

KETTERING REVIEW



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the quality of public life in the American democracy

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Agitated Times

By Sheldon Wolin

Can agitation find its bearings, become an accomplice to democratization?

Ever since the 1960s, mass rallies, protests, and street demonstrations have been a persistent, if not universally welcomed, phenomenon in Britain, many western European countries, and, to a lesser extent, the United States. Although the rights to assemble peacefully and to protest have long been guaranteed in these societies, attention to their status as forms of politics has been, like the phenomena themselves, fitful and episodic.

Characteristically, demonstrations take place “outside” the official institutions prescribed by constitutions and legislation and thus form a parallel politics.

A demonstration does not follow a calendar or hold prescribed sessions. By definition, its actions are inconclusive and intentionally so. The aim is to disrupt the ordinary tempos of the political process by demanding either a halt or a change in direction or a redoubled effort. Unlike the deliberative mode of institutionalized politics, demonstrations are incitements, agitations that have an inescapably populist quality even when the particular cause does not.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the noun “agitation” as “the keeping of an object before public attention by appeals.” In referring to “public attention,” that definition introduces what we might call an embryonic political note. It is embryonic in the sense that it refers to “public attention” rather than, say, to the “attention of the public.” It is possible that agitators might aspire to turn mere attention-getting into a constitutive act that brings a public into existence, temporarily uniting otherwise disconnected singulars who might then proceed

to discuss the concerns of the agitators and, whether intentional or not, help to disseminate them and thereby expand the original audience. However, by linking agitation to “appeals,” a note of equivocation enters. Ordinarily, we do not associate appeals with discussion, or more precisely, while discussion implies a difference of opinion, appeal seems more univocal, perhaps because of its association with accusation.

I want to attempt to clarify what is at stake by setting up a contrast between two ideal-types of politics and their tempos. One conception represents agitation as disruptive, energetic intervention the results of which include a large element of the unpredictable and perhaps some element of the anarchic. The other is represented by an ideal of action as orderly, stylized, shaped, and limited by prescribed processes, procedures, even timetables, designed to produce predictable (i.e., consistent) decisions or results. This latter conception is most famously represented in Max Weber’s ideal-type of bureaucratic rationality in which tempo is written into institutional practices, or better, engraven into them.



Weber’s notion of rationalization was built around the idea that some circumscribed portion of the world could be subjected to procedures or practices that would render it orderly and hence predictable. In modern times, that pre-meditated construct was best represented by the

A demonstration aims to disrupt the ordinary tempos of the political process.

bureaucratic institutions that had become the predominant institutional form not only of the modern state but of industrial and financial capital. For Weber “rationalization” was the key to understanding bureaucracies. Their modus operandi attempts to structure beforehand, to establish a series of steps that “processes” a prescribed range of phenomena by assigning them to predesigned categories and then compelling them to conform to settled procedures, including ever “higher stages” of review. Eventually, a “final” decision is arrived at. In this conception, one could properly speak of a decision as an end product of ritualized “decision-making.”

When Weber likened “politics” to “the slow boring of hard boards,” he was acknowledging, albeit reluctantly, that the tempos of politics had come to emulate those of bureaucracy. Yet at the same time Weber was imposing a cage of bureaucratic rationality upon politics and economic organization, he was struggling to resist it and find a preserve for creative individual action. Sometimes, he alluded to the role of religion

as providing an emotional sanctuary from a cold, increasingly rationalized world, a haven where human beings could gain fulfillment without reference to economic calculations or bureaucratic requirements. More strikingly, he

For Weber, passion stands for the inspired, the unmethodical, the charismatic resistance to rationalization.

depicted an ideal scientist and an ideal politician who struggled to preserve integrity, passionate commitment, and a sense of calling or true vocation amidst an all-too-rationalized world. Passion stood for the inspired, the unmethodical, the charismatic resistance to rationalization. Yet Weber was forced to acknowledge that even charisma could be routinized. A miraculous deed could be translated into ritual and reenacted endlessly and mechanically. So, Weber, who took an active part in the reconstruction of politics in the Weimar Republic, made one last attempt to escape, without renouncing the tempos of bureaucracy and its ideal of rational action.

Although he favored a parliamentary system, he also regarded Parliament itself as dominated by bureaucratized parties. His concern to preserve a space for passionate commitment led him to speculate about the possibility of an extra-parliamentary relationship based on “leadership.” The *Führerprinzip* was intended to connect a passionate, charismatic, antibureaucratic leader with a mass following. This would inject a healthy

element of human feeling, emotion, even unpredictability into a process otherwise dominated by the cold calculations of impersonal decision-makers. The *Führerprinzip* thus held the potential for stirring up, enlivening the measured tempos of parliamentary politics and the dispassion of bureaucratic antipolitics. The agitation-idea thus pointed to an attribute of leadership rather than a demotic tendency. Weber was not envisioning a politics powered by a mass movement of which the leader was the expression and on which he depended. The mass was instrumental, not constitutive.

The *Führerprinzip* may have been approximated in Hitler’s dictatorial regime, where it destroyed the tempos of parliamentary (i.e., deliberative) politics and corrupted those of bureaucratic neutrality. In that form of agitational politics, while the “masses” were kept in a controlled state of excitement and periodically mobilized for fervent displays of national unity, Nazism pursued a dynamic policy of expansionism and aggression that Weber never imagined. While that form of politics has pretty much disappeared, at least in western Europe, agitation has not vanished: its tempos have simply switched locations.

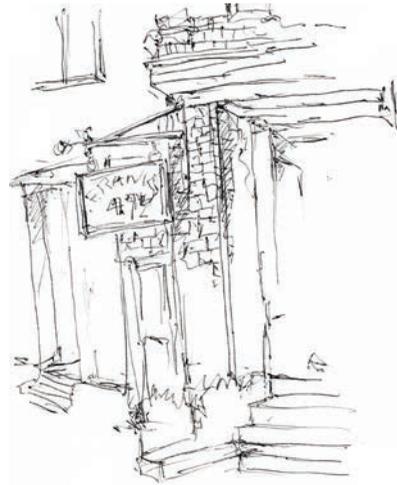
Specifically, the tempos of revolution have been appropriated by corporate capital, but not simply by capital as an economic form of organization. The full import of Joseph Schumpeter’s formula of capitalism as “creative destruction” is best appreciated by taking into account not only the dynamics of the market and of the globalizing reach of capital, but of the “troika effect” issuing from the union of capital, technology, and science.

That combination of powers has made possible a unique revolutionary tempo. By enlisting technological innovation and scientific discovery and joining them with its own impulses, capital has produced an unprecedented form of power. The combination has quickened the rate of change throughout the world, hurrying premodern societies into postmodernity, shaking up social structures, and undermining traditional authorities. It is heralded as revolution without violence, or rather, violence is presented as modernization, as “new times” when innovation quickly scrubs out memory.

The troika has set the tempo of our times; in the process, it has rendered obsolete the modern conception of revolution as aimed at a culminating moment when democratic and egalitarian forces would have triumphed and the frenzied time of revolution would give way to the new and measured tempo of consolidation. In place of modern political and social revolution, the troika promotes a conception of permanent revolution, of revolution as continuous, not pausing

The corporate economy instructs an agitated populace that virtually every job and habitat are temporary.

for consolidation, awaiting only the latest scientific breakthrough, the next technological innovation to incite investors. In contrast to the settled, virtually permanent structure of Weber’s bureaucracy, the contemporary globalizing



corporation appears as highly adaptable, poised to adjust to changing conditions, prepared to dismantle its current organization and “reinvent” itself with a flexible structure adapted to the tempos of revolution, whether of “information,” stem cell research, or robotics.

Globalized capital is no stranger to frenzies of speculation, rapid technological change, or radical reorganization, thus no stranger to agitation, albeit orchestrated. Indeed, it may be said to monopolize agitation. The corporate economy encourages change, elevates fashion to a norm, and, while using the media to manufacture excitement and dazzle, instructs an agitated populace that virtually every job and habitat are temporary. Thus, corporate capital is the agitator, the exemplar of permanent revolution, of normalized agitation. Its hegemony is secured by control over the manufacture of popular and elite culture. That control is so nearly total that the popular demonstrations against the Iraq



war in 2003 and the agitation at the conventions of the major American political parties in 2004 either went unreported or were treated as freak shows. The public at large remained unperturbed, unagitated.

Thus, the new model agitator serves as pacifier, exploiting change so that its rapid tempo prevents critical thought from gaining a purchase—hence no need to muzzle critics—and structural injustices go unremedied. Like revolution, agitation has been incorporated, its tempo co-opted.

Can agitation find its bearings, become an accomplice to democratization?

“Stop and think,” Hannah Arendt once counseled. We might rephrase this advice as “take stock” in order to assess democracy’s prospects. Doubtless, that could, and perhaps should, entail exploring the outlook for democracy in a variety of settings, from the Ukraine to Northern Ireland, for example. Rather than attempt a task beyond my abilities, I should like to apply Arendt’s counsel to a context with which I am more familiar, that of the United States.

The United States considers itself the world’s oldest and most successful democracy and is now busily exporting its recipe to other parts of the world, particularly those with petroleum resources. Official claims to the contrary, the fact is that in the United States itself, substantive democracy is on the defensive. The actual system is best described as managed electoral democracy. Political power is organized to deflect popular determination of the uses of power and to direct it instead into a controlled form of legitimation, serving primarily the aims and needs of corporate interests. Two wars—one cold, against the USSR, the other hot, against terrorism—have transformed a liberal and predominantly secular society into a conservative and chiliastic one. Where US power was once preoccupied with “containment,” now its leaders dream of remaking the world. Moreover, unlike traditional conservatism, which identified with the slow tempo of habit, custom, and prejudice, the new conservatism is aggressive and proselytizing, in short, agitative.

Accordingly, the challenge is to expose managed democracy and point the way to “redemocratization.” What sort of role, if any, might agitation play in that cause? The Bush administration associated democratization with free elections (one person, one vote), equal political rights, and a free market. The unstated presumption underlying all three principles is that freedom and equality are conditions that, far from preventing concentrations of power, can be exploited to enable the more powerful to dominate or control. A well-financed lobbying group has the same right to influence the legislature as the unemployed

laborer, just as the corporation can appeal to the same right of free speech as the ordinary citizen. Democracy, or rather democracy-in-bad-faith, is reshaped to serve as accessory to inequalities.

If the idea of democracy is to be disentangled from corporate power and its political *imperium*, its defenders must take a stand on two basic

While participation slows time, it does not annihilate it. Time is preserved in civic memory.

principles: that there must be meaningful opportunities for power to be shared and that a democratic society is committed to an ongoing and unending effort to challenge, reduce, and ameliorate the effects of social, economic, cultural, and political inequalities.

How can we identify the tempo appropriate to redemocratization and to the scale of a country as large, diverse, and populous—and as dangerous—as the United States? Stated schematically, democracy's best hopes lie at the local level of state, county, and municipality. In those locations, the tempo of politics is slower, the opportunities to stop and think more numerous, and the possibilities for meaningful participation greater. Participation takes time because, unlike bureaucratic decisions, democratic decisions are “arrived at” rather than “made.” Moreover, because the consequences are immediate rather than abstract, decisions depend upon eliciting cooperation and agreement among familiars

who are not necessarily similar, but who are individuals and groups living together and sharing familiar though not necessarily similar circumstances. While participation slows time, it does not annihilate it. Time is preserved in civic memory—of achievements and failures, disasters and triumphs, pride and shame.

Because of its different character, sensibilities, and tempos—“set in its ways”—local democracy is not a locus hospitable to agitation and yet is seriously in need of it. Local democracy's communal virtues are inseparable from the vices of parochialism. Enter agitation as mass protest, raucous demonstration, street theater with jarring rhythms, cacophonies that contrast yet complement the slower tempos of parochial politics, directing local attention to broader, more transcending issues of war, peace, environment, and social justice—issues that are beyond the competence of local powers yet demand the attention of citizens who, by definition, are simultaneously local and national.

The best illustration of that complementarity was in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq. At the same time that there were mass rallies in



many major American cities, over one hundred city councils passed resolutions opposing the invasion. To be sure, there was no immediate effect upon the decision-makers in Washington. And yet at the present writing, there can be little doubt that the majority of Americans regret the administration's actions and their own complicity. Arguably, agitation had contributed to changing the national mood. Agitation, often ignored by the political center, its immediacy, rather than merely dissipating, can be instead a means of educating particularism, energizing

it to challenge the center. Democratic agitation takes time.

Sheldon Wolin (1922-2015) was a political theorist who spent time at the University of California at Berkeley and Princeton University among other institutions. "Agitated Times," was originally published in a 2005 issue of the journal parallax. This version of the essay is republished with the permission of Princeton University Press, from Fugitive Democracy: And Other Essays, Sheldon Wolin, 2016; permission conveyed through the Copyright Clearance Center, Inc.

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