

Steven Friedman. 2018. *Power in Action: Democracy, Citizenship and Social Justice*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press. ISBN: 978-1-77614-302-3. R350

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Steven Friedman has long been one of South Africa's premier public intellectuals, making invaluable and thoughtful contributions on the political issues of the day. In *Power in Action*, he zooms out from everyday issues to reflect on politics and democracy more generally, but it's a view deeply informed by quotidian struggles and also by the South African experience. At its heart, Friedman's argument is that contention and agency are what bring political change, and that making democracy real means that the poor and marginalised must confront the state in an organised way and on an ongoing basis. Only by challenging government every day through collective action will ordinary citizens claim the power to influence decisions that affect their daily lives – which for Friedman is the fundamental meaning of democracy.

Politics as popular agency and contention, and democracy as popular sovereignty are key themes in *Power in Action*, and they are themes that appear to run against the mainstream institutional accounts of politics. However, Friedman is a sophisticated thinker, and he links agency to institutions through the notion of collective action. In South Africa, we invariably think of protest and popular mobilisation when we think of collective action, but as Friedman rightly points out, this is just one part of the concept. Collective action is also becoming organised to engage the state through a suite of tactics from lobbying, to participating in invited spaces, to contesting elections, to protest, to forming alliances and setting media agendas, and so on and so forth. Indeed, Friedman notes that routinized collective action may be more frequent and more important than protest, and that it is through routinized collective action that the wealthy are better able to influence government between elections.

In pointing to the centrality of politics between elections, Friedman appears to join the chorus of participatory democrats in claiming that deepening democracy requires citizen participation in decision-making. This reading is only half-true however. *Power in Action* includes a trenchant critique of the pacifying and sedating effects of 'invited' spaces of government. Against this Friedman argues that change only comes through the engagements 'invented' by popular movements that retain a contentious spirit, even when engaging the state in routinized ways.

Throughout this account of politics and democracy the reader can detect an activist sensibility forged in the heat of post-apartheid South African politics, especially the moments of significant policy change brought about by social movements like the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), to whom Friedman dedicates a chapter. Much of the spirit of *Power in Action* is testimony to the remarkable achievements of this social movement. In the early 2000s, the TAC effectively changed the HIV-AIDS policy of a dominant political party with 70% of the popular vote, and a President dead set against this policy change. The lessons of alliance formation, working international as well as locally, politicising, organising and mobilising inside and outside formal institutions, all of this flows through Friedman's conceptions of politics and democracy.

Some larger implications...

Although conceived from an activist imaginary of post-apartheid South Africa, *Power in Action* provides resources to read against some current trends in political thinking globally. First, against

contemporary arguments that democracy is falling under the assault of authoritarian capitalism and resurgent nativist nationalisms Friedman holds that democracy has survived worse, and is still the most popular form of government, including in Africa, and the only kind that can offer ordinary people control over their lives. While he concedes that democracy might be staggering, it is not about to fall and neither is it beyond rescue from the (supposed) dominance of the global market, nor its (partial) origination in the west.

Friedman notes that the mainstream liberal conception of democracy is one particular form of the idea of popular sovereignty that also contains certain elitist features. Indeed, it is the Anglo-American model that the democratic consolidation paradigm wrongly assumes is the norm to which all new democracies must aspire. Denouncing this approach as 'vague, teleological, and ethnocentric, Friedman argues that while who constitutes the demos maybe contested at the edges, and our rulers may sometimes struggle to implement the decisions of the demos, it is the principle of popular sovereignty that defines democracy. This means that 'every adult human should have equal weight in making the decisions that affect them' (24). In our current context, popular sovereignty would be expressed both when citizens vote in elections for office and referendums, and when citizens engage with their representatives between elections.

Second, in placing much more emphasis on the democratic quality of governance between elections, Friedman appears to join intellectual hands with the participatory democracy literature. Hence he argues that the wealthy groups have routinized access to the state (that he terms routinized collective action), whereas the poor and marginalised generally have very little of this unless they demand it through mobilisation. This because a lack of social power constrains the poor and marginalised from accessing the state to the same extent as 'the suburbs' and business. What is required to deepening democracy are new ways of routinizing collective action between elections for all social groups, especially the poor and marginalised.

Importantly though, Friedman departs from the participatory democratic literature in two important ways. First, as noted already, he is deeply critical of invited spaces of participation set up by the state both because they usually do not offer citizens power over decision-making but also, and this is the second point, because they assume a homogeneity of identity and interests at the level of community. For Friedman this flies in the face of the reality that communities are not homogenous and that politics is driven by disagreement rather than consensus. Recognising these facts means that we need to find ways of making the state responsive to emergent forms of collective action from citizens.

Third, in affirming a normative conception of democracy as popular sovereignty rather than a model that incorporates economic and political institutions (Held 2006); Friedman pushes back against the tendency to label any forms of radical politics as populist. On most understandings, populism is the idea that elites are dominating ordinary people, but there is a tendency on the liberal mainstream to label any radical ideological politics as populist, whether left or right. While there is very little on populism in *Power in Action*, Friedman nevertheless offers resources to criticise the conflation of populism with non-liberal thought by pointing out that democracy is not expert governance of complex systems, nor is it protections that limit special interests. If democracy is just popular sovereignty, ideologies that criticise the limitations of liberal expertise, or checks and balances, or the courts, are not necessarily populist.

Some questions for debate...

Power in Action is a stimulating and provocative read, and offers tremendous resources for a left activist conception of politics and democracy. I am sure that different readers will nit-pick at some of

the many sub-arguments of this wide-ranging book¹, but ultimately *Power in Action* must be judged on its three core claims points: that politics is about contention; that democracy about popular sovereignty; and that political change comes through collective action.

The first of these claims may seem obvious in the era in which we live. However, following the collapse of the Berlin wall in 1989, a contrary theme in mainstream democratic theory was the triumph of reason over contention, manifest in ideas such as Rawls' 'overlapping consensus' and Habermas' 'ideal speech situation'. Similar conflict transcending sensibilities were evident in most versions of participatory democracy and in mainstream technocratic conceptions of 'good governance' in international development discourse. In affirming the centrality of disagreement and conflict to politics, including democratic politics, Friedman distances himself from the liberal mainstream in ways that echo both Schmittian conservative and Marxist radical tropes. However, Friedman is probably closest to contemporary post-Marxists like Chantal Mouffe and new republicans like Lawrence Hamilton in affirming political solutions to conflict, and advocating for new forms of adversarial democracy. The value of this more conflictual conception of politics has been inflated by the tumultuous political events of the last three years. The fact that Friedman developed his conception of politics before current events made them fashionable is powerful evidence in favour of his insightfulness.

The second main claim of Friedman's argument is that democracy is first and fundamentally the principle that, 'every adult human should have equal weight in making the decisions that affect them'. From this normative stance, Friedman criticises the shortcomings of actually existing democracy in South Africa and beyond. More specifically, Friedman calls into question the democratic credentials of the liberal model in respect of both expert knowledge and the checks on popular will. While Friedman's position is consistent, it begs the larger question of whether pure democracy is desirable or even possible under contemporary socio-economic conditions globally. What of the argument, following Weber and Habermas, that modern economic and political systems have evolved to produce a growing division of labour, and have deepened our interdependency in ever more complex knowledge systems? Assuming we need the effective management of these systems to survive and prosper, is there not a role for expert knowledge alongside that of popular accountability? Indeed a key lesson of governance in post-apartheid South Africa is the cost to ordinary citizens of displacing or ignoring expert knowledge (Palmer et al 2017). Similarly, what are the lessons from the last ten years, of an executive unchecked by parliament, opposition parties, the media and the courts? Indeed, is it even realistic to expect that enhanced forms of collective action between elections would have corrected the process of state-capture at all, never mind more efficiently than the current institutions have? Lastly, what of the economic forces that drive state capture? Are checks, balances, and the courts not important resources against investors in our neo-liberal age?

The third main claim of Friedman's argument is that it is conscious and directed collective action, whether in the form of popular mobilisation and protest, or in the form of more structured or routinized engagement and lobbying, that is the key form of power to influence rule in democracy. The claim that politics between elections and outside of choosing rulers is perhaps more important to democracy is rarely made, and an urgent invocation to study lobbying, formal engagement, and

¹ I can imagine democratisation specialists taking issue with his critique of the mainstream account (is it really that novel); decolonial scholars questioning whether he has engaged the strongest views from their field (as opposed to a quirky Comaroff piece on Botswana); empiricists wondering why most of the sources are ten years older than they ought to be; feminists concerned at the silence on gender issues; civil society scholars pondering the exceptionalism of the TAC; and so one.

informal networks and practices that link the wealthy and powerful. In a time of new forms of representation through social media, understanding the extra-institutional ways that politicians connect to contending social groups is imperative, not least because of the biases it introduces in to the democratic process (see Hobden 2018 on this). At the same time though, this insight offers hope to groups marginalised at elections, or in the media, that policy change is nevertheless possible through various forms of collective action.

However, I wonder whether Friedman's conception of collective action, especially routinized collective action, is as different from the status quo of 'invited spaces' that he criticises. Will new forms of engagement be less hamstrung by a lack of bindingness and political capture (Piper & Von Lieres 2016)? More importantly, is it really access between elections that explains the bias of the state? Surely different political parties advance the different policies when in government. Is it not the case that governance favours the wealthy for a range of reasons other than lobbying such as election and party funding; sharing the same social backgrounds and similar worldviews as the powerful; being dependent on business for taxes, economic growth and jobs? Ultimately then, should we not recognise the role of institutions, as well as agency, in politics?

The take away...

Power in Action is an important intervention into debates on politics and democracy at a critical time in the history of democratic rule globally. It is a thought-provoking, contentious and powerful case for re-thinking some traditional assumptions about how power works, and what democracy should be. Ultimately, the great strength of *Power in Action* is that it conceives of politics and democracy in ways that gives hopes to the activist rather than the politician or the civil servant. If change comes through collective action rather than institutions, then activism rather than elections is the better route to social justice. Furthermore, if democracy is people controlling decision over their lives, then the popular will rightfully trumps the expert knowledge of civil servants. Practically and normatively then, *Power in Action* conceives of politics and democracy in ways empowering to ordinary citizens and civil society rather than politicians and civil servants. It is, on its own terms, epistemically democratic: that is, a fundamentally empowering and democratic way of thinking about power and democracy.

References

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