

Democratic Action as Insurgency: On Claude Lefort's Concept of the Political Regime

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Abstract : This paper investigates the nature of democratic action through a critical reading of Claude Lefort's notion of the democratic 'regime'. Lefort provides one of the most innovative accounts of the essential features of a democratic regime. According to him, democracy is a political regime that acknowledges the indeterminacy of a society and stages it as a contestation between competing political actors. As such, democracy provides the symbolic markers of society's openness towards the future. However, despite their democratic features, the recent decades in late capitalist societies attest to a sense of the future becoming fixed and predetermined. This suggests that Lefort's conception of democracy harbours a misunderstanding of the character and experience of democratic action. This paper examines this underlying tension in Lefort's work. It claims that Lefort underestimates how a democratic regime, next to its symbolic function, also takes a materially constituted form with its particular dynamics of power relations. Lefort's systematic dismissal of this material dimension for democratic action can lead to the contemporary paradoxical situation where democracy's symbolic markers are upheld (free elections, public debate, dynamic between government and opposition in parliament,...) but the room for political decision-making is constrained due to a myriad of material constraints (e.g., market pressures, institutional inertias). The paper draws out the implications for the notion of democratic action. Contra Lefort, it argues that democratic action necessarily targets the material conditions that impede the capacity for decision-making on the basis of equality and liberty. This analysis shapes our understanding of democratic action in two ways. First, democratic action takes an asymmetrical, insurgent form, as a contestation of material power relations from below. Second, it reveals an ambivalent position vis-à-vis the political regime: democratic action is symbolically made possible by the democratic dispositive, but it contests the constituted form that the democratic regime takes.

Keywords : Claude Lefort, democratic action, material constitution, political regime

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