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Review of “Political Theory in the Square: Protest, Representation, and Subjectification”

by Lisa McGhie and Alan Hickey

As globalization takes hold, political movements and protests across the world become more relevant to us as Americans. In their paper, “Political Theory in the Square: Protest, Representation, and Subjectification,”¹ Marina Prentoulis and Lasse Thomassen² analyze what such protests can teach us. The article, published in *Contemporary Political Theory*, is timely in our globalized situation where protests have become something common. The article uses the movement *Toma la Plaza* in Spain and the movement *aganaktismeni* in Greece to show what the “occupy” movements are trying to accomplish and how, in the end, these activities will not completely change the hierarchal political structure that dominates our society today. The authors submit that, though these movements fight for an egalitarian political structure, they can only disrupt the political status quo, because vertical political structures are inevitable. Although the article does not give any normative pronouncement of whether horizontal or vertical government structures are better for democracy, the article does give great insight into the practical difficulties that protest movements face when trying to supplant vertical government structures.

The article makes it clear that the “occupy” protests are designed to protest against the existing form of government, as they propose a different, more just form of government. Protestors in these cases demand an equal voice in government, rather than the distorted representative voice they currently have. Prentoulis and Thomassen explain that the movements seek governmental reform toward liberal democracy in which the government’s power lies solely with the people. To the protestors, representative governments are merely a shadow of true democracy and limit the people’s voice. This idea can be attributed to the fact that representatives act as trustees rather than delegates who are subordinate completely to the people, thus distorting or even

silencing the people's voice entirely. Therefore, in the eyes of the people, the interests of the representatives trump those of the general population.

Understanding the mission of the movements, one question remains: Should governments have a horizontal and egalitarian structure or a vertical and hegemonic structure? Throughout their article, the authors never give a conclusive answer to this normative question. Rather, they explain that, even within protest movements there exists some form of vertical structure—someone has to be a spokesperson. No matter how hard movements try to form horizontal structures in their organizations to provide for equality, they can never escape some form of vertical structure that helps organize the movement to make it cohesive.

Though the authors never definitively answer the question about whether governments should have a horizontal or a vertical structure, they do make it clear that the people's ideals fall prey to reality. There is a big difference between the ideal philosophical world and the ideal structure in the real world. The authors explain well how electing someone as a representative distorts the people's voice. This problem would not exist if representatives followed the voice of the people in every decision. But, as Prentoulis and Thomassen clearly note, this is impossible since representatives have their own ideas and preferences, and because there is an epistemological problem of knowing exactly what the masses want.

Even if a representative wants to act as a true delegate and do exactly as the people would want, there is no way for him or her to be sure of what every person wants. This same problem exists within the movements themselves, because in order to form a cohesive, ideologically coherent body, movements must have leaders who represent the voice of protestors. Therefore, the voice of the movement's leaders may not capture the full voice of the protestors they represent, leaving protest movements subject to the flaws of vertical structures.

The Spanish and Greek protest movements offer interesting case studies, which explain that the broad mission of these movements is to challenge hegemony and vertical governmental structures. Though the authors never give an absolute answer to the question about whether horizontal or vertical structures are better for governments, they do make it clear that the ideal of strict, horizontal governmental structures is impossible to attain. Overall, the article gives a practical explanation about the difficulties protest movements face that seek to increase the "demo" portion of democracy in governmental structures.

NOTES

1. Prentoulis, Marina and Lasse Thomassen. "Political Theory in the Square: Protest, Representation and Subjectification." *Contemporary Political Theory* 12.3 (2013): 166–84. ProQuest. Web. 11 Mar. 2015.
2. Dr. Malina Prentoulis PhD, University of East Anglia; Dr. Lasse Thomassen, PhD, Queen Mary University of London.