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The Democratic Counter-Occupation of The Freedom Theatre in the Palestinian Territories

INTRODUCTION

The objective of this chapter is to assess, in the light of the current crisis of liberal democracy, performable qualities of democratic practices and, with special focus on The Freedom Theatre in the occupied Palestinian territories, appraise the added value of performances that not only apply to precarious and belligerent contexts but also adapt participatory performance practices to changing political conditions. The chapter pursues correlations between increasingly radicalised democratic notions in political studies and applications of such concepts in activist performance. Towards the end of the chapter, a conceptual arrangement of democracy, performativity and adaptability will be justified in terms of ‘democrativity’.

THE DECLINE OF DEMOCRACY

The twenty-fifth-anniversary issue of *The Journal of Democracy* (January 2015) was entitled “Is Democracy in Decline?” and addressed a recent corrosion of electoral procedures, freedom of the press and the rule of law as well as a widespread doubt about democratic governance in various countries in the past decade.¹ The rationale behind the decade-long trend is motivated by the journal primarily in economic terms: the financial crises of advanced democracies and the seeming vitality of some autocratic regimes is leading to a shift in geopolitical relations between democratic states and their rivals. So how is democratic decline appraised? It is usually measured in reference to index-based averages of responses to questions about various political and electoral functions and variables in specific countries. Studying quantitative indexes of national democracies almost makes one forget about the very issue at stake, namely that the definition, significance and flaws of democracy are all about the *governance by people*. This is seldom considered in qualitative terms by political institutes such as Freedom House, Economist Intelligence Unit or Polity, who mainly

¹ *Journal of Democracy*, Volume 26, Number 1 (January 2015).

rely on quantified indications in categories such as electoral process and pluralism, civil liberties, the functioning of governments, political participation and political culture. Whilst political elections, liberties and functions are appraised as instrumental policy implementations, political participation mainly implies voter turnout, whilst political culture signifies popular attitudes to existing political systems in particular countries. It is the latter indexes, the soft attitudinal indications, that has shifted significantly in the past decade and is now characterised by a widespread doubt about democracy as a governing mode in various countries.

National rankings are assessed in terms of so-called ‘full democracy’, ‘flawed democracy’, ‘hybrid regimes’ and ‘authoritarian regimes’ as well as, alternatively, ‘free’ versus ‘not free’ states. However, the institutes seldom take into account factors related to citizens’ active participation in democratic practices. One of the main participatory measures of democracy relates to the act of voting, even though this can be a problematic criterion even in what is considered to be full and free democracies. People who celebrate classical Athens as a democratic example are honouring a city-state where about 15% of the population was eligible to vote and where one-third of the population were slaves. Athenian democracy is not exactly comparable with contemporary United Kingdom, but it is still worth considering the numbers from the recent general election (May 2015) when the Conservative party went on to form a ‘majority’ administration after getting 24.3% of the eligible electorate. In the 2016 US election, Donald Trump got 26.3% of the total electorate (or 46% of the mere 58% who turned out to vote). It is difficult to understand what David Cameron meant by saying that he intended to act as prime minister “on the basis of governing for everyone in the United Kingdom”² and what Trump meant when he said that he “will be president for all Americans”.³ To get a quarter of the electorate in a political system based on a majority system is far from logical and sustainable.

² “Election results: Conservatives win majority,” BBC News, accessed January 1, 2017, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election-2015-32633099>.

³ “US election results 2016: ‘I will be president for all Americans’,” BBC News, accessed January 1, 2017, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-37920305>.

THE FREEDOM THEATRE AND ISRAEL/PALESTINE

Israel and Palestine are special cases when it comes to estimating conditions and qualities of democracy. Freedom House considers Israel's status to be 'Free', whilst the Palestinian territories are deemed 'Not Free'. In reference to its freedom status, political rights and civil liberties, Israel gets an aggregate score of 80 (out of 100) and a freedom rating of 1.5 (on a scale of 1 to 7 where 1 is highest).⁴ "The numerical ratings and status above reflect conditions in Israel itself," Freedom House states in an explanatory note. "Separate reports examine the West Bank and the Gaza Strip." The latter reports, unsurprisingly, account for scores as low as 30 and 5.5 for the West Bank and, even worse, 12 and 6.5 for Gaza. What is surprising, however, is that the report on "Israel itself" is distinct from the West Bank and Gaza reports, despite that Israel's policies and interventions in the Palestinian territories have had and continue to have direct and fundamental effects on the scores of the territories. Israel controls more than half of the West Bank and is enforcing a military blockade of Gaza, so it is peculiar that the scores of Israel ("itself") are not affected at all by the country's relations with the Palestinian territories.⁵

It is not clear why Freedom House has committed itself to keep Israel and the Palestinian territories separate as geopolitical entities. What is evident, however, is that the organisation applies different evaluation criteria to principles and practices respectively. The paragraphs in the Israel country report usually start with a categorical statement about a high degree of fairness and rights and then qualifies such declarations with examples of practices that compromise the country's freedom status. In the section on political pluralism and participation, which explicitly contrasts rights and practices, it is stated that "Palestinian citizens of Israel enjoy equal political rights under the law but face some discrimination in practice" (Freedom House 2016). In the section on freedom of expression and belief, the report

⁴ Freedom House country report on Israel, accessed February 1, 2017, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2016/israel>.

⁵ Noam Chomsky does not think the geopolitical separation "is a very pretty picture; you can't separate Israel itself from Greater Israel with their planning which is being implemented in the West Bank." Chomsky, *On Palestine* (London: Penguin Random House), 101.

claims that “while Israel’s founding documents define it as a ‘Jewish and democratic state’, freedom of religion is largely respected”. However, Jewish women are repeatedly “arrested at the Western Wall for donning prayer shawls traditionally worn by men, in violation of rules set for the location by ultra-Orthodox religious officials”. So it appears that conditional national commands, such as geopolitical boundaries (albeit in violation of international law) and ethnic and gender policies, such as orthodox religious rules (albeit in violation of the country’s freedom of expression), override the enactment of cultural practices as well as the implementation of laws in Israel – and yet this does not seem to alter Freedom House’s estimation of the status of freedom in Israel.

In the occupied Palestinian territories, the relations between policies and practices are quite contrary compared to the assessment of Israel. The superimposed implementation of Israeli policies obviously limit the self-governance of the Palestinian Authority and thus put cultural practices in a pivotal position when it comes to the territories’ status of freedom and democracy. As Jen Curatola argues in her chapter in this volume, Palestinian civil society organisations hold precarious positions under the pressure of disparate cultural, authoritarian and international interests. The Freedom Theatre is certainly a case in point as the organisation has to manoeuvre its cultural practices between pressures of an external occupation, official Palestinian indifference, disinterested international aid and a reluctant local engagement. As Wallin and Stanczak argue in the chapter “Cultural Resistance” in this volume, the theatre organisation operates in resistance to four levels of occupation: the one by Israel, but also by the Palestinian Authority, the reliance on international aid as well as the mindsets of The Freedom Theatre members themselves.⁶ Hence The Freedom Theatre struggles against colonial, political, financial and cultural forces, which mangle Palestinian communities into disparate and quite contradictory factors of belligerence, pacification, normalisation and defeatism. The risk of defeatism is an internalised consequence of the first three external pressures, something which Gary English (see “The Freedom Theatre: Artistic Resistance and Human Rights in the International Sphere” in Part IV) associates with Franz Fanon’s notion of the oppressed psyche under colonial rule. The

⁶ Jonatan Stanczak, “The Freedom Theatre, Jenin” (paper presented at the symposium “Teater och global politik”, University of Gothenburg, October 8, 2014).

Freedom Theatre counteracts this oppressed mindset with a postcolonial reasoning although primarily by means of cultural practices and communal participation which coordinate an interrelated double strategy of cultural resistance and self-empowerment.

The Freedom Theatre pursues freedom in rather opposite ways to those rewarded by Freedom House's quantitative and principled measures, namely by cultural practices sourced from and expressed through stories and participatory performance practices on the ground rather than enforced laws, political commands or bureaucratic agreements. Most of the themes and material of The Freedom Theatre performances are directly linked either to the local refugee camp in Jenin or similar social and demographic situations in the West Bank. The theatre has, of course, earned an international reputation for its touring productions, but the bulk of performance practices are generated through projects geared by devised methods and techniques in interactive workshops, applied theatre, street theatre, children's theatre as well as the education programme.

The theatre's legacy of grassroots engagement goes back to Arna Mer Khamis' Care and Learning projects but the local ethos and participatory methodology of The Freedom Theatre also resembles international phenomena such as community-based theatre groups in sub-Saharan Africa, which often develop through international support and local engagement although to a lesser extent national or regional backing. Interestingly, the types of theatre practiced by these groups reflect their financial local-global nexus; local storytelling and musical traditions, folklore, ritual and ceremonial heritage, community meeting praxis and other performative practices mixed with international genres such as devised theatre, improvisation techniques, interactive drama, applied performance, and so forth. Likewise, the conceptual support is informed by native intellectual and linguistic sources – for instance, some of the Palestinian contributors and references in this anthology – as well as by intercontinental philosophers such as Paulo Freire, Franz Fanon, Judith Butler and Noam Chomsky. In a geopolitical conflict that is already well known through global media, The Freedom Theatre offers overseas audiences, stakeholders, collaborators and organised friends associations culture-specific insights and expressions with greater accuracy than conventional media reports. This is not only because the

organisation assumes more culture-specific detail and nuance, but also inside-out reflective and critical perspectives on the conflict. The Freedom Theatre's critical stance against Israel is matched up to self-critical points of view in reference to the Ramallah authorities, the Jenin refugee camp, the theatre organisation itself and, again, individual tendencies of thinking and acting from within the maelstrom of occupation.

The variety of theatre genres make up an arsenal of cultural resistance, which engages people in a peaceful pursuit of freedom but, by the same token, also encourages participants to be vigilant and respond critically to any false hopes and gestures that masquerade as slogans under banners of freedom and liberty. A counter-slogan mentioned in Ben Rivers' chapter "Narrative Power: Playback Theatre as Cultural Resistance in Occupied Palestine" is "no peace without justice", a variant of the claim of peace and conflict scholar Johan Galtung, whose essay "Rethinking Conflict: The Cultural Approach" makes clear that reconciliation follows upon a cultivation of freedom, not the other way round.⁷ For anyone visiting The Freedom Theatre in Jenin, it will soon become clear that the situation in the refugee camp does not come with prefixes like post-conflict or post-colonial; even if the belligerence has mitigated since the Israeli onslaught of Jenin in 2002, the conflict is still in force due to the regular encounters with Israeli soldiers, the travel restrictions and other isolating factors, the political stalemate and, not least, the settler colonial presence throughout the West Bank. Hence, there is no place for a feel-good dramaturgy at The Freedom Theatre that leads supporters to think, as Mustafa Sheta explained in an interview, that the weapons of the armed resistance have been substituted for peaceful conduct of cultural resistance.⁸ It is not as simple as that. The cultural resistance is a continuation, rather than a substitution, of the armed resistance.

The co-founder and first leader of The Freedom Theatre, Juliano Mer Khamis, advocated for a 'cultural intifada' whereby actors free their minds from the physical

⁷ Johan Galtung, "Rethinking Conflict: the Cultural Approach" (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2002, 9-10).

⁸ Mustafa Sheta, interview with author at The Freedom Theatre in Jenin (12 October 2016).

occupation of Palestine.⁹ In an interview with Mer Khamis in 2011, the year of his assassination, he claimed that freedom of expression precedes freedom from occupation. This right is not, however, implied as something received but as something acquired by the theatre activists, a statement that inverts the reasoning by Freedom House insofar as it implies that The Freedom Theatre captures the right of expression *in spite of* the layers of oppressive and occupational forces against the organisation. By keeping themselves in a state of formative subjectivity to free their minds in opposition to various external and internal pressures, The Freedom Theatre explores the face value of rights and principles by starting from their own experiences in the refugee camp and by breaking out of the isolation through a performative vortex of bottom-up projects toward national and global issues of macro-political oppression.

RETURN TO PALESTINE

Take the example of the community theatre production *Return to Palestine* (2016).¹⁰ The work transpired through the relational aesthetics of interacting audiences in playback theatre workshops across the West Bank in a coordinated networking project with Ramallah-based Ashtar Theatre, a partner organisation within the Palestinian Performing Arts Network (PPAN), only to end up as a street theatre performance in various urban settings as well as refugee camps in the Palestinian territories as well as in Jordan. The plot of the touring performance revolves around a young man called Jad, an American-born Palestinian who travels to his ancestral land for the first time. Hence, whilst the production was sourced by testimonies and stories in direct collaboration with Palestinian communities, it operated on regional and international platforms in terms of theatre methods, knowledge transfer, activist networking, funding and public opinion. However, by keeping a focus on the main character Jad the performance reflects regional and macro-political affairs through the prism of a formative individual's mindset, which, in effect, offers opportunities to reverse the

⁹ Juliano Mer Khamis quoted in "Building Artists and Leaders in Palestine: The Freedom Theatre Ten Years On" (*Huffington Post*, April 24, 2016, accessed February 1, 2017, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/cynthia-p-schneider/building-artists-and-lead_b_9759122.html).

¹⁰ See "Return to Palestine", The Freedom Theatre (accessed February 1, 2017, <http://www.thefreedomtheatre.org/return-to-palestine/>).

levels of occupation from the risk of subjective defeatism toward more external levels of oppression.

When performed on the streets of the Jenin refugee camp, the city centres of Ramallah and Nablus and in the Balata refugee camp, *Return to Palestine* set out with a captivating musical variation by the string instrument oud. The drama then embarks on a fast-moving road trip of discoveries, shocks and confusions for Jad. He lands in Israel and is at first upbeat and fascinated by what he sees but, after a few alienating experiences due to his ethnicity in Tel Aviv, he is relieved to get a taxi out of town. Once in the occupied territories, he is relieved to meet fellow Palestinians. He shows and tells his new friends about his impressions of Israel with an array of animated (Jacques Lecoq inspired) movements and gestures of winding roads, rolling waves and squeaking sea gulls. When he mentions place names his friends correct him by referring to their original Palestinian names. The audiences respond with laughter, but it is an anxious laughter as everyone is aware of the credulity of the main character, which will soon shatter in the face of harsher realisations. The same musician who plays the oud raps on a box with a stick to make a perfect sound imitation of distant machine guns. A more world-weary laughter continues as Jad seeks shelter behind and under his friends. The visitor gets hit full on by the 3D reality on the other side of the screen that has up till then shown him Palestine and it reaches its ultimate end when one of the compatriots, Jad's friend Malek, gets shot and falls to his death next to him (see Jad's letter home to his sister in the final chapter of the volume, "We will return"). This fatal shot marks the *peripetia* of the dramatic action and after that turning point Jad has not only returned *to* Palestine but reached a point of no return *from* his homeland.

Return to Palestine epitomises the cultural resistance of The Freedom Theatre vis-à-vis the multiple levels of occupation in the West Bank. The nexus of local participation and global support is retained without compromising the critique against the colonial occupier or the internal(ised) occupations. The script was composed by means of local stories and was brought back to communities as audiences were given the opportunity to discuss the plot after seeing the show. This narrative circulation is a genuinely democratic procedure, well on a par in qualitative terms with any other model of deliberative and participatory democracy. Not only are local audiences

engaged as co-authors to a script, which is disseminated by performance, but the edutainment project reciprocates the collaborative exchange by revisiting audiences in interactive events where site-specific crowds respond to a collective testimony in the form of street theatre. The participatory post-performance discussions keep the script open-ended and yield democratic deliberations, which is a way of keeping track of changes over time and on the ground. Performances like *Return to Palestine* could in principle go on a never ending tour and gradually alter its form and content through participatory self-evaluations ad infinitum.

Many audience responses affirmed and authenticated the pertinence of the dramatic action. Some remarks were more critical and cut to the nerve of The Freedom Theatre's mission. In a post-performance talk in Ramallah, a woman pointed out that Palestinians nowadays seem happy to use their guns at weddings and parties, but not during raids by the Israeli Defence Force – a comment that hinted at the continuum of armed-cum-cultural resistance in Palestinian activism. The Freedom Theatre employs soft means of public opinion through theatre and its raison d'être is based on a non-violent opposition to the enemy; nonetheless *Return to Palestine*, like many other productions, depict physical confrontations with the occupying forces.¹¹ The Freedom Theatre is insisting on freedom of expression and liberty of association in the face of regular raids, detainments, travel restrictions and other kinds of oppression. How does this insistence relate to The Freedom Theatre's concomitant refusal to take a neutral stance against the occupation? The organisation's position is that there can be no peace, or negotiation thereof, without political freedom, just as there cannot be democracy without rights and liberties on the ground. The question then becomes: does the cultural resistance by way of pacifistic theatre primarily contribute to a democratisation or normalisation of the state of occupation in the case of The Freedom Theatre? The answer to this question is premised, I believe, as much on the formulation of the question as the empirical reality in the occupied territories.

¹¹ This stance was confirmed by the then Artistic Director Nabil Al-Raei who stated in a recent interview that The Freedom Theatre wants “to take new initiatives and look for different, non-violent kinds of solutions to oppose the oppression.” (“Making you feel what we feel”, interview in the blog *Affective Societies* by Verena Straub, January 12, 2017, accessed February 1, 2017, <http://affective-societies.de/en/2017/repertoires/making-you-feel-what-we-feel-the-freedom-theatre-in-jenin/>).

If the question is whether The Freedom Theatre can defeat the occupying forces, or broker a peace deal with the enemy, there is no doubt that the theatre institution is a neutralised by-product of the stalled peace process between the Palestinian Authority and Israel. But as The Freedom Theatre is resisting an occupation by Israel as well as the Palestinian Authority along with the international aid community and, as a result, their own ways of thinking, the recalcitrance of The Freedom Theatre cannot be understood as a simple binary opposition of occupation versus resistance but something more complex. To resist occupying forces on multiple levels and fronts turns the question of resistance against its own premise: is the fundamental mission of The Freedom Theatre about resistance or is it in fact about a more affirmative and multi-purposeful action through self-empowerment? As far as I can see the mission comprises both strands, like two sides of the same coin. If I had to choose one single concept to describe The Freedom Theatre's modus operandi it would be a *democratic counter-occupation*.

A CASE OF COUNTER-OCCUPATION

There is a double negation involved in opposing something you do not want. In some cases, that kind of confrontational protest can be very valuable and turn into something positive, either on a temporary basis if the protest consolidates the protesters, or on a long-term basis if the opponent ends a state of oppression. However, even if there is some truth to both these means and aims in the case of The Freedom Theatre, I believe that the fundamental purpose and outcome of the organisation's core mission can be understood differently given the current situation in the occupied territories. If the mission of The Freedom Theatre is stipulated in terms of resistance on all the above-mentioned fronts (international, bilateral, national and individual), there is a high probability that the combined opposition will impose a normalisation of the multiple occupations merely by attempting to cope with the overwhelmingly powerful and negative conditions. Conversely, however, the theatre's mission can be understood as an affirmative form of activism in support of its democracy-building undertaking in the West Bank and in a refugee camp which is de facto an autonomous zone within an illegally occupied territory.

A distant although comparative example in a semi-autonomous area emerged in Zuccotti Park in New York in 2011. Occupy Wall Street (OWS) chose to situate its democratising activism in this particular park as it is privately owned and yet accessible to the public twenty-four hours per day. This allowed for a quite self-governing campaign without state or corporate interference along with the right to use sidewalks for public opinion activities. The occupiers knew that they were up against hegemonic opponents – the US government, the financial powerhouses of Wall Street and the New York Police Department – but they also knew their right of free speech and liberty of assembly. OWS opted for an alternative mode of protest which, rather than confronting authorities head on as the global justice movement had done a decade earlier, embodied direct actions framed by ‘prefigurative’ concepts – that is, to enact, in advance, the aim of one’s political aspirations. This confused politicians, journalists and the law enforcement as the movement neither had an individual leader nor a set methodology or agenda, but relied on a horizontal organisation in which decisions were made collectively, which developed an operation with “space for spontaneity, creativity, improvisation”¹² and “spaces of democratic creativity”.¹³ “Direct action is the insistence, when faced with structures of unjust authority, on acting as if one is already free. One does not solicit the state. One does not even necessarily make a grand gesture of defiance. Insofar as one is capable, one proceeds as if the state did not exist.”¹⁴ The use of direct democracy was geared by forward-looking prefigurative actions, which Boggs describes as “the embodiment, within the ongoing political practice of a movement, of those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal”.¹⁵ Graeber defines prefigurative activism in a similar way and in direct reference to OWS: “The idea that the organisational form that an activist group takes should embody the kind of society we wish to create.”¹⁶ This constructivist concept was devised in Zuccotti Park in the form of a soup kitchen, a library, sleeping facilities, counselling services and plenty of

¹² David Graeber, *The Democracy Project: A History, a Crisis, a Movement* (London: Penguin Books, 2013, p. 26).

¹³ *Ibid.*, 203.

¹⁴ David Graeber, *Direct Action: An Ethnography* (Oakland: AK Press, 2009, 203).

¹⁵ Carl Boggs, “Marxism, Prefigurative Communism, and the Problem of Workers’ Control” in *Radical America* (No. 6, Winter 1977, 100).

¹⁶ Graeber, *The Democracy Project*, 23.

political meetings and dialogues on the economic injustice for the great majority of Americans.

There are of course numerous and significant differences between OWA and The Freedom Theatre in terms of causes, contexts and participants but there are also some interesting similarities in approach and tactics when it comes to standing up to ostensibly overpowering adversaries in geopolitical situations where activists cannot rely on support from a state and thus find themselves in a sort of interregnum where alternative models of governance are called for in order to provide opportunities for public participation. If OWS was an occupation of a social space in need of democratic reform, The Freedom Theatre is a counter-occupation of an already occupied space in need of democratic reform. Other examples of prefigurative activism and participatory democracy are, for instance, the Zapatista movement in the Chiapas state in Mexico, the indigenous tent embassies in Australia and, indeed, the African community theatre, which the author of this article studied at a time when people's lives were jeopardised by AIDS due to corporate patent on life-saving medicines, political negligence, gender trouble and other cultural predicaments.¹⁷ Hence, it is usually multiple pressures from hegemonic forces such as legislative, corporate, belligerent or neo-colonial oppressors that call for prefigurative activism.

The Freedom Theatre is not simply a theatre organisation, but a cultural institution and an activist hub – or, as Samer Al-Samer puts it in the chapter “Reflections on Palestinian Theatre” in this volume, “a part of a major cultural front in resisting the occupation inside the ongoing activism for liberation.” The theatre offers a range of public services, such as photography and film courses, a childcare centre, employment opportunities for theatre practitioners as well as office workers and kitchen personnel, a three-year theatre education, internships, courses for international visitors, theatre workshops for children and life skills training for adult residents of the refugee camp, besides the ordinary outreach projects across the West Bank and productions across the world. The Freedom Theatre is not only fighting for freedom by putting up cultural resistance to the occupiers, but also by getting ready for

¹⁷ Ola Johansson, *Community Theatre and AIDS* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

liberation after the occupation and beyond the confines of the refugee camp.¹⁸ The dynamics of site, discourse and performed practices at The Freedom Theatre epitomises Paulo Freire's concept of 'conscientization' whereby critical dialogues and self-reflections are adapted into praxis against oppressive forces in society. Jonatan Stanczak, co-founder and long-term general manager of The Freedom Theatre, extends the Freirian notion of conscientization into a prefigurative objective by claiming that the Palestinian theatre participants "use their own ideas and imagination of a better future and then put them into action."¹⁹

THE FREEDOM THEATRE AND PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

So how is it possible to appreciate the work of The Freedom Theatre in terms of the egalitarian benchmarks of the Freedom House? To answer that question it is necessary to consider both the geopolitical context of Jenin and the benchmarks of Freedom House. The West Bank is part of the *de jure* state of Palestine, which has limited control over its own territory due to the Israeli occupation. This means that democratic policies or participation within the Palestinian territory will inevitably be restricted and fall short of meeting the criteria of a 'full democracy'. Hence the Freedom House's indexes do not apply under the current conditions. That does not mean, however, that the work of The Freedom Theatre is any less democratic or free than the fulfilled indexes of Freedom House. As indicated above, the latter institution's democratic benchmarks are based on a questionable separation of Israel and the Palestinian territories, but also determined by instituted and implemented policies, commands and rules rather than actual practices between people within communities on the ground.

In the global North, an ideological and materialist critique has emerged against instrumental assessments of democracy, not least among progressive economists after

¹⁸ Liberation for one's own sake is not necessarily the ultimate aim for Palestinian activists, though. Freelance actor and former Freedom Theatre student Faisal Abu Alhayjaa said in a recent interview: "If Palestine becomes free, really free, I will search for another place where there is still injustice" (see "Interview with Ahmad Al Rokh, Alaa Shehada and Faisal Abu Alhayjaa" in Part III).

¹⁹ Jonatan Stanczak interviewed at Dubai Lynx (accessed February 1, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JEwQ8leGGNU>).

the global recession in 2008.²⁰ The critique has added an ethical dimension to the discourse on contemporary economy and steered the debate towards ethical issues of (de)democratisation, inclusivity and engagement, which ultimately brings performance into consideration with qualitative factors such as shared social practices, affective labour, performative ethics, and, in particular, political participation. In her book *Can Democracy be Saved?* (2013), Donatella della Porta describes the normative definition which underlies the legitimising role of citizens in a liberal democracy: “Democracy is power *from* the people, *of* the people and *for* the people; it derives from the people, belongs to the people, and must be used for the people”.²¹ This definition directs a focus toward egalitarian tenets of democracy but is unclear on whether democracy should also be carried out directly *by* the people. The definition can be compared to the way Tim Prentki and Sheila Preston define the communal transactions of applied theatre in their edited volume *Applied Theatre Reader*, namely as “theatre ‘for’ a community [...] theatre ‘with’ a community [and] theatre ‘by’ a community” – even though these functions are described in general terms rather than ascribed to all kinds of applied theatre practice.²²

David Held defines participatory democracy in terms of “direct participation of citizens in the regulation of the key institutions of society, including the spheres of work and the local community”.²³ This definition, along with similar approaches to participatory and direct modes of democracy, imply that existing institutions and voting systems can contribute to a democratisation of society but that they can also be misused for undemocratic purposes, not necessarily by being overthrown or rigged, but just by being used for purposes other than people’s needs, will and active

²⁰ Scholars such as Joseph Stiglitz (see *The Price of Inequality*, New York: Penguin, 2013) and Thomas Piketty (see *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, Cambridge MA.: Harvard University Press, 2014) have made links between neoliberal policies in financial systems and their eroding impact on democratic conditions by means of, for instance, inherited wealth, salary gaps, corporate and instituted hierarchies, and so forth.

²¹ Donatella Della Porta, *Can Democracy be Saved?* (Polity Press, 2013, 4). Della Porta’s description can be compared with Lincoln’s definition of democracy, namely “a government of the people, by the people, for the people.”

²² Tim Prentki and Sheila Preston (eds.), *The Applied Theatre Reader* (London and New York: Routledge 2009, 10).

²³ David Held, *Models of Democracy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 215.

engagement. Democratic institutions and systems are founded on principles and rules, but those are not in and of themselves democratic but should be seen as conditions of (or scripts for) democratic governance (or performance). With the acknowledgement of such performative conditions, a whole range of supplemental and alternative conditions enter the discourse – and the more refined the quantitative criteria becomes, the more they entail qualitative provisions, yielding, in turn, justifications in the form of performative modes of democracy.²⁴

Applied theatre and modern democracy have gone through a participatory turn motivated by similar progressive legacies. Radical democracy, according to Mouffe and Laclau (1985), should be understood beyond liberal notions of freedom and deliberative consensus and take into account difference, dissent, conflict and thus ‘agonism’, which is guided by an agreement to disagree in political discourse (unlike irredeemable forms of antagonism).²⁵ Mouffe later tied in this reasoning with Wittgensteinian notions such as ‘form of life’ and ‘language games’, in which there is no neutral position to assume when it comes to rational agreement (re Habermas) or moral judgment (re Rawls).²⁶ Instead, there is a plurality of practices that evolve and intensify under certain circumstances that are always hanging in the air – or above “rough grounds”, as Wittgenstein put it – and which always will be more or less contentious in democratic deliberations and policy making.

Mouffe’s concept of radical democracy is comparable to the pedagogies of John Dewey and Paolo Freire. In *Education and Democracy* (1916), Dewey envisions education as a prototypical – or prefigurative – micro-democratic society that uses participatory practices from agriculture to dramatic play and collaborative conflict resolutions as comprehensive learning processes.²⁷ Dewey’s pragmatism is often reduced to the well-known slogan ‘learning-by-doing’ and as early as in *How We Think* from 1910, Dewey described a sequence of problem-posing questions which

²⁴ “The duty must be performed”, as Ambedkar put it in Dhananjay Keer (ed.), *Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission* (Mumbai: Popular Prakashan, 1990, 47).

²⁵ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards A Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985).

²⁶ Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000, chap. 3).

²⁷ John Dewey, *Education and Democracy* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1916).

branches out into an experimental procedure that resembles a contemporary devising process in community theatre.²⁸ The so-called ‘Dewey sequence’ starts with the recognition of a problem, followed by a contextualisation and analysis of its culture-specific conditions; in the following step learners hypothesise a resolution and thus go on to act out scenarios and solutions through dialogue in an open-ended fashion.

The Dewey sequence preceded Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1971) by about half a century,²⁹ but probably did not have a direct impact on it and has not had the same impact on theatre as the Brazilian pedagogue’s publications, mainly due to the fact that Augusto Boal provided an inverse introduction to Freire’s pedagogy in his *Theatre of the Oppressed*.³⁰ Like Dewey, Freire proposes a methodological sequence that focuses on the experience and cultural background of communal learners, who, regardless of educational merits, acquire abilities to contextualise personal and social issues in dialogue with each other and consequently elevate explorations to a reflexive level and further onto a level of ‘conscientization’ whereby critical thinking is applied and enacted into praxis in public life. The fact that Dewey calls his pedagogical pursuit democratic while Freire calls his liberational or revolutionary is a linguistic and geopolitical variation of the same means and objectives.

Freire’s publications preceded Mouffe’s by more than a decade and by the time Mouffe and Laclau’s seminal book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* was published in 1985, Freire’s pedagogy had been applied by Theatre for Development practitioners in Africa and by Augusto Boal in South America and other parts of the world. More recently Mouffe has written about artistic expressions in reference to democratic issues in public spaces (Mouffe 2008), but her approaches and concepts are ultimately too discursive for the purposes of describing the practice-based and participatory qualities of The Freedom Theatre’s democratic pursuit. (Theoreticians are not always the trailblazers; in progressive genres like applied theatre it is more likely that practitioners act as conceptual as well

²⁸ John Dewey, *How We Think* (Boston: D.C. Heath and Company, 1910).

²⁹ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 2005 [1970]).

³⁰ Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* (London: Pluto Press, 1979).

as practice-based forerunners.) It is the *application* of radical concepts that make The Freedom Theatre relevant in the discussion of contemporary democracy.³¹

Liberal rights and deliberative agreements can be installed and instituted as statutes, acts, laws and amendments, but once in place such decrees are justified through participation and, ultimately, through performance. In an allegedly ‘partial democracy’ such as Palestine, the constitutional and legislative decrees are compromised by the occupation and this *de jure* status of the state radically increases the significance of alternative and applicable modes of democratisation. Cultural practices not only qualify as democratic measures in virtue of their participatory elements, however, but are also more sustainable than decrees. “Democratization,” says Charles Tilly, “is a dynamic process that always remains incomplete and perpetually runs the risk of reversal – of de-democratization.”³² If The Freedom Theatre is viewed as an institution which provides a democratic counter-occupation by way of participatory cultural practices, it can also be understood as an example of ‘dual power’ by providing a viable alternative to official, top-down authorities, especially by enacting community-based and prefigurative practices of post-occupational freedom.³³ This is not to disregard the ongoing agonistic activism

³¹ James Thompson writes an excellent chapter called “Theatre Action Research: A Democracy of the Ground” in his book *Applied Theatre: Bewilderment and Beyond* (Bern: Peter Lang Ltd, 2003, chap. 4), which is going back to the applicability of Freirian principles for performance initiatives antecedent of the formation of established theatre models. It should be said that Freire, just like Dewey, makes recommendations of applications of explorative drama when he proposes different techniques of sharing news and reflections between intellectuals and ordinary people: “Some themes or nuclei may be presented by means of brief dramatizations, containing the theme only – no ‘solutions’! The dramatization acts as a codification, as a problem-posing situation to be discussed” (Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 122). Freire goes on to foreshadow Boal’s newspaper exercise: “Another didactic resource – as long as it is carried out within a problem-posing rather than a banking approach to education – is the reading and discussion of magazine articles, newspapers, and book chapters (beginning with passages). As in the case of the recorded interviews, the author is introduced before the group begins, and the contents are discussed afterwards” (ibid.). As Michaela Miranda makes clear in her chapter on the educational program at The Freedom Theatre, Freire has had a significant impact on the devising pedagogy and projects at the school.

³² Charles Tilly, *Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, xi).

³³ Samuel Farber, “Reflections on ‘prefigurative politics’” (*International Socialist Review*, Issue #92, accessed February 1, 2017, <http://isreview.org/issue/92/reflections-prefigurative-politics>).

against the multiple occupations, but it transcends the one-sided view of The Freedom Theatre as an organisation of cultural resistance.

In terms of applied theatre, a project such as *Return to Palestine* does not only extend into communities but reaches an apex of outreach efficacy where the next step requires more sustainable formations of participatory actions in order to take democratic effect. This is neither a matter of a dramatic crescendo or catharsis, nor a social or political epiphany or statement, but rather a moment of structural pause where the course of events can go in different directions and toward diverse destinations. The apex indicates what I would call a juncture of ‘democrativity’, implying a combination of performativity and adaptability whereby applied theatre takes effect but also becomes pertinent in more extensive and sustainable cultural and political contexts, such as social or political movements, educational institutions, activist networks and other formations of democratisation. This is the threshold The Freedom Theatre stands before today and with its artistic versatility, activist dynamism, educational provision, human resources and cultural capital it will be capable of maneuvering a range of performance practices, from community-based theatre to international touring and educational programs. Whichever route the organisation opts for, it will involve a bargain with at least four levels of occupation and so it will be vital that any deal retains the degree of democratisation The Freedom Theatre has cultivated for the day freedom comes around.