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THE BLUE NOTE OF DEMOCRACY

Abstract. *The article starts from the assumption that old criteria for analysing the state and perspectives of democracy – e.g. sovereign state, party pluralism, elections, representation, national identity, market economy etc. – are wholly obsolete categories that no longer have any connection to the current dynamics of democratic innovations. For these reasons, the article appropriates the jazz idiom as a convenient metaphor and discourse to highlight epistemological and methodological challenges entailed in understanding democracy. In the last part, the article indicates deeper and substantial affinities between democracy and jazz that are useful for clarifying the democratic unruliness that is often missing in current discussions on democracy. The article concludes that an entirely new approach to democracy is required, building on a new grammar, metaphors and methods.*

Keywords: *democracy, jazz, politics, representation, depoliticisation*

Introduction

In a recent reflection on the state and the perspectives of democracy, John Keane (2015) concludes that what we need in the current discussion on democracy is primarily “new thinking”. With the development and mutual enrichment of democratic ideas and practices in the last decades, the language, institutions and normative ideals of democracy have changed completely. The old criteria, such as sovereign state, party pluralism, elections, representation, national identity, market economy etc., are today wholly obsolete categories that no longer have any connection to the current dynamics of democratic innovations. This is why an entirely new approach is required, building on a new grammar, metaphors, perspectives, theories and methods themselves.

It is only through questioning the standard narration about democracy and revealing its “hidden” chapters that the idea of democracy can shake off

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the ideological dross that has gathered throughout the years of uncritically following the teleology of the “end of history” or the use of “maritime metaphors” like the ones we find in Huntington (1993/1996). It is only by understanding its universality and the common “ownership” of its history that democracy can become not only a general ideal but also a possibility for political action in various contexts. But how? Isakhan and Stockwell claim that recovering the original meaning of democracy and thereby correctly understanding its state and perspectives is possible only

[b]y encouraging people to engage with their own diverse traditions and indigenous cultures ... to recover those moments, those practices, and customs, those traditions and narratives which emulate the spirit of democracy and are already inherent in their own society. Opening awareness of the breadth of democratic forms gives people the means to deepen, strengthen and develop democratic practice and the opportunity to promulgate democracy more widely (Isakhan and Stockwell, 2012: 223).

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Tormey (2015) also concurs that the thesis about the crisis or even the death of democracy depends on our perspective. The political class understands the decline of voter turnout, the decline of political party membership, disinterestedness in institutional politics and above all complete distrust in the political elite as contours of the decline or even the death of democracy. However, it is clear that this crisis of representation does not entail less democracy, that is, democracy is not threatened by a slow demise. From the hegemonic perspective, the subaltern democracy, which is today very much alive and thriving, has never actually been seen or heard. Alongside the media explanations of apathetic and selfish citizens, we can quickly frame another/different reality – citizens who are not apathetic, but no longer wish or allow for undemocratic policies to be justified or implemented in their name.¹ This is why new citizens realise their political demands directly. New citizens do not vote, they act. They do not join political parties, but establish new networks, affinity groups, assemblies and projects. They do not wait for elections and the policies of politicians, but prefigure their political aspirations here and now. They do not follow the media propaganda because they themselves are the media (ibid.: 2).

The purpose of the article is to explore further, how is democracy to be understood today? How is democracy to be studied in order to overcome the Procrustean logic of hegemonic theories that reduce democracy to a

¹ Moses I. Finley (1996: 11) even concludes that “the indifference and ignorance of a majority of the electorate” is the main discovery of the study of Western democracies.

specific constitutional system? How is the original meaning of democracy to be rescued from theories that relate the democratic idea to the political model of the 1% based on the rule of the best or *aristoi*, political representation and, above all, a specific economic paradigm? As André Gide (1949) might have said, everything that needed to be said about democracy has already been said, but because nobody listened, everything needs to be repeated. It is only thus that we can manage to deconstruct the hegemonic accounts of democracy, which, with their refined processes of economising everyday life and especially their theological-moral explanations, lead to new and as yet undetected processes of naturalising the political. It is only thus that we can come to see that the common denominator of the countless political utterances and “scientific” theories about democracy should be sought in political agoraphobia (Dupuis-Déri, 2011) or the oligarchic notions of democracy that merely co-opt the word, but at the same time reject its content. The dark side of such doing is of course a tacit collaboration in the defense of existing socio-economic relations and the inhibition of politics, because it marginalises and trivialises the political subjectivities and forms of action found in the ontological register that rejects the establishment of sovereign power. What actually hides behind the façade of democratic formalism is a fear of the masses that can endanger the pastoral governments of the neoliberal project.

The articles in this thematic issue of *Teorija in praksa*, entitled *Democracy and the Crisis of Representation*, respond to the need to examine the modern political transformations that have accompanied – and to some extent preceded – the crisis of the hegemonic economic paradigm and simultaneously disclosed a crisis of politics *per se*. Numerous authors (e.g. Crouch, 2004; Harvey, 2007; Mouffe, 2013; Graeber, 2013; Rancière, 2014; Tormey, 2015) note that the crisis of representation, participation and legitimacy in contemporary political communities is accompanied by depoliticisation processes, which naturalise the political and thus accelerate regression into post-democracies. The thematic issue calls for a new chronotope in order to analyse the state and perspectives of democracy. We argue that to allow us to measure the ‘pulse’ of democracy we need a completely different spatial and, above all, temporal framework – i.e. not merely the context of the 2008 crisis. It is only in this way that we can demarcate democracy from the crisis of modernity and its political forms, whose persistence on nation states, sovereign territory, the hierarchies of power and people and, last but not least, the equating of *ethnos* and *dēmos* has pushed it into an irreversible crisis (Rizman, 1991).

Although the following articles reflect on democracy and representation from different perspectives and in various contexts, the overall focus of this thematic issue is on the systemic transformations and ideological

re-orientations that led to the depoliticisation of politics and *en acte* to the reconfiguration of political relations. The articles will, *inter alia*, examine the new (post-modern) political topography characterised by the crisis of (interest and political) representation, and the emergence of new political subjects and quite new forms of collective action (e.g. flash mobs). Consequently, the crisis of citizenship and political inclusion will also be addressed.

Years ago, while analysing the situation in Iraq, former US Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld pointed out there are different categories of knowledge: *known knowns*, *known unknowns*, and the most demanding and dangerous category of *unknown unknowns*.² Following the Rumsfeldian epistemological taxonomy, we might argue that our analysis of the state and the perspectives of democracy will instead be more modest: its aim is not to reveal the known unknowns of democracy or the unknown unknowns about democracy; rather, our analysis will actually be a very modest endeavour dealing exclusively with the recovery and reaffirmation of what is known and sometimes forgotten about democracy. Namely, our analysis will talk about the original meaning and purpose of democracy and its hollowing out upon the emergence of republicanism and representation.

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We nevertheless have a demanding task before us since the discussion of the known and the occasionally forgotten about democracy – starting with the very definition of democracy as the ‘rule of the people’ – will also mean an attempt at disclosing the cracks in the ideological matrix of the existing, not so easily penetrable political and economic paradigm. Such a recovering of the original meaning of democracy soon reveals that the discussion of the known knowns about democracy must actually also include the fourth category of the (un)known about democracy – the *unknown knowns* or the things we do not know we know about democracy. Put differently, in addition to the hegemonic discussions on democracy, which are in fact based on distrust of the *dēmos* or the very idea of democracy, there is also a ‘vernacular’ knowledge of democracy, which we do not detect due to its closeness, everydayness and systematic marginalisation.

The Ancient Greeks had a special name for such knowledge – *mētis*, meaning practical, local knowledge based on experience or life (Michel de Certeau thus calls it simply *arts de faire*) and is often in complete opposition to scientific knowledge about the same thing or problem. *Mētis* has no universalistic pretensions and in this regard is also more pluralistic, inclusive and open to modifications than scientific knowledge or *episteme* and partly

² *The Unknown Knowns* is the title of a documentary about Donald Rumsfeld made in 2013 by Erol Morris. The fourth category of the (un)known about the situation in Iraq was also discussed by Slavoj Žižek.

also *techné*. The last two differ from *mētis* also in the way they are organised, codified, transferred and changed. If *mētis* is local, particular and contextual, then scientific knowledge is a system of universality, standardisation and disciplinarity where there is no space for local idiosyncrasies (cf. Scott, 1998). What we have in mind in our case are of course the ideas and practices of democracy that appear in everyday life, in the pockets of resistance on the edges of the political map. For democracy is not a matter of memorising definitions, it is not a matter of an exegesis of holy texts or an uncritical following of expertise, but a matter of intuition and improvisation. It is not a matter of abstract knowledge but of concrete practice. Not a predetermined direction and rhythm but an incredible dynamics and contingency.

Excursus: 'setting the tone'

It should come as no surprise that many studies attempting to recuperate the original meaning of democracy invariably invoked the history and spirit of jazz. Of course, here we do not have in mind the musical performances or preferences of various politicians – e.g. Bill Clinton joining Lionel Hampton or Wynton Marsalis for a short session, or Barack Obama confessing in a recent *Rolling Stone* interview that he keeps Miles Davis, Charlie Parker and John Coltrane on his iPhone. What we are referring to are deeper and more substantial affinities between democracy and jazz.

Already in 1938 Thomas Mann delivered a lecture, later published as a short booklet meaningfully entitled *The Coming Victory of Democracy*, in which he argues that the aesthetics and practice of jazz best embody the democratic idea. More recently, this line of thinking about jazz continued with Ralph Ellison (1964), Cornel West (2005), Stanley Crouch (2006) and Walton M. Muyumba (2009), who argue that democracy is in fact a political manifestation of jazz. Jazz practises and develops democracy, only in a different, sonic form. Ornette Coleman, one of the giants of jazz, also admits that his 'free jazz' is a democratic experience or even a sound of democracy. When comparing jazz and democracy we can find that both build on process, play, innovation, listening and, above all, improvisation. We can argue it is not a specific musical genre or political form, but a way of life or specific attitude or approach to the world. Therefore, it cannot be reduced to rules – either sheet music or a constitution.

What, then, connects jazz and democracy? Amiri Baraka (in Magee, 2004: 166) concludes that jazz process is democratic in form: "It is about singular and collective spontaneity, and composition, both formal and *mise en scène*". Similarly, Ralph Ellison defines jazz as "an art of individual assertion within and against the group. Each true jazz moment springs from a contest in which each artist challenges all the rest, each solo flight, or improvisation,

represents (like the successive canvases of a painter) a definition of his identity: as individual, as member of the collectivity and as a link in the chain of tradition” (Ellison, 1964: 234). What defines jazz and democracy is therefore not a passive repetition of rules, but their relativisation; not the conservation of parochial identities, but political subjectivation. At the very same time jazz links improvisation with traditional materials, rebellion with respect for basic rules, originality and innovation with already defined tones and instruments, so “the jazzman must [indeed] lose his identity even as he finds it” (ibid.).

In comparison to conventional music, jazz is not performed, but ‘made’. Kerry T. Burch insists that “part of the significance of the musical idiom resides ‘in the making of jazz,’ that is, in the moment-to-moment, impossible to predict construction of beautiful sounds”. The radical essence of jazz-as-democracy does not acknowledge true or false improvisations, therefore jazz does not acknowledge hierarchisations and absolutes. *Prout* Rancière, we could add that democracy, like jazz, is defined by the complete contingency or complete absence of *arkhē*: “Democracy is not based on any nature of things nor guaranteed by any institutional form. It is not borne along by any historical necessity and does not bear any. It is only entrusted to the constancy of its specific acts” (Rancière, 2014: 97).

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As jazz is improvised through intersections of individual self-expression and collective collaboration, the democratic political process is constituted only through our self-realisation resulting from mutual cooperation. We could define both as a tension: a tension between the (historical) way things are (*natura naturata*) and the (philosophical) way things could become (*natura naturans*); between theory and praxis; between the attractiveness of a one-off act and the inevitability of a complex process; between (short-term) goals and (long-term) visions; between despair and joy; between solitude and solidarity.³ In fact, jazz and democracy both result from a redefinition of individual/community that is often missing in the canon of Western political thought, or at best is marginalised and trivialised. Recognising the ontological radicalism of jazz, Martin Williams suggests that

[j]azz depends on the individual, [but] it also depends on group cooperation. In all its styles, jazz involves some degree of collective ensemble improvisation, and in this it differs from Western music even at those times in its history when improvisation was required. The high degree of individuality, together with the mutual respect and cooperation

³ In *The Contradictions of Jazz* (2008), Paul Rinzier offers a similar explanation of the democratic impulse in jazz. According to Rinzier, jazz results from a dynamic tension between individualism and interconnectedness, assertion and openness, freedom and responsibility, and creativity and tradition.

required in a jazz ensemble carry with them philosophical implications that are so exciting and far-reaching that one almost hesitates to contemplate them. It is as if jazz were saying to us that not only is far greater individuality possible to man than he has so far allowed himself, but that such individuality, far from being a threat to a co-operative social structure, can actually enhance society (Williams, 1993: 263).

Williams stresses that the ‘Western’ political tradition builds on the uncritical reproduction of the Ancient Greek and Cartesian understanding of man as a thinking animal. In contrast, jazz ethos suggests it is possible to transcend the Cartesian dualism of mind and body since for “a jazz musician, thought and feeling, reflection and emotion, come together uniquely, and resolve in the act of doing” (ibid.). With the intersubjectivity of a jazz ensemble, jazz surpasses yet another dualism (object and subject) and offers a floating ontological and epistemological position that does not start from an atomised individual or anonymous collectivity, but is closer to the Thoreauvian idea of a “*majority of one*” (Thoreau, 2001: 212). According to Williams, jazz cannot exist without an individual – without *individual* interpretation of melody, creation of sound and articulation of emotion. But, paradoxically, it is exactly because of this that jazz also demands group cooperation, reaffirming the singularity of each individual and, concurrently, intrinsic equality of all. Jazz is therefore a philosophical and aesthetic manifestation of democracy and its collective individuality (Ellison, 1964; Magee, 2004).

Our brief ‘jazz excursus’ was necessary for clarifying the democratic unruliness that is often marginalised and trivialised in current discussions on democracy. But we also appropriated the jazz idiom as a convenient metaphor and discourse to highlight the epistemological and methodological challenges of understanding democracy (Burch, 2012: 167). What do we mean by that? If we inattentively listen to a jazz session, we might wrongly conclude that it is only noise that is connecting the ensemble, completely missing the harmony and rhythm co-created and kept alive by all the members. Max Roach, in discussing jazz as a democratic form of music and the “infinite art of improvisation” in jazz, points out that:

When a piece is performed, everybody in the group has the opportunity to speak on it, to comment on it through their performance. It’s a democratic process, as opposed to most European classical music in which the two most important people are the composer and the conductor. They are like the king and the queen. In a sense, the conductor is also the military official who’s there to see that the wishes of the masters—the composers—are adhered to, and as a musician your job may depend on how you conform to the conductor’s interpretation of the composer’s wishes.

However, in a jazz performance, everyone has an opportunity to create a thing of beauty collectively, based on their own musical personalities (in Berliner, 1994: 349).

As Saul Newman notes, political theory still has to catch up with this new terrain, since it “generally looks for visible, representative identities situated on an ontological field organized by sovereign power; it is concerned with how we are governed, or with the normative principles or constitutive logics upon which political power is founded” (Newman, 2014: 94). From that (hegemonic) position, Thelonious Monk, Charles Mingus or Art Blakey may well truly sound as just noise, while Zapatista’s *La Otra Campaña*, the *Vía Campesina* global network or the new politics of *Occupy* might merely appear like an inarticulate and opportunistic swagger. The irony is that many widely accepted theories of democracy are totally unfamiliar to the humanistic spirit of jazz – acknowledging the *declassé* elements of modern society. Also, they are unable to comprehend new localisations of the jazz/democratic process, merging jazz and democracy in multi-ethnic clubs, gay and lesbian bars, soup kitchens, alternative media, free universities, free clinics and even sex worker unionisation. The scandal of jazz-as-democracy lies exactly in its rejection of any avant-gardist logic (of a conductor or sovereign, for instance), since good jazz, like good democracy, depends on everyone involved. Lastly, both depend on the blue or melancholic note, the much needed dissonance, violation and openness of the process.⁴

Conclusion

In stressing the importance of the seemingly non-political, we closely resemble the idea of infrapolitics that, according to James Scott (1990: 184), “provides much of the cultural and structural underpinning of the more visible political action on which our attention has generally been focused”. Infrapolitics is as much a product of political necessity as of political choice so we should understand it not only as a form of political opposition in the conditions of tyranny, but, above all, as “the silent partner of a loud form of

⁴ Scott Saul (2005) refers to jazz as an extension of the idea of direct action. Adopting jazz means accepting the idea of prefigurative politics in the struggle against hierarchy and domination embodied in the liberal etiquette. “Different ensembles might represent different kinds of publics and counterpublics ... but the one assurance ... was this: that the music would not sound like the quietly humming consensus deemed normative during the Eisenhower era. To be free in a jazz context meant being part of ‘the action’—a very simple point, perhaps, but also a challenging idea for a society struggling to reconcile democratic ideals with the increasingly bureaucratic order ... Just as so many political activists in the 1950s and 1960s tried to embody a prefigurative politics ... so the musicians of hard bop gave voice to a world beyond the Cold War consensus, where everyday people might be virtuosos and provocateurs at once” (Saul, 2005: 6).

public resistance” of modern democracies. Although it is not always part of the mainstream, it is still real politics, “in many respects conducted in more earnest, for higher stakes, and against greater odds than political life in liberal democracies” (ibid.: 200). These forms of struggle are, nevertheless, still marginalized and trivialized – from the political Right and Left advocating *real* political action – as: (a) unorganized, unsystematic, and individual; (b) opportunistic and self-indulgent; (c) with no revolutionary potential/consequences; and (d) implying only accommodation with the system of domination (Scott, 1985: 292).

In the article we have argued, that to understand the original meaning of democracy, we need a cognitive transformation that Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014) perceives also as a prerequisite for any social justice. Unfortunately, we are still witnessing epistemological ignorance, a form of *epistemicide*, that strengthens the status quo and at the same time dismisses, discredits, and trivializes ideas and praxes not in line with the hegemonic epistemological position—a hegemonic notion of truth, objectivity, and rationality. Paraphrasing Arjun Appadurai (2004), we can conclude that research on democracy is a peculiar optical challenge. Many democratic innovations are namely too elusive for traditional disciplines, classical theories, and Western epistemologies, therefore the analysis must be founded on a new, more flexible epistemology and methodology.

In “Racism and the perpetual crises of representation in the American republic – From its constitution to the Trump phenomenon”, Blaž Vrečko Ilc ponders the discrepancy between the *normative* and the *actual* in contemporary representative democracies, focusing on the historical development of the United States. The article identifies racism as a constitutive feature of the American project, revealing the exclusionary character of the new republic already evident in the Declaration of Independence and its racist discourse about the Native Americans as “the merciless Indian Savages, whose known Rule of Warfare, is an undistinguished Destruction, of all Ages, Sexes and Conditions”. Vrečko Ilc lucidly examines the post-revolutionary period and the gradual subsumption of democratic sentiments under republicanism that were finalized with the new constitution and its legitimation of the slavery of African-Americans and the eradication of Native Americans. What follows is the analysis of the (post-)Civil War political and economic arrangements that once again codified and strengthened the racial segregation defining the American project. The article concludes with a brief analysis of the Trump phenomenon as the continuation of the identified perpetual crisis of racial/racist exclusion and/or hierarchical inclusion.

In “Lost in Translation: The Original Meaning of Democracy”, Žiga Vodovnik follows suit and offers a theoretical demarcation of democracy

and republicanism – i.e. political representation, elections and majoritarianism. Vodovnik warns that democracy never meant the rule of the people, but was born as an idea foregrounding the power or the capacity (*krátos*) of the people (*dēmos*). Following Jacques Rancière, he argues that democracy is neither a form of society nor a form of government, but is rather precisely the ‘ungovernable’ on which every government is based. He stresses that, although today representative democracy does seem merely a pleonasm, it has in fact always been an oxymoron. Vodovnik ascertains that a cursory overview of the main theoretical discussions of democracy in the “short 20th century” reveals that the *prima facie* very heterogeneous and mutually exclusive theories share a similar sentiment – political agoraphobia or fear of the people and the related desire to depoliticise political communities. The result are the hegemonic accounts of democracy that have recuperated merely the word, but at the same time rejected its content – that is, politics. With their refined processes of economising everyday life and especially their theological-moral explanations, they lead to new and as yet undetected processes of naturalising the political.

In “Representation in crisis and redefined citizenship in the aftermath of the 2012 Maribor protests”, Cirila Toplak relates her experiences as an activist-scholar participating in and analysing the 2012–2013 protests, in particular those in Maribor. Toplak identifies the overarching context in which the protests were emerging: the economic crisis, in which politics and democracy were being forced to redefine their position and purpose. However, Toplak concludes what the “All-Slovenian Uprisings” of 2012–2013 shared was more than just the rejection of a particular economic model. Specifically, the protests were not inspired by the narrow economic reductionism and determinism. Instead, they were placing emphasis on the crisis of representative democracy at the global, national and local levels. Although the protests came to be gradually marginalised and instrumentalised, what lingers on are the innovative forms of direct action redefining the idea of democracy and citizenship. Namely, the protests and various grassroots collectives that later emerged were able to deconstruct the hegemonic accounts of democracy in Slovenia which, with their refined processes of economising everyday life and especially their theological-moral explanations, have led to new and as yet undetected processes of naturalising the political.

The thematic issue closes with “E-participation as a technology of citizenship” in which Marinko Banjac looks at ICT, especially e-participation tools, as a possible *panacea* for the shortcomings of representative democracies. Banjac identifies a crisis of the prevailing political order – a crisis of participation, representation and, consequently, legitimacy – that calls for novel forms of governance and/or new modes of citizen participation and collaboration with government. However, Banjac warns that the practices,

tools and techniques of e-participation are always mediated by power and should be understood as a technology of citizenship. He articulates the performative dimension of e-participation, revealing the multitude of forms, directions and actors upon which power is founded. The article reframes the thesis about the crisis of citizenship – usually related to the restriction of democratic forms of organisation, especially with the decline of the welfare state – reminding us about citizens' collaboration on the exercise of power and, therewith, the often forgotten discrepancy between *potestas* and *potentia* or, expressed differently, between *Power* and the *power* that actually produces it.

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