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Democracy and the politics of the spectacle

Vidhu Verma[a]

[a] Centre for Political Studies, School for Social Sciences,
Jawaharlal Nehru University
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BOOK REVIEW SYMPOSIUM: *DEMOCRACY DISFIGURED: OPINION, TRUTH AND PEOPLE*, BY NADIA URBINATI

Democracy disfigured: opinion, truth and people, by Nadia Urbinati, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2014, 307 pp., US$39.95 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-674-725133

Review

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Given the immense variety in the democratic practices as well as the fact that 'democracy' is a term applied so widely that it has become vague, it is necessary to survey changes in the conception of democracy. With *Democracy Disfigured: Opinion, Truth and People*, Nadia Urbinati (2014) offers a major contribution in this direction by examining democracy across manifold debates in political theory and speaking to the ideal conditions under which we practice it. The book stands out in its singular desire to explore a decline of electoral and political participation to which corresponds the people's longing for political spectacle.

This article is a response to Nadia Urbinati's compelling attempt to articulate three forms of disfigurement of representative democracy due to epistemic, plebiscitary and populist visions of democracy. She theorizes the intimate ties between these visions arguing that they converge towards a view that denies the normative character of democratic procedures. The processes of change and redefinition are intense not only due to the challenges posed but the speed of events that new systems of internet democracy facilitate. This metamorphosis is assisted by movement of protests, opinion formation and technological innovation even though democracy's fundamental norms are not subject to change.

The normative core of representative democracy is the public sphere of opinion formation, which Urbinati cautions, is also a domain where considerable challenges await us. Whereas she conceives of a direct causal connection between the disfigurement of democracy and the undemocratic character of politics, I argue that such a conception is flawed. I provide a series of arguments designed to highlight some of the limitations in this position and conclude by questioning the general thesis that underlie Urbinati's account of democracy. The disfigurement of representative democracy is acknowledged by her as coinciding with a series of economic and political crisis as a result of which democratic institutions and decision-making procedures are facing loss of legitimacy. At times, this pattern of politics is remote from participation and distribution of political power. The series of formal conditions she subsequently enumerates are not sufficient to justify the causal relationship between public opinion and political results or decisions – a thing to be added is the way political discourse displaces antagonism between classes to restore balance and justice among groups in liberal democracy.

Three compelling objections emerge from a reading of her account. The first step in my argument that I propose to take is cutting the link between the disfiguration of democracy and an opinion-based approach to politics. The latter should not be mistaken as a necessary reflection or rectification of the former. Such a conflation of politics and democratic theory distort Urbinati's project. It disregards her theory that has not been inspired by presenting representation as a second-rate device in the absence of direct democracy; Urbinati turns the question around so that the three forms of disfigurement in modern society are not an impediment to representation but on the contrary its essential condition that must be overcome.

For Urbinati, the normative core of representative democracy is at risk from the complex world of opinion formation where assertion of popular assertion both in the form of 'plebiscitarian identification of the masses with a publicized leader' and of 'populist claims seeking to represent the whole people as a homogenous unity of values and history' (Urbinati, 13) are increasingly also phenomena of political passivity and docility of citizens. At first sight, such malfunctions appear only in the basic traits composing the democratic figure, but as the book proceeds her approach to politics seems to miss the critical point. To begin with, a close link between media and public opinion has been part of the work done by political scientists like Harold Lasswell, who wrote about the open interplay of opinion and policy as mark of popular rule (Lasswell 1941). His approach is now central in public opinion polls, conducted world-wide during elections, where the causal link between the power of media and the autonomy of trends in voting and attitudes of citizens is deeply probed and contested. Urbinati is forging similar links in her work but with new theoretical tools. One must take into account that Urbinati's main thesis is that mutations in democracy must be understood through the tradition of doxa (popular opinion). It turns Plato's idea into an ontological notion of solipsism that denies authenticity to the plural realm of doxa. By making use of Aristotle's reading of political deliberation, she argues that democracy is the government 'most friendly to public discourse' (Urbinati, 33). The roles played by doxa are that of cognitive, political and aesthetic (Urbinati, 229). These broadly include information requirement and consensus, expression of ideas that sends inputs into the political system and exposure of politicians and policies to public judgment (Urbinati, 36). The new policy spaces, however promising they may be, are not enough. What insights can a normative theory of democratic politics offer us in an era when individuals are deeply embedded in their biographical experience and social and cultural identity? Are we living in representative democracies anymore if plebiscitarian democracy which degrades voters' political engagement to electoral battles is driving citizens by a feeling of general well-being? Moreover, opinions even though a solitary business, turn into critical judgment only where the standpoints of others are open to discussions and interrogation. The very process of opinion formation and constructing consensus is determined in contemporary politics through technological methods. Indeed, it has become a commodity that can be increasingly bought and sold.

Second, I want to argue that Urbinati begins her study with reference to the ancient Greeks or their language of politics which is not essentially 'an instrumental or goal-oriented activity undertaken for the sake of some end' but is 'the medium of moral education of the citizenry' (Urbinati, 81). Despite the recent constraints of this kind of an attempt, she goes on to assume that a European identity and notion of democracy are closely related to the foundations of ancient Greek culture. Urbinati declares Greece to have initiated something peculiarly modern: that it conceived a polis 'based on speech', a principle which the electoral transformation of modern democracy did not change

(Urbinati, 20). In contemporary debates on democracy it is important to examine to what extent Plato and Aristotle appear to have shared or rejected the values of direct democracy in their own societies; or to what extent Greek attitudes in general to slaves, women, aliens and even to democracy were justified philosophically and logically. If the vast majority of Greeks were not entitled to participate in political life, citizens were regarded as equals in the sense that each could claim the right of private free speech (parrhesia) and equality of public speech (isegoria). This independence of citizens as free men typified the polis even though it had a distinctive form of a slave mode of production. Hence, the peculiar embrace of the ancient polis as an objective force of democracy is different from thinking of inheriting ways of thinking about values and institutions from the Greece and of forging an identity with the Greeks and their past.

There is something odd about the aspiration to establish a tradition of political theory across the centuries to challenge conventional ideas for modern readers. An insight into Greeks tells us only something about the way public speech was tied to democracy as a unique kind of civic life, but it tells us nothing substantive about the factors for the decline in political power of traditional parties or the increasing role of television in constructing political consent or the increasing weight of the executive as a result of economic and financial emergencies. Indeed, scholars have written about the central role of media and opinion polls as 'mediacracy', 'videocracy' and 'audience democracy' to stigmatize the transformations of representative democracy.

Therefore, I think the author could also consider public opinion as an immaterial phenomenon which appears as a cognitive and symbolic process equipped with potential agency for both legitimacy and affective ties; this public sphere is not the polis or agora as in ancient Greece but as a domain which goes beyond the sharing of the same space and the same time for doing politics. Nevertheless, it is one of the pillars of modern democracy that invoke a space of liberation or even empowerment from the yoke of tyranny. The media including the printing press, electronic press and social media create conditions for the formation of a speaking public even though a rational confrontation rarely takes place due to the speed in circulation of these opinions. It also creates a public, though distant in time and place, through texts and verbalizations. For these reasons the link between media and public opinion appears a founding and constitutive act that I mentioned earlier.

The third part of this reconstruction of the role of doxa lies in detecting the disfigurements of the system of representative democracy in which elections are viewed as 'means to a government of opinion as a government responsive to, and responsible toward, the public' (Urbinati, 229). Against these disfigurements, Urbinati advocates democracy as linked to procedures and not only about an ideal society with a specific goal to achieve; neither does it improve our decision-making capacity (we do not learn how to vote by voting) across different arenas of citizen engagement. If we accept a proceduralist theory of democracy on Urbinati's terms, how will we come to accept the problem of caste or racial segregation as our problem? How is the agenda set for collective deliberation through doxa as she defines 'representative government is government by doxa'? (Urbinati 229). Can we blame civil society for imposing exclusionary norms, for defending unruly fasts, demonstrations and acerbic modes of expression? How can doxa alone bring to the fore a set of values – freedom, equality, justice – which engage the affective bonds of familiarity that we nurse in our immediate circles? These are difficult questions for most democratic theories and they continue to nag the critical tradition Urbinati has located herself.

Nevertheless, Urbinati raises a crucial question of jurisdiction; procedurally a public forum that keeps state under scrutiny should be ruled, she argues, according to the same egalitarian principle embodied in citizens' right to be self-governing (Urbinati, 228). Electoral representation is egalitarian due to the premise of universal franchise. In most respects, I found myself agreeing with her approach here. But Urbinati might consider how in respect of authorization citizens show unstable preferences that are neither formed by the electoral process nor the right to vote but by proportional representative electoral systems; preferences can lead to a strong party to form a minority government with a small per cent of the vote if turnout of eligible voters is also very low. How is such a group to remain accountable to the interests and perspectives of others in a meaningful way? In the ideal model that Urbinati has imagined, public opinion is a discursive process which must develop in the co-presence of citizens along with dialogicity in face-to-face interaction characterized by self-direction and determination. In reality public opinion is a much more ambiguous process!

My final critique is that despite the sort of normative view she takes on democracy, it is surprising that she does not give attention to contestatory mechanisms of the kind that would look into issues of domination and power between democratic citizens that emerge in the literature on 'democracy deficit' in European Union and elsewhere. To ask questions in areas in which collective decisions can be made, a conceptualization of the public spheres across countries in the light of the new scenario of representative democracies is urgently needed. These are the questions where her approach has real strengths but somehow they do not emerge here. The ways in which power, authority and leadership of communities are negotiated in civil society lead to a progressive disembedding of the public sphere. Hence, the publicity through Internet to various debates can be accessible to all without limits but it might not be necessarily discursive; in short, the structural transformation of the public sphere from elites to many subaltern groups seems in actual fact only through media processes and not through social integration.

Many scholars have written about the way the access to the public sphere does not only lose dialogicity but also produces differentiation among citizens in the way about who is speaking, listening and consuming. Others have traced the development of modern society in which social life has been replaced with representation. Subsequently the spectacle is the inverted image of society in which relationship between people is mediated by images. Thompson has written about the 'mediatisation of public opinion', where the media take on process of formation of individual and collective opinions (Thompson 1995); the symbolic environment is driven by information and technology by institutional actors, which is up for grabs by the media system, institutions of state, opinion pollsters, public relations firms, marking offices, lobbies, etc.; the public presentation of these ideas in a symbolic arena constructed by the media pose the question of the formation of public opinion or doxa in societies like ours where economic inequalities create new meritocracies. Grossi has written about the 'demoscopic field' to identify the formation of public opinion or mediated 'public debate' in post-industrial societies (Grossi 2005, 9). This is a specialized ambit or domain in which dynamics of opinion are activated, competed and constructed. Hence, public opinion cannot be spontaneously generated but would require associations, groups and movements that frame and interpret the symbolic and cognitive dynamics of the formation of that domain.

Finally, I am unsure about Urbinati's optimistic long-term scenario that presupposes democracy will remain the goal that countries are seeking. This goal is likely to depend on its being viewed both as a standard of political legitimacy and as the best system for achieving a certain kind of effective governance that all countries seek. What has changed

is that many presuppositions about democracy are increasingly being questioned specially in advanced countries of USA and Europe. In the last decade alone democracy in states with grounded traditions have been involved in major debates about enjoyment of rights. In an era of identity politics, what seem for many to endanger democracy is the attitude towards immigrants and minorities, both seen as sources of crime and as burdens on the state for jobs and social security benefits.

Despite the problems I raise, I think Urbinati's emphasis on opinion-formation and its distortions definitely lead her to give greater attention than many theorists do to crisis that put democracy in peril today. She uses conceptual tools to counterbalance the dangers of political judgments against the autonomy of individuals and persuasively uses opinion formation as a means for overcoming debates on identity and difference. This analysis provides an illuminating interpretation of the ideological crisis of post-liberalism and exposes the intellectual weakness of earlier efforts (republican, deliberative or competitive) to delineate new versions of democracy. I would recommend that to negatively stigmatize the transformations of representative democracy from the role played by its three versions actually indicate the author's move towards a 'post-democratic society' position. Overall this book remains valuable because it should make us think more deeply about important aspects of democracy. This book is not only a scholarly and analytical discussion on democracy but a book dedicated to reworking our democratic imagination and for reshaping liberal theories and ideologies.

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Vidhu Verma
Centre for Political Studies, School for Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University
vidhuverma94@gmail.com