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Editorial

Special Issue: The Political Aesthetics of Democratization Conflicts

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Struggles for democratic change around the world have become highly visible – and highly mediated – events that have moved the site of contestation from the negotiation table to public spaces. As a consequence, these struggles are no longer primarily controlled by political elites but rather by a broad range of participants who have employed new types of communication beyond the spoken word for conveying their demands, including images, sounds, performances and art. This special issue aims to ask “questions around beauty, taste, and the formal (most often visual) qualities of texts, media and material objects” (Aiello and Parry, 2015: 1) in the context of democratization conflicts. We understand democratization conflicts as phases of societal upheaval revolving around demands for – and resistance to – the democratic transformation of a country. Democratization conflicts make visible the friction between the “fundamental cultural shift that promotes new values, norms and aspirations” (Voltmer, 2019: 7) brought about by democratic transitions and the persistence of the world views, or established social and political practices, associated with the previous regime. These conflicts often lead to episodes of violent confrontation between opposing factions or between grassroots movements and security forces, which in turn may escalate into riots, sectarian clashes or even civil war, or may de-escalate and be re-articulated in a non-violent political setting.

The role played by imagery and artifacts (in the broadest connotation of these terms) in political processes has been the object of substantial scholarly attention for at least the past decade (cf. Bleiker, 2009; Sartwell, 2010). More recent literature has delved into the contribution of aesthetic practices to protest and conflict, for instance in relation to the inclusion or exclusion of migrants from the political communities of their host countries (cf. Marciniak and Tyler, 2014) and the transnational dynamics of global protest (Werbner, Webb and Spellman-Potts, 2014). This special issue focuses instead on conflicts that challenge the very nature of an existing authoritarian regime and its legitimacy, or develop as part of democratic transitions. These democratization conflicts unfold in two main arenas: the transformation of citizenship, addressing issues of participation and collective identities on the one hand; and the transformation and contestation of power, involving questions of accountability and control on the other (Veltmer, 2019: 6-14). However, even though pro-democracy uprisings can be dramatic and mobilize a large number of citizens, their outcome is by no means certain. In many cases, they have been crushed at the outset; in other instances, the transition has been hijacked by old elites who manage to exploit the process to their own advantage. Even rounds of free and fair elections rarely signal the end of conflict and contestation, particularly in countries that had previously experienced decades of authoritarian rule. Thus, the conflictual nature of prolonged, stalled or even failed transitions often provides unique insights into the intrinsic complexity of democratization processes and how they are communicated. But transitional conflicts are not only about the future; they are also about the past and its interpretation. By uncovering the brutality of the old regime, transitional justice processes aim to give voice and visibility to the victims and their suffering. At the same time, alternative narratives of the past can also become an instrumental tool to manipulate public discourse, sometimes as a point of reference for collective experiences and the formation of identities.

Throughout these contestations, aesthetic expressions provide spaces where different visions of the future and the past, values and demands can be articulated, especially when access to mainstream media remains restricted. This special issue aims to demonstrate how the analysis of the aesthetic qualities of public communication can help to better understand the dynamics and consequences of the conflicts that unfold during political transitions. What is more, the broad range of countries brought together in this special issue (including Egypt, the Western Balkans, South Africa and Indonesia) highlights the complex ways in which political aesthetic practices employ, challenge and transform the values and norms of the contexts in which they are embedded.

Political transitions often involve – indeed, encourage – the articulation of ethnic and political identities through visual art, as in the case of Egypt. By opening up the public space and providing formal or informal opportunities to participate in the political process (including through elections), democratization processes create new channels for the expression of ethnic pride or for making explicit political claims about the enduring legacies of inequality and exploitation. The analysis of the aesthetic characteristics of political communication can also shed light on how societies transitioning away from brutal colonial rule, like South Africa, define the borders between insiders and outsiders, between the members of their new polity and those who need to be excluded. In other countries and regions that have experienced ethnic wars or political unrest in the recent past, such as the Balkans and Eastern Europe but also post-colonial Asia, expressive media like cartoons, film and music can instead become a channel for articulating more subtle messages about the stalling of democratization processes, the complex reverberations of transitional justice, or the enduring legacy of corruption and social injustice. These new spaces of expression, both physical (streets, media) and epistemological (frames, narratives) often become the battleground for power struggles which can lead to new phases of open violent confrontation.

The individual contributions to this special issue shed light on the main arenas of democratization conflicts and the role that different forms of aesthetic expression play in these processes. The articles by Sorensen and Krstić, Aiello and Vladislavljević discuss episodes of conflict involving the transformation of power and accountability in two countries that experienced recent and broadly successful democratization processes – South Africa and Serbia, respectively. In both countries, the introduction of electoral democracy and the presence of democratically-elected officials were nevertheless accompanied by the perpetuation of practices that tarnished the legitimacy of the newly-established regimes and that remain the target of protest and contestation. In South Africa, the disruption of the 2015 State of the Nation Address (SONA) by members of the Economic Freedom Party (EFF), a radical opposition group, took the form of a staged counter-performance in the South African parliament. The aesthetics of this disruptive performance – Sorensen argues – exposed the hollowness of the ‘constructed’ pomposity of Jacob Zuma’s claims to power, which were marred by substantial allegations of corruption and nepotism, and attempted to establish the members of the EFF as ‘the proper owners of the liberation narrative’.

In a similar vein, the work of the Serbian political cartoonist Dušan Petričić reveals the role of satire as a tool for contesting ‘the extent and excesses of state power’ (Hammett, 2010: 5). Krstić, Aiello and Vladislavljević argue that, by using visual metaphors for ‘representing intangible, unknown, or problematic ideas and issues as more familiar’, Petričić’s cartoons focus the attention of the public on the ‘subtle ways in which authoritarian manipulation works’ and on how the elites of newly-democratized states often attempt to systematically ‘discourage citizens from engaging meaningfully in politics’. Petričić’s repeated attempts to denounce the ‘subversion of media freedom’ in his cartoons also reveal the central yet contested role of media and journalism in democratic transitions.

Other types of democratization conflicts – involving the transformation of citizenship and identity in the context of prolonged transitions, and the role of memory and retribution in transitional justice – also receive attention from this special issue’s contributors. The contested nature of ‘Egyptian-ness’ in the aftermath of the 2011 Tahrir revolution is the focus of El Gendi and Pinfari’s analysis, which discusses the visual language of religious icons by the Egyptian Coptic artist Victor Fakhoury commemorating the massacres of Christians at different stages of Egypt’s failed transition to democracy. Their unique blend of Pharaonic and Christian symbolism with politically-charged ‘hidden transcripts’ (Scott, 2010) presents ‘a narrative of national belonging’ that is ‘alternative, or at least complementary, to the one promoted by the hegemonic state discourse since 1952’, and whose anti-Muslim undertones become increasingly apparent as failure of the democratic transition opens the door for repeated episodes of sectarian violence.

On the other hand, as the memory of violence and conflict fades into a more distant past, art forms like music and theatre – as argued by Bahun – become ‘sites of simultaneous memorial petrification [...] and future-construction’. In Former Yugoslavia, performing arts and initiatives like the Monument Group help to articulate grassroots positions against transitional justice mechanisms that some perceive as imposed from above, while also elaborating a forward-looking vision of the country striving a ‘new path between capitalist neoliberalism and atavistic nationalism’.

Finally, the special issue also aims to highlight the significance of political aesthetics as a way of recovering and in fact also constructing memory where there has been a collective forgetting of past atrocities and where processes of democratization are either unfinished or deeply ambiguous in their outcomes. This becomes especially significant in the Indonesian context, where some of the very same perpetrators of the mass killings that took place in the 1960s either remain in power or have since gone back to leading ‘normal’ lives as ordinary

citizens. As Demaria and Violi demonstrate in their analysis of Joshua Oppenheimer's 2012 documentary *The Act of Killing*, through the use of different cinematic genres and textual strategies, the cinematic medium can work as 'an aesthetic answer to the emptiness of any judicial, forensic, political, moral, ethical, historical and memorial frame of the killings'.

Taken together, the special issue's five contributions address key aspects of mediated conflict like identity, memory, citizenship, nationhood, participation, power and inequality, but also hope and reconciliation. With examples from Africa, Asia and Europe, the special issue also offers an ample view of the ways in which different cultural and political contexts shape how 'media' – ranging from street art and performance to film and social media – are central to the relationship between people and politics in times of transition and the conflicts that accompany these processes.

Some of the contributions of this special issue – El Gendi and Pinfari, Krstić, Aiello and Vladisavljević, and Sorensen – are informed by or use material collected as part of the research project 'Media, Conflict and Democratisation' (www.mecodem.eu), funded by the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (grant no 613370). The contributions by Bahun, and Demaria and Violi have been invited to complement and deepen the discussion of the themes addressed in the special issue.

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