

Book Review

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Spectators in the Field of Politics by Sandey Fitzgerald. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. 226pp., £68.00 (h/b), ISBN 9781137490612

Democracy has been a perennial preoccupation of social thinkers for many generations. Still, intense efforts to revisit, reframe and reinvent it continue unabated. Democracy has been simultaneously eulogised and downgraded almost with equal zeal, and in both its ‘mass’ character has been a prime concern. However, till date the status of masses remains considerably blurred. One major route to ascertain their status is the degree and quality of participation in political affairs. For a considerable period, the attempt was to elevate the masses from ‘spectators’ to ‘actors’, with the assumption that the former is passive and the latter active. The book under review challenges such received notions. Within the framework of theatre theory, it cites multiple evidences to prove that spectators are pro-active in negotiating democracy in everyday life.

The metaphor of theatre is not extraordinarily new in the discussion on politics. Nor is the exploratory zeal of addressing the nuts and bolts of participatory democracy. Then again, if the goal of a social science researcher is also to stimulate further academic deliberations on an ‘existing theme’, the author largely succeeds in achieving it. Through elaboration of complex interfaces of performance, performativity, drama and theatre, with supportive literature

from varied disciplines and impressive array of case histories over time, she builds up her case steadily and is able to provide a number of provocative twists to the existing notions of people’s participation, the so-called mantra of democracy. In the process, *distance*, conventionally denoting physical and cognitive separation between the ‘spectators’ and the ‘performers’, has been reworked to negate the hitherto rigid disengagement between the two.

The author’s conceptualisation of the ‘field’ elevates it to the status of animated space, with the epistemic indulgence to ordinary people to be ‘co-actors’ in the nuanced interplay of inclusion and exclusion—the motive force of politics. However, the ‘field’ remains mostly offline with the role of digital revolution having received little attention. There is no doubt that in the world today the ‘political’ is being reconstructed with the advent of the digital with all its empowering and disempowering attributes. The challenge of ‘new’ politics, sourced from offline–online dialectics, could have added greater breadth and depth to the discussion by identifying the dominant trails of communication vis-à-vis the theme.

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