"anti-democratic," as in the rhetoric of Burke (111). But how does he tell them apart, and on what basis does he make this claim?

Today there is no shortage of actors drawing on aesthetics to awaken the sovereign people and make them rally around the leader and the flag against the enemy. They abound. In that sense, this is a remarkably important book. It wants to wrest aesthetics out of the hands of reactionary forces—who know how to use it—and show its potential for radical democratic theory. Frank's new book goes a long way to achieve that aim, yet more work is still needed to clarify the difference between democratic and undemocratic ways of aesthetically representing the people. I hope the book is widely read, and that scholars take up the challenge that it poses to radical democratic theory. For, as Frank writes, Marx's fear of Bonapartism "still resonates powerfully today" (ix).

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Beyond the Age of Democratic Revolution

Jason Frank

I am grateful to the editors at *Democratic Theory* for organizing this symposium, and especially to Karuna Mantena, Adom Getachew, and Sofia Näsström for engaging *The Democratic Sublime* with such generosity, acuity, and insight. The questions and critiques they raise open promising new lines of inquiry, while also pressing me to further address the troubling resonance between the political dilemmas explored in the book and the democratic crises of our present. The essays provide me the opportunity to reflect further on problems left insufficiently articulated in the book and more clearly see the roads not taken.

The Democratic Sublime examines a central but theoretically underexplored political problematic that appeared during the late eighteenth-century age of democratic revolutions, and that has haunted the history of popular sovereignty ever since. As the personal and external rule of the

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king was replaced by the impersonal and immanent self-rule of the people, representational dilemmas emerged surrounding how this new sovereign form would be imagined and made manifest by the people that constitute it. A king, as Edmund Morgan writes in his famous history of popular sovereignty,

> was a visible presence, wearing his crown and carrying his scepter. The people, on the other hand, are never visible as such. Before we ascribe sovereignty to the people we have to imagine that there is such a thing . . . capable of thinking, of acting, of making decisions and carrying them out. (Morgan 1988: 153)

In contrast to democratic theory's familiar narratives of democratic disenchantment – from Thomas Paine, say, to Jürgen Habermas – pursuing this insight demonstrates the extent to which modern democracy places entirely new pressures on the popular imagination, unprecedented enticements of collective fantasy. The fantasy space of modern democracy is centered around its constituent subject – the people – and is animated by both the contested question of who the people are, but also the equally pressing question of how this sovereign collective publicly appears and acts. I call this the democratic problem of popular manifestation.

Imaginary investments of peoplehood mediate the people's relationship to their own political empowerment – how they understand themselves to be a part of and act as a people. This opens up dilemmas of institutionalization, constitution, and law, of course, but also of visualization, manifestation, and form. *The Democratic Sublime* excavates this latter aesthetic political problematic across diverse philosophical, literary, poetic, and visual archives from the age of revolution to better understand how popular assembly in particular – the politics of crowds, demonstrations, gathering of the "people out of doors" – emerged as a distinctive, and distinctively powerful, form of democratic representation. Through the politics of popular assembly, I argue, the people aesthetically encountered the miracle of democratic initiation, their own world-making capacities of collective self-institution. As I paraphrase Robespierre in a speech he delivered before the Convention: the people must see themselves assembled to feel their power.

Mantena focuses her essay directly on the book's central theoretical concept: the democratic sublime, a term that invokes the tension between democracy's collective assertion of autonomy and the aesthetic experience of such assembly that lies beyond representation or control. In the democratic sublime the immanence of the people's inexhaustible power to make the world anew becomes a self-regarding source of

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sublime awe. Drawing on the richly illuminating examples of non-violent civil disobedience in the Civil Rights Movement and the struggle for Indian Independence, Mantena identifies a similar concern among its leaders with the "recursively revelatory" dimensions of collective action, in which "what came into appearance was a community newly empowered and endowed with dignity and purpose" (Mantena, this issue, XX).

But Mantena also presents important differences between the forms of popular assembly I focus on in the book, and the key strategies of collective civil disobedience advocated by such figures as Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi. Most notably, she emphasizes the role of "purposefully dispersed and negative" (Mantena, this issue, XX) acts of non-violent non-cooperation and withdrawal like the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955. From this example of mass abstention, Mantena presses me to recognize an important conceptual distinction, blurred if not wholly elided in the book, between the manifestation of the collective actor "assembled and gathered" and the sight of "effective agency," which may take the form of witnessing "the passing of buses emptied of passengers" (Mantena, this issue, XX). I engage somewhat obliquely with this problem in the Afterword's attempt to distinguish a theory of democratic appearance from democratic visibility—which takes orientation from Jacques Rancière's theory of disidentification, but builds primarily from Glenn Ligon's reconfiguration of images from the Nation of Islam's 1995 Million Man March and the parallel event revealingly called the Day of Absence (wherein Black women not invited to assemble on the National Mall were instead called to stay home from work and other public responsibilities)—but Mantena is right that the general problem of making collective agency visible through collective absence rather than assembled presence opens up an intriguing line of inquiry suggested but not theoretically elaborated in the book.

Mantena's second line of questioning also focuses on the relationship between popular assembly and the sublime, but interrogates the suggestion that "empowered agency must entail something threatening, mysterious, and/or unorganized" (Mantena, this issue, XX). She contrasts this with the central emphasis King and Gandhi placed on "disciplined organization." Here I am less persuaded by the critique. My emphasis on noninstitutionalized and deauthorized forms of collective action can make it seem like unruly disorder and disorganization are constitutive of the conception of the democratic sublime, but this is not necessarily the case. Indeed, some of the examples I elaborate in most detail—as in Rousseau's silent assemblies of collective absorption and self-regard—center on the ritual and formalized dimensions of collective action that Mantena highlights. Even the chapter dedicated to the poetics of the barricades

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emphasizes the spontaneous forms of cooperation and organization that astounded so many articulate observers of nineteenth-century barricade events. Collective silence, restraint, resolve, and forbearance can provide vivid exemplifications of the democratic sublime, and work as tangible indicators of the inexhaustible collective capacities I emphasize in both revolutionary and more settled democratic contexts.

Getachew's recent work on Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association's orchestration of public spectacle (2021) also thinks through the broadly aesthetic dimensions of democratic politics, and the productive mediations through which people come to experience themselves as a part of a politically empowered collectivity. As with Mantena, Getachew argues that the areas of theoretical attention opened up by *The Democratic Sublime* might be extended beyond the book's archive of examples and, in so doing, pose critical questions to the theoretical framing that both shapes and is built from that archive.

Getachew asks for greater specificity in thinking through the ways that different forms of popular assembly "enact competing or alternative conceptions of the democratic sublime" (Getachew, this issue, XX), providing alternative iterations of the political education of the senses. I think she is right that the book presents different mechanisms of political pedagogy through the different forms of popular assembly it examines, but that these differences do not themselves becomes sites of theoretical reflection, specification, and elaboration. Relatedly, my focus on different instances of productive aesthetic mediation—how individuals come to experience themselves as a part of an empowered collectivity—does not engage deeply enough with the different mechanisms tied to specific media discussed in the book and their circulation: novels, memoirs, paintings, speeches, broadsides, prints, photographs, etc. The democratic sublime opens without fully pursuing this greater specification, as Getachew notes, and I think her point about conceptualizing the different media through which the people both view themselves assembled and *view themselves being viewed by others* identifies a particularly promising dynamic to be further investigated. My effort to complicate the actor/spectator model of the aesthetics of political judgment—presented most famously by Kant in his writings on the French Revolution—may have seemed to cleave too closely to the alternative Rousseauian aesthetics of absorptive collective self-regard, wherein there is an attempt to dissolve the line between actor and spectator. That was not my intent. I began the project during the winter of 2011, as the Egyptian revolution was inspiring a conflagration of popular revolt against authoritarian leaders in the Middle East. The hundreds of thousands of Egyptians that assembled in Tahrir Square not only gathered to witness the growing manifestation of

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their own collective power; they set up large screens in the square with daily projections of the international news coverage of their struggle in its very unfolding. In the popular assembly of Tahrir, the incipient power of collective self-regard was woven into a circuitry of watching its own emergence watched by the world, nuancing and inflecting this powerful iteration of the democratic sublime.

Näsström's contribution moves beyond possible extensions and conceptual refinements and into a critique of the book's framing, especially its focus on popular sovereignty as the central problem space of modern democratic politics—a problem space she describes as a "people trap" in her own recent book on democratic theory and the "spirit of emancipation" (Näsström 2021). Taking orientation from my opening discussion of Marx's 1848, and especially Marx's worry about the abstract and socially weightless reification of the "cult of the people," Näsström doubts popular sovereignty's radicalism and urges it be replaced by other more reliable (that is, less fraught, open, and contested) foundations for emancipatory politics. The contemporary crisis of democracy—and especially the global threat of authoritarian ethnonationalist "populism"—vividly animates Näsström's questions.

Näsström doubts the "radicalism" of the democratic sublime because it is "indifferent to the social interests" that "lie behind" such conflicting recent manifestations of popular assembly as the *jilets gaunes* in France and the insurgent MAGA attack on the US Capital on January 6, 2021 (Näsström, this issue, XX). Leaving aside the empirical question of whether the social interests that "lie behind" these two movements can be so simply contrasted and opposed, or whether it makes sense to identify social interests wholly independent of their political organization and representational deployment, I do think that Näsström's question suggests differing approaches to democracy's "radicalism." She seems to find it in Left ideological partisanship, whereas I think it points to the deeper grammar of democracy's (absent) foundations that shapes and stages—Lefort's *mise en sens* and *mise en scène*—the spaces through which these ideological social conflicts are enacted, made legible, and transformed. I do think there is a meaningful distinction between partisanship and peoplehood, but it is messy, historically entangled, and contested, never politically encountered with abstract purity, which is to say it can't be theoretically "squared" or resolved, in the way Näsström demands.

The question of democracy's "radicalism," and our different approaches to it, also bears on Näsström's last question. Given the availability of an open and forever contested politics of peoplehood—the dynamic politics through which people are retrospectively constituted and contested through the competing claims to enact and represent them—how

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can we distinguish democratic from antidemocratic appeals to popular authorization on the part of popular assemblies, especially in deeply contested contexts beyond legally authorized decision procedures like elections? This is an essential and recurring problem of democratic politics, but I don't think excavating how and why this problematic emerged withing the history of popular sovereignty, nor demonstrating why it continues to persist as a problem in our present, leaves us without any normative resources for confronting it. We draw on all kinds of norms, guidelines, rules, and principles when making such judgments, but it need not be the role of democratic theory to provide a formally articulated and fixed criteria for doing so (which is not to say it can't help us outline the relevant questions). I agree with Mantena that "to simply celebrate or dismiss the democratic crowd is to misunderstand modern democracy" (Mantena, this issue, XX). It ultimately opens up questions about the role of democratic theory – and of the democratic theorist – in democratic or democratizing contexts. We can't resolve that question here, but I am grateful for the opportunity to reflect further on how *The Democratic Sublime* might point in the direction of one possible answer.

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