

April 2019

Hegelian Political Theater

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Recommended Citation

Olmstead, Cade M., "Hegelian Political Theater" (2019). *Research in the Capitol*. 7.
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HEGELIAN POLITICAL THEATER

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Introduction

What could politics, theater, and the project of German idealism all hold in common? This research seeks to explore the usage of comedy in modern political discourse through the perspectives of theater and German idealist philosophy.

It begins with an analysis of ancient Greek theater by the philosopher G.W.F. Hegel, applies this reading to the 2013 Turkish Gezi Park protests, and ultimately makes a normative claim about comedy's use in public discourse and proper democratic politics.

Discussion

The 2013 Gezi Park Protests were the largest in the history of the Turkish Republic and included 3.5 million people. The protests began with demonstrations against the demolishing of a park in Taksim Square. After the protestors were labeled 'çapulcu,' a Turkish word translating to 'looter', by Turkey's President Erdoğan, they claimed this label as their own. Songs, t-shirts, banners, and social media posts all came to bear the term, often being utilized under the pretense of humor and jest.

This case serves as a model of the comic if the protestors are viewed as looters of public space. The protestors 'seriously' became 'çapulcu' through their occupation of space. They merged symbolic representation as looters into concrete action.



The power of 'çapulcu' as a comic object only came to be realized through a re-threading of the narrative around the signifier. Erdoğan supplied a term meant to 'ridicule' and demean the protesters, but instead of rejecting the association, they overidentified with this term, exploited the arbitrariness of the signifier, and weaved together a new narrative thread alongside Erdoğan's own. This in turn led to all kinds of 'mishaps' for Erdoğan and yet supplied the means towards new agency for the Turkish people.

Theory

In Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* appears a survey of Greek theater, which includes epics, tragedy, and comedy. The common guiding thread of the discussion revolves around how each dramatic form handles the representation of ideas, of the universal.

The shift from tragedy to comedy presents a fundamental turning point in his survey. Whereas tragic actors would wear masks to represent the universal, in comedy, there are no masks. For Hegel, comedy is point in which 'the Self is the absolute Being' (Zupančič, 2008, p. 28). The very gap that is implied in representation is lifted. The symbolic comes into materiality.

For Hegel, 'Comedy is not the undermining of the universal, but its (own) reversal into the concrete... This is a universal which is no longer (re)presented as being in action, but is in action' (Zupančič, 2008, p. 27).

Conclusion

It is in this 'serious comedy', where action and symbol merge, that the subversive edge of comedy is enacted. It is only by removing the detachment of action from expression, removing the gap of representation, that comedy's potential can flourish. This analysis illuminates the rhetorical structures at work in the construction of reality and how the certain dynamics of comedy might be utilized to subvert hegemonic codes on behalf of the oppressed.

Supporters of democracy must be strategic in their combatting of authoritarian forces. An effective strategy would be one that includes a critical approach to the rhetorical structures at work in constructing the collective imagination. Comedy presents one kind of opening to re-suture the threads of the imagination. The life of signs is one intertwined with our own. When we take seriously—when we perform seriously—the subversive nature of comedy, rituals of re-enchantment may occur and allow for the radical re-shaping of the conditions in which we find ourselves.

References

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