



Opening the Boundaries of Citizenship

Democrats, citizens, fools

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Hi! My name is Deena Dajani and I am a research associate with the 'Oecumene: Citizenship after Orientalism' project at the Open University. My contribution to the project is, perhaps, an unconventional one, but my point of departure is a right now seen as essential for the practice of democratic citizenship: that is, the right to question authority.

From this now 'given' right, I became interested in tracing the unconventional sites of its emergence. By unconventional I mean locating its beginnings before it was thought of as an abstract legal right: prior to this moment, where and how was this right exercised and acted upon, or to be more playful, where and how was this right performed?

Before I propose a way of answering those questions, it is useful to begin briefly by pointing to Jürgen Habermas's theory on the public sphere. Habermas investigated the transformation of early modern European societies into modern democratic states. He argued that driving this transformation was a moment in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when critical rational deliberation was developed as the mode of thought and communication through which public affairs were discussed. This ideal form of communication was honed in coffeehouses and, to lesser extents, the salons of social and cultural elites where the bourgeoisie regularly met. It is through these discussions that something approaching 'public opinion' was first formed, and as public opinion became recognised as a political force through which publics can be governed, issues over how to regulate it emerged, and from there a commitment to legal forms of regulation understood as rights. It is through this process, then, that rationality enforced itself as the dominant form of democratic practice.

I'd like to focus on a particular right – the right to question authority – and try to offer a different site of emergence of that right than that offered by the theory of the public sphere. Is it not possible that the right to question authority can be traced to traditions earlier than sixteenth century coffeehouse discussions? What if the beginnings of this right were not in the virtues of abstract rational deliberation but in the possibilities of action and performance? What if the first to exercise the right to question authority was not the bourgeois male, but the witty court-fool?

Now that I've made the suggestion I expect it sounds, ironically, reasonable. That is because the word 'court-fool' or 'court-jester' conjures up a pervasive figure: one inseparable from the

king, subversive and political, using the guise of folly to voice aloud in court criticism otherwise only exchanged in whispers. In this sense, the court-fool was the first to exercise the right to question authority, to act upon it, to perform it, before the 'right' was conceived in abstract legal terms by the figure of the rational bourgeois male.

In fact, so worrying were the subversive possibilities of the court-fool that in 1449 Scotland passed The Act for the Away-Putting of Feynet Fools meting out punishments like ear pinning and limb amputating to any court jesters found to be actually sane, in other words, those using the license of madness and folly to establish themselves in court and not be held accountable for what they say.

However, before we get swept up celebrating the court-fool as an early democrat of sorts, it is important to subject this figure to a critical examination too. This pervasive figure of the court-fool is available to us largely through literature, through the works of Erasmus and Shakespeare, and in this particular guise the court-fool has been privileged over and separated from other traditions of folly, like that of the madman and the clown. It was the madman who was licensed to speak his mind without being held accountable due, initially, to superstitious beliefs in the utterances of the mad as divinely ordained, and it is through this license that the court-fool first entered court and came to exercise the rights that he did.

As to the clown, he was constituted as a figure distinct from the fool through an affiliation with spaces beyond court, like the festival. This severing of the relationship to court also meant that the clown's humour started to be described as 'empty' or 'emptied' of political significance, serving no function beyond eliciting laughter. Therefore, the canonization of the court-fool as the ideal figure of folly rendered deficient and lacking these other traditions of folly, like madness and clowning, that played a role in its development.

This process becomes even more pronounced in the colonization of the court-fool as a universal figure. For example, if we consider two fools from the Arabic-Islamic tradition, Bahlul al-Majnun and Juha, and the way they are described in the literature, we find that they have been re-cast as two different types of fools, one wise (like the court-fool) and the other naïve (like the clown), and accordingly affiliated to two different entities, one the caliph's court and the other the village square, depending on their approximation to western readings of folly and the significance accorded different types of fools.

Of course, this introduces another challenge still: it demands that we recognise the exercise of the right to question authority everywhere, including spaces beyond Europe where it is thought that democratic culture or democratic traditions do not exist. Consider for example, the folly of Bahlul al-Majnun, an eighth century self-proclaimed madman believed to have

regularly performed a live theatrical piece known to us as *Muhakamat al-Kulafa'*, or in English: Trial of the Caliphs. Caliph is the title given to the head of the Islamic Empires.

Every Monday and Thursday, or so the story goes, Bahlul would gallop unto a hill signalling the beginning of his performance, and he'd be followed by the men, women and children, the latter's tutors always failing to prevent them from joining. Bahlul would then call on the Muslim caliphs, one after the other, starting with the very first caliph, Abu-Baker al-Siddiq. In every instance after Bahlul called on a caliph, a boy from the audience would be brought forward in his place and Bahlul would evaluate the contributions of his reign before judging whether or not he should join the righteous in heaven or the perpetrators of injustice in hell. Some of the caliphs were given glowing accolades, but others were derided, dismissed and one is even called a pimp! When Bahlul got to the current ruling dynasty of his time, he'd go silent. So the audience, on their own initiative, would bring forward a boy and inform Bahlul that this boy is 'Abu al-Abas, Prince of the Believers'. The boy would come to face Bahlul, and Bahlul would end the performance by proclaiming that they [meaning the audience] should try the whole bunch of the Abbasid caliphs together... and that the verdict ought to be that they are thrown collectively into hell.

Seen in this light, Bahlul's folly was not limited to playfully scathing remarks (as in the tradition of the court-fool) but included forms of public participation in political parody. This, at the very least, warrants enquiries into the politics of folly beyond those possible through the limited focus on the figure of the renaissance court-jester.

So what begins as an investigation into how and where the right to question authority was first exercised opens up a series of challenges that question conventional ways of thinking about politics. In the first instance, it uncovers democracy's fools by shifting the site of emergence of the right to question authority from the moment it was conceived as abstract law by the bourgeois male, to an earlier moment when it was first exercised by the court-fool. In the second instance, even this revised narrative becomes problematic as we examine it more closely: the canonisation of the court-fool is found to be implicit in subjugating other traditions of folly and their potential political significance, a process that extends from the madman, to the clown, to fools from the elsewhere.

These questions are significant not only because they tell us of different traditions of folly, but because they allow us to interrogate concepts like 'rights' and their own exclusionary legacies. Inquiries into the politics of folly unsettle claims about democratic practice being the culmination of rationality as mode of thought, and offer an accompanying foolish democratic legacy for consideration. In the face of 'the' democracy in its liberal form, widely recognisable and claiming reproducibility and exportability to all corners of the world, even if through war when needed, it is sometimes not entirely clear who the foolish really are.