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for people’s vote." According to this definition, democracy is the political mechanism for competition among members of the political elite. Democratic process understood as a competitive struggle among the elite for power
and office therefore limits the role of the people to the election of those members of the elite who will govern. The true function of the electorate’s vote, therefore, is to produce a government and acceptance of leadership. Within this framework, the role of citizens is reduced to periodically voting for and authorizing their government. Political participation beyond this is not desirable.

Seen from the perspective of leadership model of democracy, it is clear that the recent political protests are simply undesirable. Citizens (or political consumers as Schumpeter defines them) who are dissatisfied with the democratic process and their political leaders should express their preferences at the ballot box. There is no room in the elite model of democracy for disruptive political protests. To be sure, this is not to say that citizens should not have the right to protest. Schumpeter does not make that claim, but it is clear that the dominant political culture in an elite model of democracy would not be hospitable to this type of political activity. Given that the elite model is the dominant version of democracy today, it is no surprise that the protesters are characterized in a derogatory fashion as potential trouble-makers, self-destructive mobs, and extremists.\textsuperscript{xix} At best, democratic participation in the form of disruptive political protest can be seen as an unwelcome attempt to exert political pressure on the political elite and influence the political agenda. However, when it comes to the new forms of politics emerged in recent political movements, the Schumpeterian model would be silent about their democratic value. Those disruptive and creative performances are not only undesirable, but they also have no democratic value.\textsuperscript{xx}

**PUBLIC SPHERE AND DEMOCRACY**

Habermasian deliberative democracy offers an alternative to the elite model of democracy. It reclaims the radical democratic inspiration of Rousseau’s direct democracy by reintroducing the public sphere back into democracy. The normative ideal of the public sphere forms the core of deliberative democracy. According to Habermas, the deliberative democratic process is constituted by the ideal procedure for deliberation and decision-making. In this model, through rational discussion, the public sphere generates democratic opinion and enables collective-will formation, which, in turn, channels the use of administrative power in the specific directions.\textsuperscript{xxi} In addition to periodic elections which provide a formal mechanism for controlling state authority, the deliberative democratic process serves as the basis for self-governance by providing citizens an informal way of criticism. The institutionalization of opinion generated in the public sphere through rational discussion allows the public to criticize and control the political authority informally.\textsuperscript{xxii} Political legitimacy is bound to opinion generated and worked out rationally and democratically in the public sphere. As Habermas notes, the normative expectations connected with deliberative politics
are primarily placed within that sphere. Within a democratic framework, it mediates between the state and society as a vehicle of public opinion.

Habermas describes the public sphere as a network of communicative structures for sharing “information and points of view (i.e., opinions expressing affirmative or negative attitudes)." In this process, “the streams of communication are filtered and synthesized in such a way that they coalesce into bundles of topically specified public opinions." Habermas then draws a distinction between weak and strong publics. Weak publics refer to “publics whose deliberative practice consists exclusively in opinion formation and does not encompass decision-making” whereas a strong public “encompasses both opinion formation and decision making.” Drawing on this distinction Habermas describes the weak public, which is placed at the periphery of the political system, as the vehicle of public opinion. The function of the weak public is to signal the problems that need to be dealt at the political system since they cannot be resolved elsewhere. The weak publics function as a sounding board for problems: “a warning system with sensors that, though unspecialized, are sensitive throughout society.” Besides detecting and identifying problems, weak publics must convincingly and influentially thematize those problems. The dramatization of political problems would enable the parliamentary bodies to consider and deal with them. Parliamentary opinion and will-formation must be sensitive to the informal contexts of communication embedded in the weak publics. A rational will-formation can come out of the democratic process only if the arguments, opinions, and issues that developed in the public sphere can permeate through to the organized opinion-formation. The legitimating force of the democratic process is grounded by the rational treatment of political questions. In this process institutionalization of procedures (and the presuppositions of communication) is the guarantee for the rational acceptability of the outcomes since this institutionalization enables the political public sphere to fulfill its functions. The interplay between the strong publics as the medium for political will-formation and the weak publics is the source of the normative expectation of rational and thus legitimate democratic outcomes.

Given the centrality of the political public sphere and, in particular, weak publics in the deliberative democratic process, one might expect that deliberative democracy would characterize recent political protests as an indispensable part of the democratic process. From the perspective of deliberative democracy, however, although the emergent forms of protest may supplement the democratic process since they thematize and dramatize the gap between the public sphere and the political agenda, the methods protesters use to express their opinions undermine the rational character of the political discourse. Deliberative democracy prioritizes attaining legitimacy through rational opinion formation which is a process initiated within the political public sphere. And deliberative democracy is clear on the limitations and modes of communication that should be employed.
in political public sphere.\textsuperscript{xxix} From this perspective, the recent surge of creativity and performativity in political protest may be seen as instrumental attempts to dramatize political problems. The deliberative approach may acknowledge the instrumental value of disruptive and expressive type of contestation and expression, but, like the Schumpeterian model, it puts no democratic value on them. At most, from the perspective of deliberative democracy, we need to put up with disruptive, disorderly, and expressive political action. Once we approach recent political movements from this perspective, the democratic value of the new forms of political action has gone unnoticed. Singing in the square, reading books to the police, sweeping the square clean at the end of the day, and other political performances in public spaces thus become irrelevant and have no democratic value other than transmitting issues to political institutions where discussion and decision-making takes place.

\textbf{WHY THE AGONISTIC PERSPECTIVE MATTERS}

Agonistic democracy offers an alternative to the elite model of democracy and deliberative democracy by advancing a new vision of democracy and politics. To understand why we should approach the recent protests and the new repertoire of political action from an agonistic perspective in order to reveal their democratic value, it is necessary to demonstrate how agonistic democracy views the nature of politics, political action, and democracy. Seen from the perspective of agonistic democracy, the mainstream models of democracy rely upon a conception of politics that prioritizes the political system as the most important site of politics and view the aim of politics as the production of public policy outcomes. That’s why the mainstream approaches to democratic politics fail to grasp the democratic meaning of the new political performances staged in recent protests and fail to make room for such forms of political practices. Although the deliberative democratic model with its emphasis on the public sphere values political participation, its understanding of political action as rational deliberation oriented to understanding does not allow it to theorize the democratic value of disruptive and expressive political action.

Agonistic democracy takes seriously mainstream institutional politics while endorsing a broad conception of politics that exceeds institutional limits. The agonistic account of politics “resists the state’s organization of politics into approved spaces and formats” and “decenters the state as the owner and licensor of politics.”\textsuperscript{xxx} Agonists argue that politics is ubiquitous in contemporary life and political sites are diffused across the surface of the social.\textsuperscript{xxxi} Pluralizing the political by extending the domain of political expression and contestation to various sites and relations over the social allows for the recognition of the political potential of several everyday political spaces such as the public space,
workplace, family, religious institutions, educational institutions, sexual relations, and economic relations.

This broad notion of politics rests on an ontology of power and an account of the social. For agonistic democrats, every social order is purely contingent, incomplete, and open. It follows from this that “every social order is the result of the temporary and precarious articulation of contingent practices.” As Chantal Mouffe indicates, “all systems of social relations imply to certain extent relations of power.” Therefore, every order is political and is an expression of a specific pattern of power relations. What follows is the impossibility of separating off social as a completely distinct realm from the political. The social is simply the domain of sedimented political practices. A society cannot exist without sedimented social practices, yet these sedimented practices “are taken for granted, as if they were self-grounded” and their contingent political constitution is often concealed. These settlements, and overall the background context, exclude, constrain or encourage certain norms, standards, and identities while inevitably determining the range of acceptable interpretations of the terms of the political discourse (such as reasonable, legitimate, neutral, common good, justice, fairness, right), the permissible forms of political action, and the dominant approaches in institutional politics. For agonistic democracy, one of the main aims of political activity is to reveal the hegemonic and contingent nature of these seemingly apolitical elements—social patterns of representation, deeply entrenched values, standards of judgment, and daily attitudes—that deeply shape everyday practices. Agonistic performance by contesting the “normal” and the “naturalized” introduces the possibility of reconstructing the terms of cultural intelligibility and reservoir of meanings and thereby opens up the space for the emergence of new political subjectivities, approaches, and norms. Agonists argue that the subject of politics exceeds the laws of the state and public policies and extends to the reservoir of norms, values, meanings, assumptions, and identities that constitute the political order. Political activity takes place wherever a particular hegemony is constructed or unsettled. A democratic politics that only focuses on issues of institutional politics would inevitably neglect these more fundamental questions of politics about the background context.

For agonists, democracy provides the stage for this unending and dynamic struggle among contending identities and hegemonic projects over visions, boundaries, public standards and norms governing the political order. Agonistic democracy shifts our attention away from institutional structures to politics of everyday life. Democracy is viewed as a process that needs to be regenerated by agonistic performance. That is why, for agonistic democrats, conflict in social and political life is not a sign of imperfection, but an expression of a healthy democratic life. What is at stake is the perpetuation of the public space—the as the medium of contestation, enactment, and performance. The public and everyday spaces become important political sites where political actors stake
their claims, contest the hegemonic elements of the social, and express the unimagined and unrecognized possibilities. This understanding of democracy and political action places civil society at the center of democratic politics. Public spaces become usual spaces for unsettling the dominant hegemony, staging alternative possibilities, and expressing freedom. Within this framework, agonistic political performance has democratic value beyond the possible effects it has on the political agenda and political decision-making.

RECOGNIZING THE DEMOCRATIC VALUE OF THE RECENT PUBLIC SPHERE MOVEMENTS

The agonistic approach to democracy and politics allows for the recognition of the democratic value of the recent public sphere movements. From an agonistic perspective, the protests do not only problematize the crisis of liberal democracy, but they defend an alternative democratic regime and a broader notion of politics that does not prioritize institutional politics. In doing so, they challenge the traditional boundaries of politics, the hegemony of the elite model of democracy, and the existing structures of representation and political power. In addition to using conventional methods of protest, the new political movements expressed their alternative to the existing political order by performing the kind of democracy organization they defend, by opening up political spaces for inclusion of difference and emergence of new subjectivities, and by generating an ethos of democracy required to support a peaceful pluralistic inclusive democracy.

The organizational structure of the Occupy Wall Street movement, Taksim Gezi protests, and Bulgarian protests is a significant part of the protester’s political vision and their critique of existing democratic institutions. These demonstrations are organized by ordinary citizens who argue that the existing representative structures have failed to represent them. The point is that the political system is occupied by the political and economic elite and political parties that are distant from the ordinary people, along with lobbies whose goal is to maximize the interests of big business and thus refused the people a political voice. In these political movements, the critique of the existing hierarchical political organization and representation was accompanied by an enactment of alternative political order that challenged the hegemony of the existing form of representative democracy. The protesters rejected the hierarchical formation of the vertical organization and organized themselves horizontally. They did not have clearly designated leaders, representatives, and a specific set of demands. The protesters set up assemblies in the occupied spaces and local neighborhoods that became sites for political discussion and engagement. In these forums, every participant could express her own views and join the political dialogue. The regulating norms were openness, transparency, equality, and inclusion. The forums or platforms
continued even after the main protests ended. Ordinary citizens organized neighborhood assemblies and discussed political issues. The aim of the forums was to keep the spaces of everyday politics open for participation and expression and to demonstrate the possibility of a more inclusive and participatory vision of democracy. The organizational structure of the protests created a challenge for the traditional approaches to democratic politics. Failing to grasp that the protesters displayed an alternative vision of democratic organization, many commentators and politicians questioned the political character and efficacy of this new form of protest. Once we see these new forms of politics as counter-hegemonic struggles that challenge the dominance of one form of democracy, however, the political nature and the democratic value of organizing the protests horizontally become clear. In staging their demands and critique in a new form, the protesters redefined democratic politics by contesting the dominant understanding of liberal democracy and by staging a new order based on participation, inclusion and equality.

To fully grasp the democratic value of the recent political protests, it is also important to recognize the political spaces the protests opened up for inclusion of differences. The new political movements offered opportunities for democratization by providing the stage for minorities and marginalized groups to challenge the hegemonic norms while expressing themselves without worrying about the negative consequences. For agents and social groups who seek entry in the public realm and struggle for recognition and inclusion these safe political spaces provide a stage for visibility and expression of their experiences. The public sphere movements generated stages for performance, discussion, and interaction. In these public political spaces, agents could “manifest freely their presence and interact with each other.” Exchanging stories and sharing experiences allowed the protesters to get to know each other and forge new relationships. The interactions of the protesters at occupied public spaces—sharing food, blankets, books, medicine, and so on—should be seen from this perspective. For instance, against the backdrop of the Egyptian revolution of 2011, the respectful and cooperative interactions between the Christians and the Muslims in Tahrir Square take on a deeply political and democratic meaning that is not easily recognized by traditional notions of democratic politics. In Istanbul Gezi Park protests, participants from different ethnic, racial, sexual, religious, and political groups had the opportunities to have an open discussion about their political views, identities, and preferences. For the first time, LGBT community got to know “anti-capitalist Muslims,” Kurdish separatists expressed their desire for an independent “Kurdistan” without being penalized or booed, and transsexuals shared their bitter experiences. The point is that the new type of worldwide protests brought “the micropolitics of everyday life into the realm of democracy.” Political performances in the public opened up political spaces for the emergence of new relationships, new forms of political subjectivities, and a new democratic space.
Thus, these political movements generated a democratic ethos that is at the core of a peaceful, pluralistic, and inclusive democracy.

From the perspective of agonistic democracy, the new forms of citizenship that emerged during the protests are as valuable as the democratic ethos being formed. By performing in the public the protesters realized that they have a voice and recognized themselves as political actors and thus reclaimed their political power. Unlike the militant factionalism that dominates the political landscape today, the new political subjects that emerged in recent political movements are open to democratic engagement. The protesters rejected politics of polarization and exclusion while reminding the importance of civility and tolerance in democratic politics. This alternative form of citizenship endorses the political notions of civility, tolerance, and equality. Active citizens who seek a voice in the political arena enacted these politics virtues by performing in the public. They have used the public space as a stage “for the rehearsal of new forms of citizenship.” Seen from this perspective, what the traditional approaches to democratic politics characterize as “apolitical” practices become political acts as they generate the core values of a new democratic vision. Practices of the protesters in Sofia and Tahrir Square such as demonstrating with flowers in hand, reading books to the police and offering them water, sweeping the square clean at the end of day are examples of turning to language of civility and tolerance while rejecting the polarizing rhetoric that characterized the protesters as a mob. Similarly, playing music in front of police lines, dancing, and singing in the square, doing yoga, offering free lectures, holding sarcastic banners and signs, telling political jokes, staging political theatre in public should be seen as expression of the civil, tolerant and peaceful characteristics of these new political agents.

CONCLUSION

The recent political protests contested the widening gap between the political system and the public sphere, and the political elite and ordinary citizens. This is the democratic political moment most commentators emphasized. To be sure, exerting pressure on decision-makers, influencing the political agenda, and transmitting unrecognized issues and concerns to the political public sphere are essential parts of a healthy democracy. The agonistic perspective advanced here does not downplay the significance of collective decision-making and the institutional dimension of democracy. The point is that there is more to politics and democracy than state authority and institutional politics. A democratic politics that measures the value of political action by its effects on institutional politics cannot recognize the democratic value of the disruptive and expressive political performances and the emergent forms of political protests within the recent public sphere movements. Only when we take the agonistic perspective that envisions
democratic politics as an unending struggle over the terms, conditions, and shape of the polity, and emphasizes the significance of understanding democracy as an ethos, we can recognize the democratic potential of the recent political movements. Once we approach the recent public sphere movements and the emergent political forms within these movements from an agonistic perspective, it becomes clear that while voicing a crisis of liberal democracy, these political movements performed an alternative notion of democracy, democratic culture, and citizenship in public spaces.

The recent public sphere movements expanded existing democratic imaginaries by unsettling the common sense and challenging the “normal” understanding of democracy and by displaying the possibility of an alternative political organization. The aim of this type of performative, disruptive, and creative politics is not to win an election, but to redefine democracy and to develop a language of resistance and counter-acting by generating a democratic ethos of inclusion, plurality, civility, tolerance, and respect while opening up political spaces for the emergence of new political agents. Unlike the approaches that characterize the recent protests as “apolitical” and “meaningless,” when approached from an agonistic perspective, what we recognize is that these movements and the new forms of political protest they staged are essential aspects of a vibrant participatory democracy.

NOTES


ix Örs, ‘Genie in the bottle’, 7


xiii Göle, ‘Public space democracy.’


 xv Ibid., 251.

xvi Ibid., 257.

xvii Ibid., 262.

xviii Ibid., 260.

xix This is how those who defend ballot-box democracy characterized the recent public space movements.

xx See John Medearis, Joseph Schumpeter’s Two Theories of Democracy (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 105-106. According to Medearis, Schumpeter’s leadership model of democracy does not see any value in political participation.

xxii  Jürgen Habermas, “Public Sphere”, in Steven Seidman (ed.) Jürgen Habermas on Society and Politics (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 231.


xxiv  Ibid., 360.

xxv  Nancy Fraser, ‘Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy’, in Cheshire Calhoun (ed.) Habermas and the Public Sphere (MA: The MIT Press, 1992.), 134.

xxvi  Habermas, Between Facts and Norms. 307.

xxvii Habermas, Between Facts and Norms. 307.


xxxii  Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, Hegemony and Sociality Strategy (London: Verso, 1985) xii-134.


xxxiv  Chantal Mouffe, Return of the Political (London: Verso, 1993), 141.

xxxv  For instance, Mouffe’s hegemony centered understanding of politics accounts for the relation between the social and the political. See also Mark Wenman, ‘What is Politics: The Approach of Radical Pluralism’, Politics 23(1)(2003), 61, http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/1467-9256.00180.

xxxvi  Mouffe, On the Political, 17.


Prentoulis and Thomassen, ‘Political theory in the square’.


Göle, ‘Public space democracy’.


Göle, ‘Public space democracy’.