Expressionism, Futurism, and the Dream of Mass Democracy

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Liberalism and the Deferral of Democracy

When one socialist regime after another toppled in the wake of 1989, history seemed to affirm Francis Fukuyama's recently forwarded thesis about its immanent demise. As Fukuyama observed in "The End of History," a century that began with liberalism in retreat had come full circle. Liberal democracy was again the order of the day, after surviving challenges from the right and left. What Fukuyama's triumphalism underestimated was the difficulty liberalism had in making the halting transition from limited popular rule to mass suffrage in the twentieth century. By the time liberal regimes began implementing universal suffrage after World War I, bolshevism and fascism had already introduced alternative models of mass participation. The perception that liberalism had failed to redeem its promise of emancipation as its parliamentary institutions spread across Europe in the nineteenth century helps explain the antagonism of avant-gardes in Germany and Italy for liberal ideals at the beginning of the twentieth. Indeed, a comparison of debates among German Expressionists and Italian Futurists before 1914 indicates that both groups viewed parliament as a relic of the nineteenth century that was destined to be washed away by a tidal wave of mass democracy. While this belief proved to be erroneous, their critique of parliamentary politics was prescient in anticipating the Achilles' heel in Fukuyama's apology for the finality of the liberal democratic model at century's end.

The failures of constitutional regimes in Germany and Italy to respond to rising demands for political rights at the turn of the twentieth century led to a politicization of modernism in these lands that was unique for Europe before 1914. While Expressionist and Futurist art often looked derivative of innovations emanating from Paris, none of the French revolutions in art, from Impressionism to Cubism, ever made claims to be vehicles of social revolution in the way that Expressionism and Futurism most emphatically did. And notwithstanding the fact that Expressionists and Futurists saw themselves constituting a cultural rather than political avant-garde, both groups were inspired by utopian visions of a mass society. Surprisingly, political debates documented in Expressionist and Futurist periodicals are informed by a single, shared metaphor, which compared the field of politics to a stage. This figure presents a contrast to socialist debates, which were preoccupied with the revisionism of the Second International. The preferred socialist metaphor compared the political field to a battlefield and dealt in imagery related to military strategy, as in 'war of position' vs. 'war of attrition.' It may seem odd that the cultural avant-garde, which borrowed its founding metaphor—that of an advance guard—from the martial imaginary of revolutionary politics, would abandon this imagery when it turned to politics. But Expressionists and Futurists preferred an image defined by the distinctions between actor and spectator, comedy and tragedy. The following analysis suggests that this trope played a key role in modernism's critique of liberalism's limited notion of popular rule.

"The proletarian masses, in particular, presented psychologists with a problem hardly encountered before in world history," Samuel Lublinski wrote in *Die Bilanz der Moderne* (*The Balance of Modernism*) in 1904. The rise of socialism in the late nineteenth century marked "the first time the 'people' had evolved into a conscious and clear-headed political player," he claimed (40). As Lublinksi noted, politics had been the playground of princes for most of history. Only now were the masses beginning to develop political subjectivity, he argued. At the time, Lublinski was collaborating on a radical review, *Kampf* (*Struggle*), edited by Senna Hoy (born Johannes Holzmann) in Berlin. This publishing experiment ended when Hoy left for the Russian Revolution in 1905, but its example provided a model for

the radical cultural currents that later coalesced in Expressionism. The editors of the most influential Expressionist reviews, Herwarth Walden (born Georg Levin) and Franz Pfemfert, both worked with Hoy, and the titles of their periodicals, *Der Sturm* (*The Tempest*), founded by Walden in 1910, and *Die Aktion* (*The Campaign*), founded by Pfemfert in 1911, suggest that each saw himself as the legitimate heir to Hoy's radical legacy. These weeklies, which mimicked daily newspapers, represented innovative attempts to circumvent the established media of academic art and party politics and create a new audience for radical ideas (McClintick). They exemplify the "remarkable rapprochement between avant-garde aesthetic, radical politics, and popular culture" that characterized radical modernism before the First World War (Perloff xvii).

The first of these Expressionist weeklies, *Der Sturm*, was modeled after an Italian weekly Walden knew through contacts in Florence. Giuseppe Prezzolini started *La Voce* (*The Voice*) as a forum where the heretics from established parties and churches (including the 'modernists' recently excommunicated by Pius X) could debate "social questions posed by the new forms of human coexistence created by the new industrial world" ("Al lettore"). Overnight, *La Voce* became the most influential forum for dissent in Italy (Gentile, *La Voce* 213). Its unique status as arbiter of avant-garde discourse is evidenced by the fact that its initial resistance to Futurism hindered the movement's acceptance in Italy after publication of F.T. Marinetti's manifesto in *Le Figaro* in February 1909 won international notoriety. This resistance was finally broken when Prezzolini's closest collaborator, Giovanni Papini, left *La Voce* to found the most successful of all Futurist reviews, *Lacerba* (*The Bitter Pill*), in January 1913. This event marked the breakthrough for Futurism in Italy, as a young Antonio Gramsci noted in a contribution to a student newspaper in Turin ("The Futurists"). Futurism had already found an ally in *Der Sturm*, however. For one year, beginning in March 1912, Walden turned *Der Sturm* into the most important forum for Futurism in Europe, promoting exhibits of Futurist art and publishing manifestos in translation (Demetz). This brief alliance left no trace in the political discussions of Expressionists or Futurists, however. If, as the following analysis suggests, both groups arrived at similar conclusions, then this was less the result of productive

cross-fertilization than of independently developed diagnoses of a problem they shared in common: the inability of their parliamentary regimes to accommodate mass participation.

Politics as Public Performance

From the publication of its first issue, Prezzolini's *Voce* left no doubt about its sympathy for the extra-parliamentary politics of revolutionary syndicalism theorized by Georges Sorel. As Eric Hobsbawm observed, revolutionary syndicalism became the politics of choice for an entire generation of dissident intellectuals angered by the gradualist accommodation of Socialist parties in the decade before 1914 (134). When the Florentine weekly printed an article titled "Il valore morale del sindacalismo" ("The Moral Value of Syndicalism") in its third issue, Prezzolini felt compelled to add a disclaimer denying allegations his publication was a syndicalist mouthpiece. The author of the article was Paolo Mazzoldi, secretary of the Parma Chamber of Labor. Under Mazzoldi's direction, the Parma Chamber had organized a general strike in the summer of 1908 that kept 33,000 workers inactive for two months. The strike was only ended when army troops occupied the Chamber's offices and confiscated its strike funds. The Socialist Party reacted by expelling syndicalists from its ranks when it met in Florence in September 1908. When *La Voce* began publishing three months later, it printed Mazzoldi's piece to protest the party censure.

Mazzoldi began by criticizing the revisionist program of the Second International and the reformist policies of the Italian Socialist Party, before turning to revolutionary syndicalism. His arguments hinged on a standard Sorelian trope, namely, the idea that the general strike, the basic tool of revolutionary syndicalism, is not directed toward any goal but the direct expression of the workers' will through the spontaneous and collective refusal to work. In a series of articles first published in 1905-1906 in the Italian journal *Il divenire sociale* (*Social Transformation*) and then collected and reprinted in 1908 in France as *Réflexions sur la violence* (*Reflections on Violence*), Sorel insisted that the general strike must remain purely destructive in its intention. Only if the terrifying idea of catastrophic and irrevocable overthrow is maintained as a horizon of expectation can

the general strike reveal its moral character. "But, in undertaking a serious, formidable, and sublime work, the socialists [i.e., *revolutionary syndicalists*] raise themselves above our frivolous society and make themselves worthy of pointing out new roads to the world," he argued (281). In other words, syndicalist methods of direct action were intended to transform the agents as much as the social order they attacked. Mazzoldi's arguments echoed Sorel's ideas. "Even if the syndicalist doctrine were nothing more than the error of a few utopians," he wrote, "the single act of placing workers before their own future, of exalting their power, of awaiting the new philosophy from their muscles, would be enough to elevate the moral worth of the working classes." According to Mazzoldi, striking offered a medium for the disenfranchised masses to practice and thereby develop political subjectivity. By focusing on the performative aspect of political subjectivity, Mazzoldi introduced the conceptual framework that informs the metaphor of politics as a stage.

There was at least one good reason why the extra-parliamentary methods of syndicalism found such resonance among Italians at the turn of the twentieth century: the fact that so many were excluded from participating in the parliamentary regime. The constitution that unified Italy inherited from Piedmont in 1861 was a document of liberal government *for* the people. It did not foresee government *by* the people, at least not if 'people' is intended as a synonym for 'masses.' In the first post-unification election of 1861, less than two percent of the population was eligible to vote (Cammarano 8). Apart from one reform that increased the electorate to seven percent in 1882, no further reform was attempted until Giovanni Gentile, the perennial prime minister of the prewar decade, proposed 'universal' (male) suffrage in June 1912, bringing the electorate up to 24 percent (Gentile, *Le origini* 231). In the years leading to this belated reform, the political writer for *La Voce*, Gaetano Salvemini, waged an impassioned campaign for universal suffrage from the pages of the journal and floor of Socialist Party congresses. "We can see but one means of salvation," he wrote after elections in March 1909, "the eruption of the illiterate masses in public life." Only then could the cycle of corruption and cooptation that dictated parliamentary politics be broken, Salvemini argued ("Commento").

In contrast to Italy, Germany became the first European state to

introduce universal male suffrage when Bismarck extended the generous voting rights of the North German Federation to the entire *Kaiserreich* upon its founding in 1871. But democratic appearances were deceiving. A system of parliamentary checks insured that cosmetic concessions to democratic sentiment did not hinder the government in managing affairs of state. The major concession, universal suffrage for males 25 years and older in *Reichstag* elections, was checked by that house's subordination to the *Bundesrat*, a less democratic body of state delegations that was dominated by Prussia. The institutionalization of Prussian hegemony in the *Bundesrat* was not itself undemocratic, since two-thirds of all Germans lived in Prussia. But the Prussian *Landtag*, whose delegation exercised de facto control of the *Bundesrat*, was elected by an extremely undemocratic procedure. When Bismarck established the direct and equal male franchise for *Reichstag* elections, he mitigated its effect by retaining an older law for the Prussian *Landtag*. This law provided for the non-secret, indirect election of delegates in three unequal classes based on taxes paid. The top two brackets, which represented 15 percent of voters, elected two-thirds of all delegates, while the 85 percent of the electorate that fell into the lowest bracket elected but a third. In addition, the ten percent of otherwise eligible voters who fell below the minimum tax threshold were barred from voting in elections to the Prussian *Landtag* (Berghahn 210-11). This arrangement kept the reigns of power in Europe's most modern, industrial state firmly in the hands of a shrinking class of landed gentry (the East Prussian *Junker*) until 1918. At the same time, Bismarck's cosmetic concessions to democratic ideals had the unintended effect of inducing real desires for popular participation (Ullmann 33).

When *Der Sturm* began publishing in March 1910, the deferral of democracy in Prussia had led to political crisis and social unrest. Social Democrats had been staging demonstrations when a government headed by Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg proposed minor modifications to the three-class voting system in early 1910. Outrage at the half-hearted reform culminated in an SPD-led demonstration of 250,000 in Berlin on March 6 (Mommsen 377). In the third issue of *Der Sturm*, poet Ferdinand Hardekopf addressed the protests in a piece titled "Ein Neugieriger" ("A Curious Bystander"). Hardekopf, writing under a pseudonym, compared his fascination

for the spectacle of the mobilized masses to Baudelaire's attraction to the "theater" staged by crowds in Paris in 1848. "Of course, it is a ridiculous illusion to expect anything of Prussian voting rights, of any parliamentary politics, no matter how democratic," he observed. "And yet the popular masses now demonstrating in the streets of Prussian cities *believe* in a political ideal [...]. And who knows? Perhaps these lower-class citizens become beautiful by taking to the streets for this idea" (Hardekopf's emphasis). It would be easy to dismiss these comments as the patronizing opinions of a literary aesthete. Indeed, his description of protesters as "beautiful" seems to deny the political character of their actions. But Hardekopf was a hard-nosed political thinker who criticized Expressionist friends for being politically naive (Barnouw, Sheppard). In this statement he was less concerned with aesthetics than with the psychic function of the demonstrations, which he claimed had given disenfranchised citizens an opportunity to exercise political subjectivity. In saying the performance had made them "beautiful," he suggested that it had ennobled them. He argued that the aim of the protesters had not been voting rights per se but rather "human dignity."

In *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), Hegel developed the concept of recognition to describe the psychic dimension of political subjectivity highlighted by Hardekopf and Mazzoldi in their references to the metaphor of politics as stage. According to Hegel, the conflict-laden dynamic of social relations is driven by the desire of every individual to have his or her dignity as a free subject acknowledged by others. In his book-length sequel to "The End of History?" Fukuyama explicitly referred to Hegel's concept of recognition to support his claim that liberal democracy represents the final stage in humanity's ideological evolution and thus the end of history. Only liberal democracy provides recognition "on a universal basis in which the dignity of each person as a free and autonomous being is recognized by all," Fukuyama argued in *The End of History and the Last Man* (200). This is the idea Expressionists and Futurists contested with the stage metaphor. If, as Hegel suggested, recognition can only be won through agonistic struggle, then the liberal-democratic institution of parliament, where the masses of citizens are represented by a few deputies, does not offer most citizens any forum to seek or win recognition. Hardekopf's dismissal of electoral

politics for reducing political participation to the casting of ballots suggests that the representational forms of liberal democracy will never give life the same sense of drama as a direct and potentially violent demonstration of public protest.

When *Die Aktion* began publishing a year after Hardekopf's statement, the government's modest attempt at electoral reform had already ended in a fiasco (Hertz-Eichenrode 180). The new review responded by rejecting electoral politics as empty theater and promoting syndicalist ideas on direct action, instead. When English workers staged a general strike in the summer of 1911, for example, Editor Franz Pfemfert heralded the event as a "storm signal of the final and decisive, social revolution" ("Sturmsignale" 834). The general strike is not about wage increases or other material concessions, Pfemfert told readers. "It is a dress rehearsal for the last great war of emancipation" (833). In this allusion to the stage trope, Pfemfert highlighted an important syndicalist tenet: namely, the idea that striking, in particular, and political action, in general, represents a performative end in itself, apart from any material goals that might have motivated its inception. Like Mazzoldi, Pfemfert believed that the performative quality of striking served an important function by giving disenfranchised masses an opportunity to practice political subjectivity. Like Mazzoldi, he insisted that the strategic considerations of union organizers be subordinated to the spontaneous self-expression of workers. Only then could the masses develop the kind of political agency described by Lublinski in *The Balance of Modernism.*

Comedy, the Opiate of the People

When the *Reichstag* recessed in October 1911 with elections scheduled for January 1912, Pfemfert called on readers to ignore the campaign, boycott the balloting, and engage in extra-parliamentary action, instead. "We have gotten so comfortably used to viewing the *Reichstag* as an entertainment establishment that we treat its recesses like the vacation of any other theater," Pfemfert wrote in an editorial titled "Das politische Schauspielhaus" ("The Political Playhouse"). If earlier examples of the stage metaphor had thematized the performative quality of political subjectivity, Pfemfert

now emphasized the fictional quality of representative democracy: namely, the idea that one parliamentarian can 'stand in' for a body of constituents that is in fact absent. Pfemfert's comments indicate that the pseudo-participatory quality of German institutions had discredited the idea of representative democracy. The average German had "become accustomed to viewing his parliament as a powerless institution, as a mask to hide absolutism," he argued in "The Political Playhouse" (1121). In a subsequent piece Pfemfert returned to the fictional quality of parliamentary representation and called the *Reichstag* an "Imperial Comic Opera." "Will the German citizen never recognize that this parliamentarianism from which he awaits salvation does not represent genuine democratic power, but rather an opiate for every stirring of freedom, for every democratic desire?" Pfemfert asked rhetorically. "And yet the people 'struggle' for this charade in Prussia" ("Hungernde Volksschullehrer" 1345). In caricaturing parliamentary politics as a "charade," Pfemfert employed the stage metaphor to disarticulate the democratic ideal of popular sovereignty from its identification with the liberal institution of parliament.

In Italy, *La Voce* had also worked to separate the democratic ideal of popular sovereignty from identification with the compromised institutions of liberalism. In the electoral commentary cited earlier, the staff of *La Voce* said they rejected all party labels but would have been happy to call themselves "democrats" if the name had not been "usurped" by the parties coinvolved in an undemocratic system of parliamentary cooptation. When Giolitti temporarily left government in December 1909, Prezzolini contrasted the perennial prime minister's skill at parliamentary deal-making with the ideal of popular sovereignty, arguing in "Da Giolitti a Sonnino" ("From Giolitti to Sonnino") that parliament actually ruled against the will of the people. "Giolitti's government was *parliamentary* and not *national*, which is to say, it was surrounded by the loyal support of a clientele in parliament and broad antipathy in the provinces" (225, Prezzolini's emphases). In a piece titled "Il problema della democrazia" ("The Problem of Democracy"), Antonio Anzilotti argued that the gap between parliament and the people had discredited the very idea of participatory democracy. "In reality, the principle of democracy, that it corresponds to the total sum of individual wills, has

become totally bankrupt. The people have not put their hands to work in shaping the organs of state, and the state has only exercised the illusion of sovereignty" (679). In criticizing what he considered to be a betrayal of democratic principles, Anzilotti asked whether a regime that claims to be democratic and yet permits its citizens to remain spectators does not forfeit its legitimacy.

Two years after Pfemfert began calling for Germans to boycott electoral politics, Italians were preparing for their first elections since parliament had approved Giolitti's bill introducing universal male suffrage. One of the dreams that inspired *La Voce* was finally becoming reality: Italy was making the transition to a modern, mass democracy. Hence, it might seem strange that Giovanni Papini, a *vociano* of the first hour, would echo Pfemfert's call for a boycott and tell voters, including those who had never before had the opportunity to vote, to stay home. But that is precisely what he did in a piece titled "Freghiamoci della politica" ("Let's Give a Damn About Politics"), published in *Lacerba* in October 1913. F.T. Marinetti, the founder and impresario of Futurism, responded with a hastily composed manifesto of Futurist politics, in which he appealed to Futurists to cast their ballots for a disparate agenda that ranged from "the economic defense and patriotic education of the proletariat" to a "cynical, astute, and aggressive foreign policy" ("Programma" 221). Papini published Marinetti's manifesto on the front page of the subsequent issue, but he also added a disclaimer in which he defended his call for an electoral boycott and criticized Marinetti for being politically naive ("Postilla").

In "Let's Give a Damn About Politics," Papini called on "intelligent" Italians to withhold support for a regime that staged comic entertainment in parliament to divert attention from the real exercise of power elsewhere, "behind the scenes." Here Papini echoed Pfemfert's use of the stage metaphor to critique the fictional quality of parliamentary representation. "Real political power is located outside the parties. They try as best they can to represent and exploit this power, but all they manage to do is hide it," he concluded. "Real politics, the politics of deeds and not debates, is the work of Capitalists, Priests, and Workers. The rest is only comedy played out in more or less good faith" ("Freghiamoci" 213). The figures Papini identified as "real" political actors were representatives of collective

identities who did not hesitate to use violence when the prestige of their group was at stake. This violence might take the form of striking (in the case of workers), factory lock-outs (in the case of industrialists), or forbidding Catholics to vote (as the Vatican did when Italy annexed Rome). In contrast to deputies in parliament, who seemed all too susceptible to cooptation, the representatives of these groups were willing to accept sacrifice and inflict pain on opponents in order to win recognition for their groups.

Papini understood that Giolitti had extended voting rights as a ploy to remain in power. For a decade anticipating this move, Giolitti had retained power by means of what came to be known as a parliamentary dictatorship. This term referred to his ability to assemble ad hoc majorities united by no agenda other than allegiance to him and his pork-barrel politics. During this decade, in which *giolittismo* became a synonym for *trasformismo* (the generic term for 'cooptation'), Giolitti's ability to build patchwork majorities spanning the political spectrum had made ideological differences irrelevant. Papini correctly predicted that Giolitti would retain power regardless of whether millions of new voters pushed the political pendulum to the right or left. Giolitti would always win, Papini argued, because he knew how to play whichever role the "parliamentary comedy" demanded at a given moment. Giolitti could "play the socialist and the imperialist, all the while laughing under his breath at the theoretical calculations of those who fall for the performance on stage and never understand that in politics the real dramatic action takes place behind the scenes" ("Freghiamoci" 214). Papini suggested that the gap between the fiction on-stage and the actual exercise of power backstage had neutralized public debate and trivialized political life. As his commentary suggests, the problem of neutralization raised the challenge of creating a political culture that can provide a forum for the public representation of social differences and offer each party involved a meaningful opportunity to seek recognition.

Faced with the tragicomic impotence of the *Reichstag*, one of Germany's most prominent liberals, Max Weber, abandoned the ideal of parliament as a forum for interpreting the popular will. Weber argued instead that modern parliaments are nothing more than instruments used to orchestrate popular support for decisions made by a technocratic apparatus. "Today, parliaments are the

means for making this minimum of consent superficially manifest," he wrote in 1917 (339). Despite the reference to fictional performance, Weber's study, which considered how a postwar Germany might be reorganized as a mass democracy, drew on a different figure, the metaphor of politics as business. "When seen from a sociological perspective, the modern state is as much a 'business' as any factory," Weber argued (321). If the state is compared to a factory, then nothing threatens it more than the striking advocated by Expressionists and Futurists before 1914. Indeed, Weber criticized the avant-garde's "ethic of heroic fraternity" for undermining support for parliamentary rule (309, 366). He concluded by predicting that any mass democracy would reduce political discourse to demagoguery and force a caesarist solution in which the masses elect a charismatic leader to exercise semi-dictatorial power. If the liberal institution of parliament was incommensurable with the romantic ideal of popular sovereignty, as Weber argued, then Expressionists and Futurists, unlike Weber, were prepared to sacrifice parliament to salvage popular sovereignty.

From Political Comedy to Tragedy

As a sincere liberal, Giolitti, like Weber, understood that failure to integrate the masses in public life posed a threat to the state. Indeed, Giolitti had taken office with intentions of making politics more inclusive. But once he became occupied with assembling parliamentary majorities, he reverted instead to a strategy of depoliticizing the masses through economic concessions. By the time he finally extended voting rights, nearly a decade after taking office, his holding pattern had created a reservoir of popular resentment ready to explode in violence. This is exactly what happened in the summer of 1914. When revolutionary syndicalists staged a nationwide general strike in June 1914, Papini observed that political life was momentarily elevated from comedy to tragedy. The drama began when the Independent Syndicalist Union (USI) called anti-militarist demonstrations for June 7. In the Adriatic port of Ancona, police shot into a crowd of protesters, killing two persons on the spot and mortally wounding a third. To protest the repressive use of force by the government, the Socialist Party and rail-workers union

joined the USI in calling for a general strike, which effectively shut down the national economy. The red flag was hoisted over public buildings in many municipalities throughout Italy, and the strike turned into armed rebellion in the Romagna, which had a long tradition of rural anarchism. In the end it took army troops a week to restore order. Gramsci would later describe the *settimana rossa*, or Red Week, as "the first, glorious intervention of the popular masses on the political stage." For the first time, the masses exercised "the popular sovereignty that no longer found any expression at all in the representative Chamber," Gramsci argued ("Il popolo" 9-10). In these comments, Gramsci drew on Papini's analysis, which he repeatedly cited in his *Prison Notebooks*.

Papini began his comments, titled "I fatti di giugno" ("The Events of June"), by arguing that parliament's claim to constitute a marketplace of ideas, in which rational debate determines public policy by consensus, diverts attention from the struggle among competing interests that is deciding policy backstage. "The REAL political life of the country consists in this *Marketplace of Interests*, where each individual or party tries to get the better of his rival," he wrote (Papini's emphases). "The rest is just slogans, big words and hot air balloons, personal aggrandizement, partisan rivalries, corridor conspiracies, and drum shots for the folks in the gallery" (181). In his previous call for an electoral boycott, Papini had focused on the actors. Now he turned to those who had been relegated to the passive role of spectators. "Sooner or later, however, the folks in the gallery catch on to the comedy and find it too costly, because they have to buy a new ticket for each act," he wrote. "The folks in the gallery, who are for the most part ignorant innocents kept clueless by the newspaper accomplices of the various theatrical companies, applaud or boo the actors, but they would like something better. So every now and then they riot and let blood. And for a moment, tragedy interrupts the comedy" ("Fatti di giugno" 181).

Here Papini pulled together both strands of the stage metaphor discussed so far. First, he presented a powerful image of the distinction between actor and spectator, which is essential to any democratic notion of political agency. As his image clearly suggests, this distinction consists in the difference between being on stage and being in the audience. Secondly, he identified what was at stake in

the comedy trope first elaborated by Pfemfert in *Die Aktion*. The critique implicit in this metaphor suggests that the comic effect of parliamentary cooptation trivializes public life by neutralizing social differences. As Pfemfert's modification of the Marxian analogy to opium indicates, parliamentary comedy had the effect of deadening democratic desires and keeping the masses docile. Indeed, the resolution of comedy in conciliatory laughter offers an insight into liberal democracy's quest for social consensus, which can only be had at the cost of suppressing difference. Parliament's tendency to suppress conflict and present a steady program of comedy had created a dangerous reservoir of resentment, Papini suggested. If parliamentary debate had devolved into comedy, then a higher form of theater was needed, one that could elevate political life to drama and provide a forum for its public manifestation. This is what the masses achieved when their latent resentment erupted into manifest violence, he argued. For one week in June, the political stage was transposed from parliament to streets, squares, and factory floors. For a week, the roles of actor and spectator were reversed, as the masses took the stage and became actors.

As Papini indicated, the counterpoint to comedy—tragedy—is defined by the existential distinction between life and death. The psychological appeal of comedy resides in its ability to present reassuring images of social reconciliation. According to Hegel's definition in *Lectures on Aesthetics*, comedy can only end with the reconciliation of a protagonist who has challenged the ethical order because his or her challenge represents an expression of arbitrary individuality that lacks ethical substance. Once the protagonist has been shown that the principle s/he represents (such as greed) is arbitrary, then nothing prevents him or her from renouncing the vice and being welcomed back into the ethical order. Indeed, this reconciliation reaffirms the legitimacy of the existing order. Paradoxically, it is the tragic hero, the one who puts his or her life on the line for an ethical principle and refuses to back down, who must die, if a more just order is to emerge. In Sophocles's Antigone, for example, where the antagonistic principles of state sovereignty and family love collide in an ethical dilemma, the subjective (and thus arbitrary) aspect of Antigone's defiance of Creon must be expunged by her death in order for the objective, ethical principle she represents to be recog-

nized and preserved.

Hegel's gloss on the decisive distinction between comedy and tragedy offers a useful key to interpret the metaphorical significance it held for the Expressionists and Futurists who tried to envision a truly mass democracy. Political life can only provide the masses with opportunities to develop subjectivity if political struggle attains the heroic quality of myth, Mazzoldi, Hardekopf, and Pfemfert suggested. As Hegel's gloss indicates, this stature can only be achieved by sacrifice for an ethical principle powerful enough to endow political life with a sense of heroic dignity. In other words, common citizens need a cause worth fighting and potentially dying for, if they, like the princes of previous generations, are to attain political agency. What parliamentary politics offered instead, Hardekopf, Pfemfert, Anzilotti, and Papini argued, was a trivial form of comedy, which acted as an opiate to keep the masses ignorant of their potential as political actors. Again, as Hegel's gloss suggests, the comic quality of parliamentary theater stems from the unprincipled conduct of its actors, their readiness to sacrifice ethical principle for self-preservation. The false reconciliation offered by "gladiatorial comedies" (Hobsbawm 88) in parliament could not satisfy desires for recognition, Expressionists and Futurists observed, because it trivializes the ethical conflict that gives political life drama. In contrast to comedy, tragedy insists on the irreducibility of social difference and the high stakes involved in seeking recognition, which requires risking one's life in agonistic struggle. By its very definition, tragedy denies the possibility of achieving social reconciliation through rational debate, which is (or was) the ideal of liberal democracy.

The introduction of national parliaments in Italy (1861) and Germany (1871) represented significant milestones in the triumph of liberal ideas in the nineteenth century. A half-century later, the comic quality of parliamentary politics in these states testified to the stunted (Italy) or stillborn (Germany) lives of their parliamentary institutions. Both regimes were founded under the rising star of liberalism, but neither succeeded in realizing the liberal ideal of a parliamentary culture that could translate social conflict into political compromise. And yet the introduction of liberal (or, in Germany's case, pseudo-liberal) institutions made the extension of bourgeois rights to all members of society inevitable. This process

was slowed by remnants of the old order that hindered democratization through 1914, as Arno Mayer has shown. This deferral of democracy was symptomatic for the reactionary climate in which Expressionists and Futurists came of age. It would be difficult to understand their embrace of a tragic mode of politics without recognizing the poisoned atmosphere in which it incubated. For modernists of the early twentieth century, the liberal model of limited democracy seemed as worn as a Biedermeier sofa. They would not have imagined that liberalism might survive the introduction of mass suffrage, much less represent the final stage in human history, as Fukuyama argued at century's end.

Liberal Democracy, or Business as Usual

This analysis of political debates in the most influential forums of German Expressionism and Italian Futurism throws new light on the political character of cultural modernism before 1914. If recent research has highlighted the elective affinities of modernism for fascism (and vice versa), this analysis of the stage metaphor suggests that Expressionism and Futurism initially shared a syndicalist-tinged commitment to the democratic ideal of popular sovereignty that was incompatible with fascist methods of orchestrating popular consent for authoritarian rule. By 1918 the extra-parliamentary opposition of Futurism and Expressionism had metamorphosed into affirmative alliances with revolutionary regimes in the immediate postwar period. In Germany, where the revolution was initially socialist in character, Expressionists produced propaganda for the SPD-led government that went on to dissolve revolutionary councils and hold parliamentary elections. In Italy, left-wing Futurists participated in founding the first *fasci* in December 1918 and, for a while, it was not evident which way Futurism or Fascism would go. As things became clearer, left-wing Futurists left a Fascism that was becoming more and more reactionary, while more moderate Futurists were accommodated within Mussolini's regime. As Raymond Williams once commented, it would have been difficult to predict in 1914 where the allegiance of many avant-garde artists and intellectuals might fall a decade later. "We have to recall that the politics of the avant-garde, from the beginning, could go either way," Williams

warned (62).

Perry Anderson has argued that the radical spirit of early Expressionism and Futurism is best understood as the product of an "unstable form of society and an undecided epoch, in which dramatically variable futures were lived as immediately possible" (53). Before world war swept away the vestiges of Europe's old order and created revolutionary conditions in victorious Italy and defeated Germany alike, the outlines of the future remained ambiguous to the Expressionists and Futurists who welcomed its coming. "Would a new order be more unalloyedly and radically capitalist, or would it be socialist?" they asked (Anderson 35). If the future seemed uncertain, on one point Expressionists and Futurists were agreed: parliament was a relic of nineteenth-century liberalism destined for the dustbin of history. Both groups were convinced that liberalism, which had retreated before the prospect of mass democracy at the close of the nineteenth century, would not survive the extension of political rights in the twentieth. It did not occur to them that liberal democracy might fill old skins with new wine without having the old skins burst.

This is what liberal democracy appears to have accomplished in the twentieth century, at least according to Fukuyama's account. Norberto Bobbio was more skeptical about the success of liberal democracy, arguing that the progressive expansion of the franchise had put the union of liberalism and democracy on the verge of crisis by century's end (1-2). This union was never more than a marriage of convenience between contradictory traditions, Chantal Mouffe observes. On one hand, the liberal tradition of the Enlightenment, which emphasizes rule of law, human rights, and individual liberty, and, on the other, an older democratic tradition, which stresses equality, the identity of governing and governed, and the ideal of popular sovereignty. There is no necessary relation between the two traditions, Mouffe insists, only an historically contingent articulation. Today this relation is construed in a way that privileges individual rights while neglecting the democratic ideal of popular sovereignty. She warns that this tendency has created a "democratic deficit" and argues that the viability of democratic institutions depends on the ability to develop an ensemble of practices that can create "democratic citizens" (95). This is the problem Expressionists

and Futurists addressed with the metaphor of politics as stage. Neither group developed a clear vision of what form mass democracy might take, but on one point they were agreed. Their use of the stage metaphor insisted that mass political participation depended on a qualitative transformation of the democratic ideal of popular sovereignty and not simply the quantitative extension of voting rights.

In contrast, the liberal democratic order that triumphed in Fukuyama's narrative rejected the figure of politics as stage, at least in the participatory sense intended by Expressionists and Futurists, for something more akin to Weber's model of government as a business. The result is democracy as corporation, in which the individual shareholder bears only limited responsibility for the success or failure of the collective enterprise. This figure helps to explain the reluctance of contemporary political parties to call for personal sacrifices on behalf of the social collective, since it defines each citizen's relation to society as that of an individual investor risking private capital for personal gain. Fukuyama admitted that this model of politics would offer citizens few opportunities to seek recognition. As a result, he predicted that the quest for recognition would be transposed from politics, which he understands as a metaphorical marketplace of ideas, to the literal marketplace of economic competition. At the same time, he voiced doubts that economic competition would provide an adequate substitute for the agonistic struggle unique to political life. This is the "contradiction" liberal democracy has yet to resolve, Fukuyama concluded (*End of History* 314). It is the same problem Expressionists and Futurists addressed with the metaphor of politics as stage, at a time when mass democracy was little more than a futuristic dream. The actuality of this problem today suggests a need to re-envision the ideal of mass democracy as a horizon of expectation that cannot be reduced to closure in the casting of ballots or resolution of policy debates. The alternative, as contemporary practices demonstrate, is democracy as business as usual, in which the participation of most citizens is limited to that of passive consumers.

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