

Democratic Vistas Conference: Forms of Civic Power

Abstracts

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Programme

Thursday 5th June: Public Keynote Lecture

19.00 Cristina Maria Flesher Fominaya (Aarhus University)

Civic Movements in Dark Times: How Global Crises and the Decline of Western Democracy Are Shaping the Context for Progressive Mobilization

20.30 Wine Reception at FKH

Friday 6th June: Conference

10.00 Opening Remarks: Gladys Kalichini, Philip Mills, Belén Pueyo-Ibáñez

10.15 Önder Özden (Goethe-Universität Frankfurt)

Withdrawal, Disengagement: Another Form of Civic Power?

11.15 Fadzai Veronica Muchemwa (National Gallery of Zimbabwe)

Reimagining Civic Power: The Transformative Role of the Arts in Future Movements

12.15 Marco Santalucia (Università di Roma Tor Vergata)

Empowering Civil Society: Shared Administration as a New Era in Collaborative Governance

13.00 Lunch at FKH

14.30 Thiago Ferreira (Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina)

Power in the Public Sphere: A Polemological View

15.30 Itunuoluwa Williams (University of Kentucky)

#EndSARS: A Demonstration of Feminist Civic Power

16.30 Vinzenz Hediger (Goethe-Universität Frankfurt)

Screening the Politics of the Governed: Popular Sovereignty and Civic Power Beyond the State in Indian Cinema

17.30 Concluding Roundtable

18.30 Dinner at FKH

Abstracts

Cristina Maria Flesher Fominaya (Aarhus University)

"Civic Movements in Dark Times: How Global Crises and the Decline of Western Democracy Are Shaping the Context for Progressive Mobilization"

In this talk, I would like to first discuss how the West's incapacity/unwillingness to effectively address global crises is eroding faith in western democracy, and to highlight key elements of democratic backsliding that shape the context for progressive mobilization today. I then want to suggest some of the ways progressive activists might change their mindset in view of the new "normal". Finally, I will draw on my ongoing research project to share some conceptions of democracy from activists around the globe to show that despite the very real threats to -and disillusionment with -democracy, activists continue to work for a world in which democratic rights and freedoms can flourish.

"Withdrawal, Disengagement: Another Form of Civic Power?"

The early 2010s witnessed a wave of social movements around the world, from the Occupy movement to the so-called "Arap Spring" to the Gezi Park protests in Istanbul. While these movements, particularly the Occupy Movement, were regarded by some as naive and politically unsustainable activism, as these movements focused on withdrawal from all institutionalized forms of politics and formation of political alliances (Mouffe, 2013), yet there may be an important aspect to be gained by focusing on the idea of withdrawal or disengagement.

Politics is generally associated with struggle or conflict, in various degrees - agonistic or antagonistic - and a game of recognition. Living in post-foundational societies in particular underpins such a paradigm. Oliver Marchart, for instance, establishes a correlation between politics and post-foundationalism, a theoretical framework that posits that politics is less reliant on the assumption of an absence of any fundamental ground than on the absence of an ultimate ground. Namely, there would always be partial attempts to fill the gap, to claim to provide a ground. Thus, it is associated with pluralist endeavours that are engaged in a struggle that, depending on the historical contingency, involves an antagonistic confrontation that underlies a fundamental contingency at the heart of the social and political horizon. Since there is no ultimate foundation, this contingency runs through the social world, or in other words, it is the necessary transcendental condition of the post-foundational world. The framework proposed by Marchart compels us to act, to work on this contingency. In other words, the foundation of any given system is always already the exposure of contingency, or, to use Derrida's term, of undecidability, necessitating a constant decision: an unending "chase" that renders any political endeavor to establish a foundation futile (Derrida, 1997). In essence, the economy between "questioning the notion of ground" (Laclau, 1990: 78) and affirming "the constitutive nature of [the absence of ground] and its political institutionalization" (Laclau, 2007: 46) leaves no room for a "break" or "stop," as there will always be others to replace our place or thwart our plans.

From the perspective of the movements that have emerged in the 2010s, however, this paradigm of politics may need to be reconsidered. In fact, these movements have highlighted another political paradigm that is less associated with retreating into passivity and remaining inert, but rather with shifting the line of (power) relations by subtracting from the sphere of recognition and the conflict (Hesselberth and de Bloois, 2020). That is, such a political paradigm could be formulated as a form of situational thinking and acting that seeks to undermine the foundations of the given political apparatus for the new ways of living and feeling that are to come, rather than demanding something from this apparatus in a confrontational way. In this paper, drawing on the aforementioned movements, especially the Gezi Park uprising, I will juxtapose the political paradigm based on conflict and recognition with ideas of disengagement to highlight the possibility of thinking another kind(s) of civic power, one that turns its back on power rather than confronting it from the front.

Fadzai Veronica Muchemwa (National Gallery of Zimbabwe)

“Reimagining Civic Power: The Transformative Role of the Arts in Future Movements”

Due to ecological collapse, systemic inequality, digital surveillance, punitive legislation and political polarisation, traditional civic movements often struggle to maintain effectiveness. I argue that the arts provide a critical means of reimagining civic power, offering alternative avenues for political engagement and communal solidarity. Drawing on theories of aesthetic politics and an analysis of contemporary case studies, I explore how the arts disrupt entrenched expansionary logic of capital, engage affective and participatory dimensions, and create alternative publics beyond institutional constraints.

By interrogating the limits of protest and visibility, the paper proposes a shift toward prefiguration where artistic practices serve as prototypes for future civic systems. From Indigenous Futurisms to activist performance, the case studies examined demonstrate how creative expression fosters new forms of political imagination. Ultimately, civic power and movements must evolve to meet the challenges ahead, with the arts playing a central role in shaping the landscapes of resistance and possibility.

Marco Santalucia (Università di Roma Tor Vergata)

“Empowering Civil Society:

Shared Administration as a New Era in Collaborative Governance”

The concept of Shared Administration (*Amministrazione condivisa*), as recognized by the landmark 2020 judgment of the Italian Constitutional Court, represents a significant innovation within the context of civic empowerment and administrative governance in Italy. This judicial decision has established a pivotal precedent, formally acknowledging the active role citizens and civic organizations can play in managing, administering, and planning activities of general interest, traditionally considered the exclusive domain of public authorities. The 2020 ruling by the Constitutional Court underlined the necessity and legitimacy of citizen involvement in processes that directly impact their communities. It affirmed the legal basis for partnerships between public administrations and civil society actors, enabling these entities to cooperate on an equal footing. This acknowledgment aligns with a broader shift toward collaborative governance models that emphasize participation, transparency, and shared responsibility, deviating from a purely bureaucratic or centralized approach.

The Shared Administration enables public authorities and citizens, represented through associations, cooperatives, and volunteer organizations, to jointly carry out services and manage assets vital to community welfare. This model promotes subsidiarity and enhances democratic participation, allowing citizens to exercise meaningful influence and oversight in the planning and execution of activities that directly affect their localities, such as the management of public spaces, social services, cultural activities, and environmental protection. Furthermore, the ruling supports the principle of horizontal subsidiarity, constitutionally enshrined in Article 118 of the Italian Constitution, reinforcing that citizens’ initiatives can complement and enrich the actions of public administrations. The concept not only democratizes administrative processes but also fosters innovation and adaptability, as civil society often introduces flexible, efficient, and community-oriented solutions to social challenges.

Shared Administration represents a significant paradigm shift in the social and economic relations between public administration and civil society, moving beyond the traditional competitive logic of public procurement. This new approach emphasizes collaboration and co-design, recognizing the direct contribution of citizens and civil society organizations in delivering services and activities of general interest. By sharing goals and responsibilities, it establishes partnerships that encourage more efficient use of resources and better alignment with the genuine needs of local communities. Unlike traditional tender processes, which focus primarily on economic and competitive criteria, Shared Administration prioritizes elements such as quality, social innovation, and local impact. This model fosters genuine and responsible community engagement, enhancing social cohesion and building trust between citizens and public institutions. In this sense, Shared Administration is not merely an innovative administrative practice but represents a cultural revolution that promotes inclusivity and democracy in managing common goods and public services.

“Power in the Public Sphere: A Polemological View”

Contemporary debates on power often emphasize its justificatory and communicative dimensions, interpreting it primarily through discourse, reason-giving, and consensus-building, as developed in Habermas' and Forst's works. Such interpretations underscore the importance of legitimacy and deliberation as foundational for political and civic engagement. Communicative conceptions of power propose that legitimate power is generated through rational dialogue, emphasizing mutual understanding and non-coercive consensus as the ultimate foundations of democratic legitimacy.

However, this perspective often overlooks the polemological dimension of power—the ongoing, dynamic, and conflictual nature that characterizes political interactions and collective endeavors. Acknowledging insights from Hannah Arendt, this paper proposes to enrich the prevailing discourse-focused understanding of power by introducing a complementary, polemological perspective. Power, from this viewpoint, arises fundamentally from coordinated collective action, embedded within continual struggles and contestations that constantly redefine relationships and positions within society. Rather than being static or solely dependent on deliberation, power is seen as inherently dynamic, requiring continuous regeneration through interactions that blend cooperation with confrontation.

Drawing on this approach, civic movements within democratic contexts are reexamined as inherently situated within a fluctuating landscape of alliances and oppositions. Civic power, thus understood, is more than the ability to justify positions or reach mutual understanding—it is also about effectively navigating complex social dynamics, engaging in strategic contests, and redefining the terms and possibilities of political interaction. Every act of power simultaneously opens a window for potential disruption and reconfiguration, creating opportunities for shifts from within established orders. This concept highlights both the strategic resourcefulness and intrinsic vulnerabilities of civic action, which must continually reaffirm and regenerate its strength through active participation and engagement.

Incorporating this polemological dimension into existing theoretical frameworks expands our analytical capacity, enabling a more comprehensive assessment of civic movements' effectiveness and resilience in contemporary democracies. Such a perspective reveals the intricate ways through which civic power both shapes and is shaped by ongoing conflicts and provides insights into how democratic practices might be revitalized or weakened by the dynamics of power inherent in their execution.

Itunuoluwa Williams (University of Kentucky)

"#EndSARS: A Demonstration of Feminist Civic Power"

The feminist 2020 EndSARS protests and the Nigerian government's response to it reflect on the key question of civic power and its relationship to democracy. The Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) was charged with combating armed robbery and kidnapping-related crimes, a consequence of Nigeria's chronic unemployment and financial instability crises. However, SARS became a predator; reports indicate that officers were "responsible for innumerable extrajudicial killings, cases of human rights abuse, sexual harassment of women, and the brutalization of young Nigerians under the basis of 'criminal profiling.'" These injustices culminated in the EndSARS protests, a form of civic power influenced by feminist theory and activism. My presentation for the Democratic Vistas Conference will analyze the relevance of EndSARS women protesters and discuss what factors lead to a civic movement's success. I will argue that understanding the feminist nature of this movement illuminates the evolution of civic demonstrations in Nigeria and how women negotiate patriarchal and other socio-cultural barriers when agitating for change.

Beginning October 8th, 2020, the youth flocked to the streets in peaceful protests, disrupting traffic, defying the police, and adlibbing chants, such as "Sọrọ sókè!" ("Speak Up" in Yoruba). More unique was its strong online presence, which caught the attention of the international community, much to the government's chagrin. Central to the EndSARS galvanization were feminist actors. Women protestors and groups such as the Feminist Coalition, supported various aspects of the protests. From leading the charge on both the physical and online space, coalition building, fundraising and more, the FemCo proved themselves a formidable force against the state and federal governments. Even after the tragic massacre at the Lekki Tollgate by armed forces, the organization rendered necessary assistance, settling bail arrangements and hospital fees for injured protestors.

This paper will employ both primary sources, such as FemCo audited accounts, interviews, and online posts, as well as secondary literature, such as scholarly journals, newspaper articles, and blog posts. Two theoretical frameworks support the argument: Black cyberfeminism and Negofeminism. Black cyberfeminism, as developed by Kishona Gray, is the propagation of Black feminist action and thought through the "context of social subjugation of digitalization and virtual reality; intersecting subjugation engendered in cyberspace and virtual feminism's isolation." Through the effective use of hashtag activism, online fundraising, and information-sharing, FemCo was crucial in sustaining both the in-person and online movements. Inversely, Obioma Nnaemeka's negofeminism asserts that African feminists are well-versed in negotiation and compromise, expertly navigating through oppressive instruments and patriarchal frameworks. Indeed, FemCo were successful in negotiating societal norms in their bid for justice.

Ultimately, I seek to amplify minority voices in the global South by demonstrating their unique contribution to theoretical approaches to civic power.

Vinzenz Hediger (Goethe-Universität Frankfurt)

"Screening the Politics of the Governed:

Popular Sovereignty and Civic Power Beyond the State in Indian Cinema"

In India, cinema is political. More specific, cinema is a privileged site of democratic politics and civic resistance. As film historian Ashis Rajadhyaksha argues the cinema is the only place where the democratic idea of B.R. Ambedkar's post-independence constitution ever become a reality and a truly democratic polity takes shape, however fleetingly, in the audience. And particularly in the South of India, cinema and politics are directly connected. Film stars turn their fan clubs into parties and win elections, and the voters exercise their franchise by elevating their idols to power, and bringing them down again, when needed. At the same time the cinema, and the films themselves, are site of articulating political discontent and the empowerment of the disenfranchised. This contribution will look at examples from Malayalam and Tamil cinema to discuss cinema as a space of what political theorist Partha Chatterjee calls the "politics of the governed" and the new popular sovereignty. The main thrust of the argument, following Chatterjee and others, is that India today is a model case and laboratory of democratic challenges and civic power with lessons for the so-called "global North" and liberal democracy in the so-called West.