

Democratic Potential of Creative Political Protest

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Abstract

From Cairo to Occupy Wall Street, from Istanbul Gezi Park to DANS protests in Sofia, in recent public sphere movements we have witnessed the emergence of a new wave of creative protest. The surge of creative forms of political action brings to the fore the question of democratic potential of creative political protest. This paper explores in what ways creative protest could deepen democracy. I argue that creative political protest nurtures democracy by generating a peaceful culture of resistance and by providing a peaceful way of responding to politics of intolerance and polarization.

Introduction

When criticizing Milosevic had a high cost in Serbia, the student movement Otpor – meaning resistance – developed nonviolent resistance strategies that kept humor and satire at their core. They used creative nonviolent methods to spread their message and to help the public overcome their fear of the authoritarian regime. Otpor’s most famous prank was ‘the smiling barrel.’ Recognizing that laughter could trump fear, Otpor members drew Milosevic’s portrait on a barrel and took the barrel to the main pedestrian boulevard in Belgrade. Next to the barrel they put a sign that read “smash his face for just a dinar”¹. Many passersby took the opportunity to smash Milosevic’s face with a bat and formed a line to take their own swings. People laughed even more when the police, upon failing to find the organizers of the protest, decided to arrest the barrel. The smiling barrel stunt received widespread media coverage and appeared on the cover of two opposition newspapers. Otpor’s creative political protests have been immensely influential in encouraging the public to show their opposition to the oppressive government in Serbia.²

It was the creativity of the ‘smiling barrel’ that made Otpor’s protest possible under conditions of the authoritarian rule. Many political groups have used creative forms of protest to express their dissent and to contest the political

¹ Srdja Popovic, *Blueprint for Revolution* (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2015), 101.

² Popovic, *Blueprint for Revolution*, 100–102.

order, especially when the cost of contestation was too high.³ It is not clear, however, what we should expect from creative political protest under democratic conditions. Do creative methods of political protest have any democratic value? How does creativity change the nature of democratic political protest? Should democratic theorists take seriously creative methods of political protest? The surge of creative forms of protest brings to the fore the question of the democratic potential of creative political protest. These methods are present in the actions of the ‘Indignados’ in different European cities, various Occupy protests in the United States, Istanbul Gezi Park protests in Turkey, DANS protests in Bulgaria, and various other protest movements in Brazil, Canada, Greece, Ukraine, and Venezuela. Despite their differences, these recent political movements have staged a new form of political action that has at its core creativity. The use of humor, irony, artistic activism, and aesthetic political performances has become widespread and changed activists’ routinized repertoire of political action.

What we have witnessed in the recent protest movements is an outburst of creativity and the emergence of a new wave of creative politics. Unlike the violent political protests against institutions of global capitalism in the last decade such as the Seattle Protests in 1999, in the new political movements protesters have turned to peaceful creative methods such as humor and political art to stage novel forms of protest. These creative political performances express protesters’ political message and vent their anger against the political and economic order. For instance, a thousand protestors in Hamburg staged a massive pillow fight to contest the declaration of parts of Hamburg “danger zones” that gave the police arbitrary stop and search powers in the danger zones.⁴ In Ferguson, Missouri residents protested police violence against African-Americans by silently confronting the police officers with their hands up in air. ‘Hands up, Don’t Shoot’ has become both a slogan and a symbolic gesture of the Black Lives Matter movement. During pro-EU demonstrations in Kiev a protester installed a piano painted in the colors of the Ukrainian flag in front of a police line and played Chopin to the police to convey the peaceful intentions of the protesters.⁵

In light of these growing creative methods of protests, I ask what the surge of creative politics means for democracy. I argue that creative political protest can play an important role in fostering democratic culture and nurturing democracy.

³ Steve Crawshaw and John Jackson, “Ten Everyday Acts of Resistance That Changed the World,” *Yes Maganize!*, accessed on 5 March 2017, <http://www.yesmagazine.org/people-power/10-everyday-acts-of-resistance-that-changed-the-world>.

⁴ “US travel warning for Hamburg after police crackdown,” *BBC World News Report*, accessed 15 September 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-25651806>.

⁵ Fiona Macdonald, “Art in Ukraine: Bullets and Barricades,” *BBC Culture*, accessed 15 September 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20140523-bullets-and-barricades>.

In section 1, I suggest that creativity in political protest enables democratic politics by encouraging non-violence. By preventing the degeneration of space of democratic politics to a space of violent confrontation, creative political actions create the space necessary for democracy to function. In section 2, I argue that creative forms of protest help adversaries overcome communicative barriers which undermine democratic engagement. In section 3, I explore whether creative protest could ease the political tension between contending parties under conditions of polarized politics.

I. Creativity and Violence

Hannah Arendt describes the space of political action as ‘the space of appearance’ where one can be seen and heard.⁶ Whenever people act through speech and action before an audience to bring out a change in the world peacefully, they transform the public space to a space of democratic politics.⁷ Viewed democratically, public spaces ought to provide stages for all social groups – particularly the powerless and those without institutionalized power – where they can peacefully voice political claims and render visible issues ignored by the mass media and the society. A healthy democracy, Iris Young notes, encourages different social groups to express their political concerns in public and views contestatory and agonistic political actions with positive, or least non-negative, lens.⁸ Existing democracies, however, are seldom hospitable to public political protest. Despite the widespread recognition of the right to freedom of assembly and protest as a fundamental human right, even in societies with a long tradition of liberal democracy there are untenable restrictions on the public space and political groups are discouraged from exercising their democratic right to peacefully protest in public.⁹ As Larry Bogad rightly observes, in Western democracies public spaces are increasingly privatized and regulated. Protesters are intimidated and “harassed with preemptive arrest, surveillance, and infiltrations.”¹⁰ This widespread phenomenon has steadily weakened the democratic potential of public spaces.

Characterizing citizens as passive political consumers, who should express their views at the ballot box and let the political elite use political power, and democratic protesters as a potential threat to security and order, the dominant

⁶ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 199.

⁷ Seyla Benhabib, “Models of Public Sphere: Hannah Arendt, the Liberal Tradition, and Jürgen Habermas,” in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992), 78.

⁸ See Iris Marion Young, *Inclusion and Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 52-121.

⁹ See Larry Bogad, *Tactical Performance: The Theory and Practice of Serious Play* (New York: Routledge, 2016) and Ella Myers, *Worldly Ethics: Democratic Politics and Care for the World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

¹⁰ Bogad, *Tactical Performance*, 148.

political culture too easily warrants the use of violence against protestors.¹¹ In most demonstrations, the police look for excuses to intervene and disperse the protest.¹² To contain protesters, the police regularly use intimidating tactics and aggressive practices which only make violent confrontation more likely.¹³ Overly authoritarian attitude of the police against non-violent protesters bring about a feeling of injustice and a sense of unfairness. Donatella Della Porto argues that what makes violent confrontation even more likely and protest more intense is the perceived external aggression “described by protesters as an act of war against a peaceful community”; she claims this feeling forces “the community to join the front-line.”¹⁴ When protesters resist and insist on exercising their democratic right to protest peacefully, the police use even more aggressive methods such as firing smoke gas, tear gas, stun grenades, rubber bullets, and water cannons at protesters to disperse the demonstration.¹⁵ The police’s use of force – and even excessive force – against democratic protesters is characterized as ‘defensive’ as the police enforce order whereas protesters’ resistance tends to be depicted as aggressive transgression of the public space. The result is the degeneration of the site of democratic expression and contestation into a site of violent confrontation.

As Srdja Popovic, the leader of Serbian student movement Otpor, notes: “as soon as protests turn into a violent conflict, it is a kind of defeat. It is like challenging [Mike] Tyson to a boxing match.” However, Popovic continues, “why not play chess with him instead? Our playing field is called creativity.”¹⁶ Following Otpor’s advice, Tahrir Square protesters communicated their commitment to nonviolence by performing various creative peaceful actions such as shouting positive slogans, carrying roses, sweeping the square clean, and protecting the shops from looters. When Coptic Christians celebrated Mass, the Muslims formed a circle around them; while the Muslims prayed, the Christians joined hand in a circle around the Muslims to protect them.¹⁷ In Sofia, refusing to see the police as an enemy the protesters have attempted to communicate with them by reading poetry, playing music, and offering water. People gathered in large numbers after work during weekdays and on weekends to join the protests and to talk and socialize. Families came with their babies and strollers, others brought their dogs, and others bikes and flowers. In both Sofia and Cairo, and in many other

¹¹ This is how the elite model of democracy, which is the dominant model of democracy today, characterizes democratic citizens and political protesters. See Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (New York: Harper, 1942).

¹² Myers, *Worldly Ethics*, 148 and especially fn26.

¹³ Bogad, *Tactical Performance*, 148 and 162.

¹⁴ Donatella Della Porto, “Eventful Protest, Global Conflicts,” *Distinktion: Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory* 9 (2008): 19.

¹⁵ Tina Rosenberg, “Revolution U,” *Foreign Policy*, accessed 21 October 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/02/17/revolution-u-2/>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

recent political movements, the emergence of a peaceful and playful culture of protest served as a new source of democratic inspiration. The creative performances of the protesters fostered a festival like atmosphere and formed the language of peaceful resistance. This ethos of democratic protest transformed the nature of protest while creating new political agencies who are committed to peaceful political protest.

As recent political protests illustrate, when creativity undergirds a political movement, it generates a peaceful culture of resistance. Bogad suggests that such innovative, playful, and artful responses “make protest more joyous for participants facing intimidation from the police.”¹⁸ The protesters’ perception of themselves – itself shaped by the peaceful culture of protest – encourages them to keep the protest non-violent. Creative political performances allow political protesters to reclaim the democratic meaning of the public space by encouraging them to express their views in a non-violent way even in the face of police violence. The public space remains a peaceful site for democratic performance, contestation, and expression. In that sense, creative political protest makes possible democratic political action.

II. Negative Reactions to Protest

In an ideal democracy, the concerns and claims of protesters should be part of the democratic exchange and taken seriously by the public. Democratic engagement entails confrontation of competing positions accompanied by a willingness to listen and to make a good faith effort to understand the other side.¹⁹ However, in existing democracies those who exercise their right to protest peacefully in public are too often and too easily dismissed due to the negative characterization of protest movements.²⁰ When challenged, those in positions of power turn to tactics of delegitimization by invoking existing stereotypes about protest and protesters. This in turn results in the media reproducing derogatory perspectives on protesters. For instance, Occupy Wall Street protesters have been described as an “unruly self-destructive mass,”²¹ and Tahrir Square protesters have been called “thugs, vandals, looters, and

¹⁸ Bogad, *Tactical Performance*, 167.

¹⁹ There are various accounts of democratic engagement advanced by different normative models of democracy (deliberative, participatory, agonistic, radical), but even the agonistic approach, which understands democratic engagement in terms of a non-violent confrontation between contending parties, endorses the principle that one should always listen to the other side. See, for instance, Andrew Schaap, “Agonism in Divided Societies,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 32(2006): 269.

²⁰ A similar view of protest and contestation also persists in contemporary democratic theory. Prioritizing consensus and unity, many democratic theorists view contestation and agonism as divisive and threatening. See Iris Young, *Inclusion and Democracy*, chapters 2 and 3.

²¹ John Buell, “Occupy Wall Street’s Democratic Challenge,” *Theory and Event* 14 (2011 Supplement), 3.

terrorists.”²² Many people reject the claims of protesters without listening and trying to understand their message simply because they do not like the way protesters voice their concerns and press their claims.²³ Proponents of the contested view tend to take a defensive attitude and dismiss the other’s perspective when challenged by political groups viewed as ‘anarchists,’ ‘nihilists,’ ‘troublemakers,’ and so on. This widespread negative attitude toward political protest and protesters hinders democratic engagement.

To be sure, from an Arendtian perspective, one can argue that the public perception of protest does not matter since the experience of acting politically, and not the outcome of political action, is the real reward of political action as the act of protest is an exercise of freedom.²⁴ Indeed, it is important to recognize the expressive value of political action and avoid reducing the value of political action to its possible consequences. However, it is also important to recognize that when the aim is to contest an unjust policy, a hegemonic norm or identity, or ‘the common sense,’ the outcome of the political protest matters. Although it is difficult to trace the concrete effects of each political protest, it is reasonable to claim that the negative characterization of a protest is an effective way of undermining the credibility of a political movement and excluding the claims of the protesters from the political public sphere. As Mark Wenman points out, the “narration and coverage of particular events are never value-free and the judgments are already built into the narration.”²⁵ Depending on the framing of a protest, protesters could be viewed as a destructive unruly mob or a group of political activists fighting for a worthy cause.²⁶ If the former narrative prevails, it marginalizes the movement, which diminishes the democratic power of the protest. Thus, the protesters would struggle to get their views heard and influence the public debate. The issue is not that the public fails to see the protesters, but it is that the protest is narrated in such a way that it is difficult for the public to view them as a legitimate group deserving a fair hearing. The protesters are seen, but they are not heard due to the way dominant political narratives characterize them.

How a political protest is characterized is especially important when the issue at stake is ‘politics of becoming.’ In the ‘politics of becoming’, as William Connolly

²² Egyptian activist collective ‘Comrades from Cairo’, “From Taksim and Rio to Tahrir, the smell of teargas,” *Roar Magazine*, accessed 15 August 2015, <http://roarmag.org/2013/06/from-tahrir-and-rio-to-taksim-the-smell-of-teargas/>.

²³ Mike E. Warren, “What Should We Expect from More Democracy?: Radically Democratic Responses to Politics,” *Political Theory* 24, no. 2 (1996), 241-270, and Iris Young, *Inclusion and Democracy*, chapter 2.

²⁴ See Arendt, *The Human Condition*, chapter 5.

²⁵ Mark Wenman, *Agonistic Democracy: Constituent Power in the Era of Globalisation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 275.

²⁶ On the significance of framing, see Hank Johnston and John A. Noakes, *Frames of Protest: Social Movements and the Framing Perspective* (Lanham: MDL Rowman & Littlefield 2005)

describes, new and unforeseen things come about and disturb the existing cultural and political terrain. This new thing may be a new cultural identity that disturbs the constellation of existing identities, a new religious faith or a source of moral inspiration, or a new right waiting to be placed on the list of rights.²⁷ Struggles to challenge and modify the existing cultural and political terrain tend to generate unease since they disturb existing codes of identity, legitimacy, justice, goodness, or right. When challenged dominant identities feel threatened. Fear, resentment and hostility are typical reactions to the emergence of new social identities and the attempts to unsettle the existing cultural and political terrain. The new political movements encounter resistance and are judged by the old cultural codes that marginalize them.²⁸ Thus, the tendency to characterize political protesters in a derogatory fashion to undermine their legitimacy is already strong in the case of politics of becoming.

It is important to recognize that the use of creativity in political protest can make a more democratic engagement possible by challenging the negative narratives of protest; this encourages the public to view peaceful protesters as legitimate political actors. For instance, the protesters in Hamburg turned staged a mass pillow fight in order to respond to the police's characterization of them as 'violent radicals.' By "using the softest object" to protest they undermined the credibility of the police's portrayal of the protest.²⁹ Such creative strategies played a major role in providing a positive view of the protest and drawing the attention of the public to the creation of danger zones in the city.³⁰ Similarly, Gezi Park protesters turned to humor and satire to respond to their government's attempts to characterize them as 'marauders,' 'looters,' and 'drunkards.' When the prime minister of Turkey called Gezi protestors a bunch of marauders ('çapulcu' in Turkish), they responded by redefining 'çapulcu' as one who fights for her rights and resists injustice in a peaceful and humorous manner.³¹ The protesters adopted 'çapulcu' as their nickname: they greeted each other as 'çapulcu'; 'çapulcus are coming' and 'everyday I'm chapulling' have become the slogans of the movement. The creative redefinition of this politicized word together with many other creative and playful political performances have

²⁷ William Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 57.

²⁸ William Connolly, *Ethos of Pluralization* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), xv.

²⁹ Three days after the pillow protest Hamburg police lifted the danger zone. "Hamburg protesters prove to be peaceful by pillow fight," *Daily Sabah*, accessed 15 September 2015, <https://www.dailysabah.com/world/2014/01/11/hamburg-protesters-prove-to-be-peaceful-by-pillow-fight>.

³⁰ "Danger Zones' in Germany's Hamburg lifted," *Anadolu Agency*, accessed 15 September 2015, <http://aa.com.tr/en/world/danger-zones-in-germanys-hamburg-lifted/190829>.

³¹ "Chapulling': Turkish protesters spread the edgy word," *The Express Tribune with The International New York Times*, accessed 15 August 2015, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/560640/chapulling-turkish-protesters-spread-the-edgy-word/>.

provided a positive narrative of the protest. Recognizing the legitimacy of the Gezi movement many citizens have paid attention to the message of the protest. This is one of the reasons why a protest started by a small group of environmental activists have snowballed into a nationwide movement and generated international solidarity movements in several cities around the globe.

Despite the already existing negative connotations associated with public political protest and the deliberate use of these negative connotations by powerful political actors to delegitimize protest movements, creative methods of protest make it clear that there is a significant difference between irrational dangerous extremists and peaceful activists who want to voice their concerns, press their claims, and bring about a change. When protesters communicate their message by playing music, creating humorous slogans, reading books to the police, throwing flowers at a phalanx of officers advancing towards them, and painting sidewalks steps in rainbow colors, they generate a positive narrative of the protest. Creative, humorous acts and artistic performances can interrupt well-established scripts about political protest and open up room for positive characterization of political movements. Positive characterization of protest shifts the attention of the public to the political message of the protesters. When perceived not as ‘violent radicals’, ‘anarchists’ or ‘trouble-makers’ but as ‘concerned citizens’, protesters are more likely to be taken seriously by the public. As such, by offering an alternative narrative of political protest and correcting the public’s perception of the protesters, creative political performances can open up a space for democratic engagement.

III. Politics of Polarization

One of the main problems of contemporary democracies is the polarized form of politics that “split the political arena into factional and inimical groups.”³² To be sure, adversarial struggle is always part of the democratic space given the conflictual and pluralistic nature of democratic politics. As Chantal Mouffe rightly indicates, a healthy dose of conflict and opposition is required for a vibrant democracy.³³ Mouffe argues that a conflictual view of the world, characterized by opposed political positions that people can identify with, allows contestation and political struggle to remain within the boundaries of liberal democracy. When political outlets are provided for the expression of dissent and contestation, Mouffe claims, this leads to identification with forms of identities that will not construct the opponent as an enemy.³⁴ However, in the absence of a democratic

³² Nadia Urbinati, “Between Hegemony and Distrust,” *Eurozine*, accessed 4 August 2014, <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2014-03-14-urbinati-en.html>.

³³ Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (London: Verso, 2006), 21-25, and *Agonistics* (London: Verso, 2013), 7.

³⁴ Chantal Mouffe, *Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 200), 102-105, and *Agonistics*, 5-9.

ethos of engagement that contains agonistic confrontation politics may deteriorate into a fight between factional loyalties and radicalized identities. Reactionary positions and a politics of intolerance could take over the space of democratic politics. When a 'rally around the flag' effect dominates the political landscape, there is less room for respect, mutual understanding, and compromise. Politics is reduced to a zero-sum struggle between like-minded homogenous militant groups who do not engage democratically. Within this context, political protest might seem to escalate conflict and sharpen existing divisions. Political protest can have an effect on the public if the public is receptive and truly listening to the protesters. However, under conditions of polarization this receptivity is precisely what is lacking³⁵ and a political protest may be seen as a demonstration of power in the street, which can exacerbate the polarization of the political discourse. Given the already deeply polarized political landscape, political protest could antagonize those who are opposed to the protesters' views and could even encourage those who are sitting on the fence to support the opposite side.

Despite its oppositional nature, creative forms of protest can open up a positive political space for democratic engagement and make democratic engagement possible even in the face of deep partisanship and polarization. Creative political protest can be an effective means for contesting a political position without inducing negative emotional responses in the proponents of the contested view. One form of creative protest that can tell a story without provoking the adversary is the use of humor and irony. Humorous protest – or 'laughtivism' as Popovic terms it – both makes people laugh and encourages them to think.³⁶ Bogad also emphasizes the role of humor and irony in getting people to listen rather than outright rejecting the protesters' views. For instance, recognizing the democratic power of humor and irony, hundreds of thousand of protesters in Tahrir Square chanted together "where is my Kentucky Fried Chicken?" to express the absurdity of the claims advanced by the government controlled mainstream media that the protestors were all paid by foreign agents and offered free meals from KFC.³⁷ In Gezi Park, the protestors used the stencil of a penguin wearing a gas mask to voice their criticism of the self-censorship of the local media. This was a reference to CNN Turkey – a major news channel in Turkey and a franchise of CNN international – broadcasting a documentary about penguins during police attacks on protesters while CNN International covered the protest live. Some protesters have responded by wearing "we are all penguins" inscribed t-shirts. They painted the stencils of a penguin wearing a gas mask on walls and streets of the city. In both Cairo and Istanbul, the use of

³⁵ Robert W. Glover, "Radically Rethinking Citizenship: Disaggregation, Agonistic Pluralism and the Politics of Immigration in the United States," *Political Studies* 59 (2011), 221-225.

³⁶ Popovic, *Blueprint for Revolution*, 110-111.

³⁷ Bogad, *Tactical Performance*, 280.

humor and irony helped protesters convey their message in a positive way without antagonizing the other side.

In addition to humor and irony, emotionally charged storytelling and performance can be an effective means of communicating across differently situated groups. This mode of political communication has the capacity to reach the adversary at the affective level, thereby loosening the grip of the dominant narratives on one's perception of the other. In doing so, it can overcome the affective barriers that prevent the adversary from engaging with the other's position. For instance, to protest the murder of a protester, Egyptian activists staged a silent event in various cities where they stood at arms-length from each other in order not to violate the Egyptian emergency law that severely limits 'gathering.'³⁸ During 2014 protests in Venezuela, protesters planted mock crosses, gravestones, and coffins on prominent avenues, which symbolize the country's homicide victims.³⁹ In response to the death of a 15 year old boy who was shot in the head by a police tear-gas canister on his way to buy bread during the Gezi Park protests, the protesters staged a sit-in demonstration laying his portraits on the ground besides loaves of bread.⁴⁰ The aim of these protests was to reach the political adversary at an affective level and to evoke empathy in those who are neutral. Eliciting an emotional response from the public softens the cultural terrain, which can transform the political climate in a way that makes possible listening and understanding the concerns of the other side.

Consider, for instance, the performance of the 'Standing Man.'⁴¹ The Gezi Park protests ended when the police forcibly cleared the park of the protesters, removed the tent city, and re-opened the park to the public. The country was deeply polarized. Under these conditions, a protester staged a creative political performance, which opened a little crack in the wall that separated the two sides. The Standing Man, as the popular media dubbed him, stood still in the middle of the Taksim Square – the busiest square in Istanbul – for more than six hours. He moved only once to unbutton his pants in case the police wanted to strip search him. The performance of the Standing Man created an ambiguous situation, which revealed the limits of the dominant narrative about the Gezi protest. The

³⁸ Armando Salvatore, "New Media, the "Arab Spring," and the Metamorphosis of the Public Sphere: Beyond Western Assumptions on Collective Agency and Democratic Politics," *Constellations* 20(2013): 222.

³⁹ Girish Gupta, "From music to nudity, Venezuela protesters get creative," *Reuters US Edition*, accessed 15 September 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/04/30/us-venezuela-protests-students-idUSKBN0DG10520140430>.

⁴⁰ "Erdogan's heroes Police! Gezi protests victim teenager Berkin Elvan dead," *National Turk*, accessed 15 September 2015, <http://www.nationalturk.com/en/erdogans-heroes-police-gezi-protests-victim-teenager-berkin-elvan-dead-turkey-breaking-news-48255>.

⁴¹ Andy Carvin, "The 'Standing Man' Of Turkey: Act Of Quiet Protest Goes Viral," *NPR*, accessed 28 September 2015, <http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2013/06/18/193183899/the-standing-man-of-turkey-act-of-quiet-protest-goes-viral>.

Standing Man was not violating any law since he was simply standing in the square, but his performance counted as political demonstration in a public space which requires a permit. The democratic power of the Standing Man's protest springs from his creativity to explore this ambiguity: a peaceful protester who cannot be defined by the dominant narrative generated by the state to delegitimize the movement. The Standing Man was a protester contesting the power of the state, but he was clearly not an extremist, looter or marauder as the dominant narrative portrayed the Gezi movement. From the perspective of those who were against the Gezi movement he was yet another Gezi protester who should be ignored and yet his protest did not fit in any of the official scripts. Not only were those against the Gezi protests confused, but also the police did not know whether they should arrest him or simply let him stand in the square. Moreover, once passersby recognized the political nature of the performance, several of them joined the protest. Within a couple of hours, the number of people standing at Taksim Square went up to hundreds. The silent performance of the Standing Man has inspired similar protests across Turkey and around the world. It was a creative and peaceful response to police violence, the politics of intolerance and polarization. The Standing Man has gained the sympathy of the public and his creative political performance opened up a new space for democratic engagement.

Even under conditions of polarization, creative political performances can help one come to terms with the fact that their political position may appear contestable to others. By loosening the grip of the dominant narratives on the public's political consciousness, creative methods of protest can allow one to see the other's position from a different perspective, thereby making understanding possible. In that sense, creative political protest can help people to relate to the other's concerns and reveal one the validity of others' particular perspectives. Recognizing that the other may have a valid view when seen from their perspective may encourage one to question and examine her view of the political opponent. One may begin to see the other not as an enemy who should be destroyed, but as a legitimate adversary who should be tolerated.⁴² Creative political performances can make it possible to transcend the boundaries of political camps and closed identities and bridge the gap between "us" and "them." This does not mean that two sides reconcile, rather they perceive each other as legitimate political opponents. The transformation of political antagonism into agonism – a peaceful struggle between adversaries – is crucial since the latter introduces the possibility of negotiation and compromise on democratic terms.

⁴² Mouffe, *Democratic Paradox*, 102.

IV. Conclusion

Several political groups in various countries have shifted their protest methods away from anger and resentment toward a new form of creative and playful political activism.⁴³ These groups have discovered the effectiveness of creative political protest in drawing the attention of the public and conveying their arguments. The creative methods employed in various recent protest movements have showed that by performing democracy creatively, it is possible to challenge dominant views without exacerbating conflict despite the police violence against protesters, the dominance of politics of intolerance, and the confrontational nature of protest. To be sure, the recognition of the effectiveness of creative methods of political protest may lead to the proliferation of such methods. To gain visibility and vocality, political groups may have to come up with even more creative political acts. It is important to recognize the democratic potential of creative protest and to understand in what ways such performances can deepen democracy. Creative political protest can defuse the violent potential of protest. It is a means for responding to politics of intolerance and polarization that haunt democracies. These creative responses provide an alternative mode of political engagement, which are both peaceful and politically resonant.

⁴³ See Popovic's *Blueprint for Revolution* and Bogad's *Tactical Performance* for several examples of creative activism from around the world.