



Dimitris Vardoulakis, *Stasis Before the State: Nine Theses On Agonistic Democracy*,

New York: Fordham University Press, 2018, 153 pp., ISBN 9780823277407

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The Agonism Between Democracy and Sovereignty as the Form of the Political

For some time now there has been a growing sense that democracy is in steady decline. Whether this is due to the loss of elections or the failure of uprisings, disillusionment with the democratic project is generating negative responses ranging from “left melancholy” to “Afro-Pessimism.” In his powerful *Stasis Before the State: Nine Theses On Agonistic Democracy* (2018), Dimitris Vardoulakis argues that, starting with less disenchantment with the demos/people, a more dialectical understanding of democracy can produce a more positive view of its condition.

When democracy and sovereignty are viewed as opposite alternatives, democracy appears to diminish in power in many parts of the world. Furthermore, its conservative opponents, such as Carl Schmitt, insist that sovereignty is virtually unassailable since democratic threats, coming presumably from the outside, can only reaffirm its priority. However, if democracy and sovereignty are posited as “distinct but not separate” (10), then, instead of being mutually exclusive and incompatible, they become agonistically related. Vardoulakis reverses this challenge to democratic power into an affirmation of it, stressing that democracy is “the condition of the possibility of sovereignty” (26), presupposed by sovereignty and engaged in a struggle with it (3).

Vardoulakis deploys forcefully (stasiotically?) the Greek word *stasis*,

which means intrinsic conflict/internal contestation, to describe the relation between democracy and sovereignty. The etymology and uses of stasis generate two semantic clusters signifying mobility and immobility, corresponding to the stability of sovereignty and the movement of democracy. The two clusters are internal to, and presuppose one another. Sovereignty cannot appropriate and neutralize democracy because democracy is not only intrinsic to sovereignty but also prior to it. Stasis names the struggle between them, the conflict of the static and the ek-static. It is “the basis of all political arrangements” (11), it “underlies all political praxis” (121), and conditions the forms that the democracy versus sovereignty agonism may assume (This conception of stasis in Solon may be further elaborated with parallel readings of related Presocratic notions, such as Hesiod’s *eris*, Heraclitus’ *polemos*, or Empedocles’ *neikos*).

Vardoulakis has written a compact, challenging reflection on stasis, working with several pairs of categories that correspond to the basic democracy versus sovereignty dialectic: mobility versus immobility, *potentia* versus *potestas*, constituent versus constituted (power), disunity versus unity, democratic conflict versus structural violence, will of the people versus apparatus of the state, resistance versus stability, revolution versus institution, crisis versus exception, judgment versus justification, de-justification versus legitimation. In short, he is refunctioning categories of becoming and being to show that they are mutually constitutive and implicated, and notions of flux are primary. Instead of seeking to eliminate the violence that accompanies sovereignty, he uses a rigorous deconstructive approach, stressing in each case excess or the supplement, to argue that sovereignty presupposes stasis/conflict and its productive relationality: if either/or is posited as inclusive, neither position needs to prevail.

Judgment/*krisis* is the mode of agonistic participation in the crisis/*krisis* of stasis. It is the “situated activity” (60) that interrogates particular political circumstances (89) by taking a stand. Participation in agonism entails the exercise of judgment as both de-justification and re-justification, de-legitimation and re-legitimation, so that the natural, the social, and the political may be re-articulated (119). Furthermore, the judgment that the other is an indispensable co-competitor “imbricates questions of existence, ethical concerns, and political practice” (71). The “agonistic partner” (73) is “part of one’s identity” (74). Constituent power “finds its proper place” (75) in the agon where other becomes a political concept with “ethical and ontological implications” (75). Nobody competes alone or in a single terrain. “Stasis unfolds in various relations to laws, institutions, and government. It is a communal activity, standing together, literally a con-stitution” (93). Becoming is being-with the co-competitor.

Adopting Nicole Loraux’s notion of the “founding forgetting” in ancient Athens, Vardoulakis proposes that the constituted stability and the suppressed stasis in the state are “founded on the *forgetting of the political*

as such" (103), that is, of the originary division and agonistic relation (107), and more specifically, of the democratic mobility that is the condition of possibility of sovereignty. On the other hand, if stasis is understood as both sovereignty/state and democracy/revolution, then, instead of pursuing an exclusive victory of one over the other, their agon should be embraced and nurtured. However, since conflict precipitates crisis (57), a polity and its politics may have to be actively kept in a constant state of crisis (a rather daunting prospect) to make sure that conflict/stasis is always flaring. Alternatively, since stasis means the struggle between the constituting and the constituted, we may also ponder whether a (temporary) victory of the latter represents a defeat of democracy, and to what extent it is possible for a (constituted) state to be fully, institutionally (and not just inherently) democratic.

Many times Vardoulakis stresses the potential and the mobile side of stasis so strongly that he seems to have little interest in the potent and the stable side. Since he is focusing on the political rather than the polity, ideas such as Gramsci's hegemony, Arendt's constitution, Castoriadis's institution, or Foucault's governmentality are absent from his book. It is as if the function of democracy is to dissent, not rule, and the role of judgment is to resist, not legislate, since the people are not expected to run their affairs. The flux of becoming is certainly implicated in the state of being, but, despite its ontological priority, it seems politically inferior and reactive.

Vardoulakis's emphasis on the centrality of democracy in the political stasis is highly valuable. However, the claim that democracy is "the only constitution" (4), with nothing outside it, and "the constitutional form of any regime of power" (107) may imply that all politics (including, say, tyrannical) has by definition a democratic foundation or presupposition. Furthermore, the claim that democracy is "not reducible to the actual or potential form of a regime of power" (120) and is instead "an endless task" (121) may be placing it closer to a politics in deferral (such as Bloch's "not yet," Derrida's "to come," and Agamben's "messianic kingdom") than to governance.

It would be more productive to think of democracy also as something to be instituted, organized, or promoted. As the author reminds us, the meanings of the Latin *constitutio* (Cicero's translation of stasis)

point to taking a stand that includes others and in such a way as to be conceived as the condition of the possibility of the institutions and governmental forms of the state.<...> Stasis unfolds in various relations to laws, institutions and government. It is a communal activity, standing together, literally a con-stitution (93).

Solon did introduce the famous "law of stasis," of which Vardoulakis has been elaborating a pathbreaking interpretation, but he also wrote a

famous elegy on *eunomia*/good governance. As I have argued elsewhere (Lambropoulos 1997), *eunomia* is the ethico-political principle of civic action and citizen solidarity that is guided by the collective and deliberative respect for the agonistic contention of political forces, and guards against dissension, strife, injustice, satiety, and folly.

The understanding of governance may be enriched if the work of political judgment, apart from de-justifying the structural violence of the state (64) and enacting "the agon between democracy and sovereignty" (77), was also considered as taking sides. Beyond affirming the contingency of life, judgment participates in the agon of the agora and takes sides in the polemos of the polis by affirming values and committing itself to their advancement. The word agon means both assembly and contest. It refers to a particular gathering where the holding of contests is a basic function. The agon assembles a polis and orders a politics through competition. An agon has one certain outcome: somebody wins, and those who do not, lose. Before agon, there is victory, and without victory, there is no agon: contestants join in order to win. Schmitt knew that well while Walter Benjamin did not, since he was interested only in redemption.

Dimitris Vardoulakis, an associate professor of philosophy at Western Sydney University, through his dynamic research, engagement, and collaboration, has been generating and facilitating a substantial body of work on political theory from which many colleagues in different fields continue to learn. For example, as a scholar of comparative literature interested in ideas of revolution in modern tragedy, I am particularly impressed by his studies of drama and fiction. *Stasis before the State* is a bridge book between his *Sovereignty and Its Other: Toward a Dejustification of Violence* (2013) and *Violence and Democracy* (forthcoming), which will complete his theory of stasis (also called in his publications, *kratos*, another cardinal Greek term) as an ontology of the political. I found it consistently thought-provoking, and look forward to the development of its radical inquiry.

References

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