

June 2022
Volume 29, Number 4

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 1000-1000
ISSN 1043-9862

Democratization

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fdem20>

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To cite this article: Andrea Felicetti (2022): Casting a new light on the democratic spectator, *Democratization*, DOI: [10.1080/13510347.2022.2048818](https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2022.2048818)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2022.2048818>



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Published online: 19 May 2022.



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Casting a new light on the democratic spectator

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ABSTRACT

The idea of citizens being mere spectators who “watch” politics is widespread in public and academic debates. Scholarship in relation to democratic theory tends to see spectatorship as a state in which citizens are politically uninterested, isolated, and passive. Although this understanding aptly captures the problems about the idea of spectatorship, it is only a partial awareness and prevents us from seeing that positive forms of spectatorship are also possible. I show that positive spectatorship occurs when citizens show an interest in one or more political problems and, together with others, strive to understand them better. I consider the distinctive elements of this form of spectatorship characterized by careful observance, relationality, and proactivity. I argue that it is normatively desirable, and I reflect on the ways in which positive spectatorship helps thinking about democratizing politics. Relatedly, I also revisit the theatrical metaphor of politics, which is often associated to the concept of spectatorship as something negative for democracy. I argue that, when combined with a proper understanding of spectatorship, the theatrical metaphor can be used originally to envisage ways forward in the democratization of our societies.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 14 October 2021; Accepted 28 February 2022

KEYWORDS Democracy; spectatorship; participation; deliberation; plebiscitarianism; agonism

Introduction

An oft-quoted metaphor with regard to political life in mass democracies describes citizens as mere spectators who watch politics as it unfolds before their eyes. According to this view, citizens are seen as being passive, uncritical, and incapable of taming power struggles perpetuated by self-interested elites. This finds resonance in political science and democratic theory in which spectatorship is also seen as a pathology generally. I do not contend that a passive and uncritical citizenry is of any particular use to democracy. However, I show that our current understanding of spectatorship is unduly restrictive, and I offer a much needed, new approach to spectatorship.

In public debates the idea of spectatorship recurs often. Although some of the critiques of spectatorship serve a deepening democracy agenda, others seem tied to a democratic retrenchment perspective. That is, some political actors denounce the problem of a passive and uncritical citizenry as part of a broader critique of

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contemporary societies they seek to democratize.¹ Others, instead, use spectatorship to fuel cynicism about liberal democracy, dismiss representative institutions and cast doubt on intermediary bodies and democratic innovations.²

As far as political science is concerned, spectatorship tends to be seen as a problem, and attention is swiftly focused on finding ways of addressing this. For example, the bulk of empirical research tends to judge political behaviour by how active citizens are.³ There are notable exceptions that conceptualize and empirically investigate the relation between models of democracy, including spectator democracy that is contrasted with participatory democracy.⁴ Also, some researchers have questioned the simplistic dichotomy between active and passive citizens and shown, for example, how passivity could often be understood better as a case of latent publics ready to be activated.⁵ Nevertheless, empirical investigation into forms of spectatorship in the citizenry that enhance democracy remains minimal or non-existent.

In democratic theory, a shift has occurred from theories that envisaged a limited role for citizens to research that values their active and vocal participation. As argued by Gray, in democratic theory “we lack any systematic conceptualization of the range of different attitudes democratic citizens might hold in silence.”⁶ Interestingly, citizens’ failure to participate offers as an easy target for elitist critiques of democracy.⁷ It is no coincidence that scholars close to the realist tradition of democratic thought, for example, plebiscitarian democrats, tend to give more attention to the idea of spectatorship.⁸ Politics for realist democrats is, by and large, the domain of elites that can harness support of publics as one weapon in their power struggles.⁹ Besides that, from this perspective, there is little point in delving deeper into the nuances of spectatorship.

For their part, scholars with more radical democratic views appear suspicious and dismissive of a concept traditionally associated with more conservative readings of their field. Without paying close attention to spectatorship, however, they risk throwing the baby out with the bathwater. There are aspects of spectatorship that need not be tied to Schumpeterian ideas of democracy and can, instead, be very valuable for building progressive critiques. Throughout the article, I refer to participatory and particularly deliberative theories of democracy that are at the forefront of contemporary democratic theory. Their highly sceptical views, while justified in many respects, hinder from our purview the ways in which spectatorship could contribute to democracy. Indeed, those approaches that seek to deepen and expand democracy, are exactly those that have greater stakes in better understanding (and trying to promote) positive forms of spectatorship.

The aim of this article is to offer a new approach to the idea of spectatorship and spur a much-needed debate on the role it plays in democratic life. In particular, the article offers a refined understanding of the concept as something that can also enhance democracy. Towards this end, I first introduce the typical view of spectatorship as a phenomenon characterized by a focus on private interests, individualism and passiveness. I then show some of its limitations and question some underpinning ideas including a common but problematic understanding of the Arendtian dichotomy between actors and spectators. Research on spectatorship only sees spectators as the opposite of actors. However, citizens can be both actors and spectators. Indeed, the idea of positive spectatorship shows that there are deep ties between acting and spectating in democracy.

In a theoretical move from extant conceptualizations, I argue that spectatorship when shows careful observance, relationality and proactivity is normatively desirable from a democratic standpoint. Thus, I provide a definition of spectatorship which is in stark contrast with current ideas. In particular, positive spectatorship occurs when citizens who have an interest in a given political problem (or more than one) strive to understand it better in conjunction with others. When positive spectatorship occurs, the intended political message conveyed to citizens is not accepted passively but considered actively, scrutinizing its meaning, and assessing its worth. Here, spectatorship refers to citizens' critical reflection on received meanings and it is more than a process in which individuals are given norms and conform to them. This is a new and more nuanced way to think about spectatorship which can spur a much needed, more systematic effort to understand this phenomenon. Looking at the way in which citizens develop their ideas about political problems, I distinguish positive spectatorship from other forms of democratic life that have been equally overlooked and/or pathologized within the dominant approaches to democracy and that are receiving greater recognition only recently (especially, listening and silence).

Finally, I explore the theatrical metaphor, which is central in the tradition of thinking the citizen as a spectator. I borrow from Rancière's eminently political critique of the theatrical spectacle to show how a nuanced understanding of spectatorship can contribute enhancing, rather than hindering, democracy. Overall, spectatorship is too important a feature of democratic life to be thought of as only a problem. Also, engaging with spectatorship more systematically helps us thinking about democracy in original ways.

The article is structured as follows. In the next section I introduce the idea of spectatorship and discuss its substantial problems for democracy, and I then argue that, these issues notwithstanding, a sceptical view does not capture the object of analysis in all its complexity. In the ensuing section, I revisit the concept, define positive spectatorship in its main features and distinguish it from other forms of democratic life. Afterwards, I use the concept of spectator to reconsider and explore a longstanding metaphor of politics as theatre and envisage how positive spectatorship can contribute to democratizing politics. The conclusions address some limitations of this study and suggest ways forward.

The problem of spectatorship

Extant scholarship sees spectatorship as a problem and, specifically, as a state where citizens are passive, uninterested in politics and isolated. Spectatorship drives disengagement as citizens limited involvement in political life and poor understanding of political problems reinforce each other. This is contrasted with the growing appreciation for active and engaged citizenship. Departing from a traditional focus on minimal forms of engagement such as voting, contemporary empirical studies judge citizens and their behaviour in terms of the type of action they take and its extent.¹⁰ As participatory and deliberative theories of democracy, which value active and engaged citizens, displaced minimalist approaches as the driving forces in democratic theory, spectatorship has come to be seen in an increasingly gloomy light. The more labelling spectatorship as something to be avoided has become customary, the less effort there has been to understand what it is all about.

For deliberative and participatory theorists of democracy in particular, passive spectatorship is not just the antithesis of active participation, it provides a foil against which prescriptive accounts of what constitutes political participation can be defined. Whatever political activity entails in these understandings of democracy, it does not include spectatorship.¹¹

The critiques voiced by theorists working outside of the participatory and deliberative framework deserve attention. Among others, Gray argues that, increasingly, democratic theory tends to associate empowerment with voice. Although this is “certainly not ‘wrong’” the association “predisposes democratic theorists to hear the silence of citizens as indicative of disengagement or disempowerment.”¹²

Despite spectatorship tending to be a problem that is hardly defined at all, in current scholarship there are some elements that can be used towards a characterization of the phenomenon. Such a definition is partial in that it focuses only on negative aspects. Nevertheless, it gives us a first important means of shedding light on the way spectatorship is currently conceptualized: citizens are in a state of spectatorship when they are uninterested, isolated, and passive with regard to politics.

According to some key participatory democrats, participation is the opposite of spectatorship, the latter being the overriding characteristic of everyday life in democracy. A participatory society enables citizens to control their individual lives actively through participating in decisions in all relevant areas of collective life. As Pateman argued long ago, this runs contrary to the views of those who take citizens’ apathy and lack of interest in political life for granted and frame participation as an ancillary political phenomenon.¹³ Participation is also seen as an alternative to the tendency of liberal democracy to relegate the development of fundamentally apolitical and passive citizens to the private sphere.¹⁴ Participatory democracy seeks to activate individuals and to support them in the development of their capacities and powers, which implies an effort to overcome passivity which is widespread in a capitalist democracy.¹⁵ Finally, to mitigate the development of an isolated and passive citizenry, there are calls for active participation of citizens in public life and for greater attention to be paid to the communicative dimension of democracy.¹⁶

Also deliberative scholars tend to be sceptical about spectatorship. For example, Gutmann and Thompson argue that a substantial disadvantage of representative democracy is exactly the fact that “most citizens become mere spectators; they participate in the deliberation only vicariously.”¹⁷ What is expected of citizens is that, in the main, they should hold representatives accountable. However, they might fail to do so or be prevented from doing so, leaving open the possibility that those representatives might act irresponsibly or dishonestly. Spectatorship is also seen as deeply problematic in Niemeyer’s work on deliberation. Building on Edelman’s famous studies on symbolic politics, he claims that “removing spectatorship is necessary to displace symbolic politics, one of the key goals of deliberation.”¹⁸ Finally, Fung captures the problem with spectatorship well in his seminal work on the types of participation in complex governance. Here, he updates and improves on Arnstein’s ladder of participation. In his democracy cube, Fung relegates “listen as a spectator” to the outermost edges of this latter type. Indeed, if a process includes only spectatorship it is not considered a substantial form of participation at all. According to Fung:

the vast majority of those who attend events such as public hearings and community meetings do not put forward their own views at all. Instead, they participate as spectators who receive information about some policy or project, and they bear witness to struggles among politicians, activists, and interest groups.¹⁹

The negative connotation given to this concept certainly captures problematic aspects that spectatorship might present. Indeed, we concur that for democracy to work spectatorship alone is not sufficient. Efforts to promote participatory and deliberative forms of democracy should be encouraged. Nevertheless, I intend to show that it is possible to revisit the concept of spectatorship and to discriminate between the different forms it takes.

Spectatorship revisited

Plebiscitarianism is an uncommon source of insight for contemporary democratic theory.²⁰ Notable exceptions notwithstanding, from Weber onwards, plebiscitarianism has been characterized by a majoritarian, vote-centred understanding of democracy.²¹ Its limited attention to communicative or transformative aims makes it an arduous interlocutor for participatory and deliberative theories of democracy.²² Nevertheless, potential interconnections certainly deserve attention as plebiscitarian features seem to emerge in our societies in parallel with participatory and deliberative characteristics.²³ At any rate, there is no need to subscribe to plebiscitarianism to recognize this is the area within democratic theory that has given spectatorship most attention. As such, plebiscitarian democracy and, especially, Green's in-depth work on spectatorship in mass democracies makes a valuable contribution towards achieving the aim of this article.

As Green argues extensively, "spectatorship is definitive of the way ordinary people relate to politics in their ordinary lives":²⁴

the key point is that the vast majority of our political experience, whether voter or non-voter, is not spent engaged in such action and decision-making, but rather watching and listening to *others* who are themselves actively engaged. Such spectatorship is inscribed in the very nature of political action itself.²⁵

Interestingly, Green's diagnosis of spectatorship in democracy resonates with the participatory and deliberative critiques we saw above. In fact, he argues that "mass representative democracy engenders and normalizes a type of citizen that, as a matter of law and abstract principle, has full political rights but, as a matter of practice, experiences politics primarily as a spectator."²⁶ The prognosis, however, differs widely.

Green invites theorists to reconsider the long-standing distinction between the role of the spectator and that of the actor and to pay closer attention to the former, rather than just the latter. He is clear that "spectatorship is not better than acting." Indeed, "the spectator is a problematic figure who upsets traditional democratic values of equality and autonomy." Nevertheless, Green argues, the aim of democratic theory should not always be to "seek to find ways to transform spectators into actors."²⁷

This is an interesting insight, but I reformulate and develop it in ways that are markedly different from Green's. First, although I agree with Green that not all citizens can be turned into participants or deliberators, I question the dichotomy between spectators and actors: being a good spectator involves considerable activity. Second, the fact that spectators exist should not blind us to the existence of different ways of being a spectator and does not mean democracy should not encourage participation or deliberation. Indeed, fostering positive forms of spectatorship can be an essential part of building a more democratic society.

Green, like others, sees spectatorship as a reality that democratic theorists must come to terms with.²⁸ Unlike them I intend spectatorship as a theoretical and empirical conundrum, which can be more or less beneficial for democratic life. I hold that the idea of transforming spectators into actors is problematic because it creates too stark a dichotomy between spectatorship, on the one hand, and participation and deliberation, on the other. This type of distinction plays into the hands of those who intend the persistence of spectatorship to be something that undermines participatory and deliberative visions. Instead, I argue that the vision of participatory and deliberative democracy can also be pursued in a society in which spectatorship persists.²⁹ However, we need to make critical sense of this phenomenon and distinguish between its undesirable features and desirable ones. To do this, we first need to address the longstanding dichotomy between spectator and actor that is problematic but deeply engrained in contemporary thinking about democracy.

In dealing with this dichotomy, I start from where traditionally many scholars have looked, the influential work of Arendt.³⁰ Arendt is credited as one of the main theorists to have made “judgement” a key political problem and her work is certainly also valuable for understanding spectatorship. Nevertheless, the way in which Arendt’s work has been received has generated some issues that deserve clarification to reflect on spectatorship more effectively.

Traditionally, Arendtian judgement has been framed as being of two kinds: the actor’s and the spectator’s. The spectator is essentially a philosopher “whose task becomes to stand apart from the practical life of humans that he/she might pass judgement upon it.”³¹ According to this view, the spectator is passive and detached. At the other end of the scale, political actors are engaged but generally unfit to make political judgements, because

the actor is always “in the thick of things,” is committed to this or that cause, is in pursuit of a particular end, desires a particular outcome, is motivated by particular reasons, is interested in objects, events and actions because he/she deems them to be right or wrong, good or bad.³²

The remarkable dichotomy between actor and spectator, however, is neither the only nor the best possible interpretation of Arendt’s concept of judgement.³³ Interestingly, according to Zerrilli, a “‘Spectator’ is not another person (i.e. a philosopher as opposed to a political actor), but simply a different mode of relating to, or being, in the common world.”³⁴ As Lederman argues, there are “spectators in the public sphere, not only, and not mainly, actors.”³⁵ Indeed, “there has always been, for Arendt, a political activity in the public realm which is not action per se, but a form of spectatorship.” As he adds, “The spectator can become an actor in an instant; it is only that then she or he no longer forms an opinion – she or he acts.”³⁶ Marden sees it as consistent with Arendtian views to state that:

As free-acting members of a political community we seek to impress and persuade each other through speech and deed; at the same time we listen to others and make ourselves available to persuasion, we evaluate and weigh the meaning and quality of others’ words, acts and propositions – in short we are called upon to judge and be judged.³⁷

The above considerations allow us to reject the actor (active) and spectator (passive) dichotomy, which, as has been seen, supports many a case for citizens to act passively with regard to democracy. Instead, it spurs us to see that spectating takes effort and that it can be done in different ways, which from a democratic standpoint can be

more or less desirable. The view that participation and deliberation, on the one hand, and spectatorship, on the other, are in contrast is problematic. Positive forms of spectatorship might actually be necessary to attain participatory and deliberative goals.

Barber's work, which has both participatory and deliberative components, is especially interesting for shedding light on the last comment. Barber's call for citizens to participate more actively in public life is paralleled by one to greater attention to the communicative dimension of democracy. Intriguingly, Barber's "strong" view of democracy involves greater participation supported by a more positive ability to listen, something that is sorely lacking in representative democracy. Barber's call invites action, not spectating, but the elements of positive spectatorship are instrumental to action. Battistoni and colleagues connect "Barber's pre-eminence as a theorist and advocate for a more participatory democracy" to his "ability to understand the centrality of talk – and of 'eloquent listening.'"³⁸ Further, Mansbridge remarks on an important aspect of Barber's concept of strong democracy: "empathic listening" takes effort. An awareness of this challenge has informed later work in deliberative democracy.³⁹ As Morrell argues, however, though the necessity to listen one another has been characteristic of deliberative theory since its inception, the bulk of research on this topic until recently has come from democratic theories other than deliberation.⁴⁰

Stepping into the depths of the current democratic crisis, Dryzek and colleagues have remarked on the communicative nature of the problem with democracy.⁴¹ To them, in a context of declining cognitive complexity, growing incivility and post-truth, a key challenge for democracy is that elites will engage in demagoguery and polarization to the extent that there is a public receptive to these types of messages. They argue that public deliberation represents a means of addressing this problem. It enables citizens to influence decision-making processes but also to develop deliberative virtues, which include listening and reflection. A highly valuable yet demanding activity such as public deliberation is part of a broader effort to create a more attentive public that resists being manipulated.

More generally, also other influential contributions to democratic thinking seem to point in a similar direction. For example, Manin's critique of *audience* democracy offers, in the first place, an analysis of the demeaning ways in which all things political are experienced by the citizenry and, then, a call to redress this state of affairs.⁴² The ability of the public to be a critical observer is instrumental to the empowered citizenry that Keane envisages in his *monitor* democracy.⁴³ This point is also important in Rosanvallon's analyses of counter-democracy and, in particular, for citizens' ability to engage in *surveillance*, prevention and the testing of judgements.⁴⁴ More recently, Dobson's plea for dialogical democracy is based on an analysis aimed at identifying positive forms of watching and listening, which are explicitly considered as two "aspects of spectatorship."⁴⁵ In sum, the idea of spectatorship ought not to be tied only to a negative way of living in a democracy. It can be taken, instead, as an integral part of ambitious projects concerned with democratization.

We should avoid two common but flawed views. Spectatorship is neither a state where citizens are either in an ideal position to make judgements nor the one that dooms to a perpetual misunderstanding what goes on before them. Clearly, spectators are not some sort of omniscient characters fully able to understand what's before them. Yet, widespread, aprioristic rejection of spectatorship runs the risk of downplaying subjects' capability of understanding what they see. It basically negates the political

as something discernable under everyday circumstances. That runs against the recognition of citizens' agency, when, instead, being spectators can often be the way in which the political begins and is the most common if not the only way in which many experience politics. Without spectators, a substantial part of democratic politics wouldn't happen at all. The goal here is to start framing the discussion on spectatorship in more realistic and nuanced terms capable of discerning what might be good and bad about it. With this idea in mind, in the next section I seek to enlarge our view of positive, democratically enhancing forms of spectatorship.

Towards positive spectatorship

It is now possible to define positive spectatorship, a normatively desirable form of spectatorship that occurs on those occasions when citizens show an interest in one or more political problems and, together with others, strive to understand them better. This definition is in stark contrast to the traditional and democratically crippling characterization of spectatorship. Importantly, interest, effort to understand and relationality all should be present at once, since forms of spectatorship that neglect one of these elements risk leading to some of the problems traditionally affecting spectatorship. What is it that spectators are watching? Why are they watching it? How are they watching? Spectatorship can enhance democracy when behaviours that configure normatively desirable answers to these questions can be envisaged. In showing the desirability of positive spectatorship I engage with scholars with different background because the concept does not fall squarely within one particular tradition of democratic thought and can be related to different conceptions of democracy.

First, positive spectatorship emerges when a citizen watches something that she finds interesting in light of a political problem she is concerned with. That is, a citizen decides to watch something rather than merely being exposed to it. Of course, one can happen to see to something and unexpectedly find information she deems relevant in light of a given political topic she is interested in. Yet, positive spectatorship puts an emphasis on the decision a person makes to pay attention to something or someone in the first place. From a normative standpoint, the fact that a citizen displays an interest in politics can hardly be deemed negative from a democratic perspective. Further, whereas one's resolve to seek insight about a political interest might not seem particularly ambitious, the fact the someone decides to act upon her interest for a political issue is generally understood as something positive for democracy.⁴⁶ This first characteristic is needed to avoid that spectatorship fosters an uninterested and inattentive attitude.

Though necessary, interest alone is not sufficient to forge positive spectatorship. A second characteristic is the effort to enhance one's understanding of the issue(s) at hand. In positive forms of spectatorship one watches something in order to better understand a given matter of interest. Of course, a spectator's effort to understand might or might not lead one person to changing her views. Someone that spectates might even reinforce her opinions about a political problem. What matters is that the spectator gains a better idea of why she holds certain opinions, of their strengths and weaknesses. The point here is not for spectators to develop necessarily a very good or sophisticated idea on an issue (though this might happen) but to follow something so as to improve their understanding. Normatively, it could be seen as a first step

towards “internal reflection” or “enlightened understanding.”⁴⁷ Instrumentally, this is of consequence in democratic systems. The spectator’s effort to understand affects the way ideas develop across democratic systems. As seen, Arendt argued that the spectator is in a privileged position to understand, so much so that the spectator is turned into the model of Arendtian critical judgement. One could interpret this as a way to acknowledge the reciprocity of the judgement of the actor and that of the spectator. It is not indifferent whether political actors relate to publics where positive forms of spectatorship are widespread or not. Further, much political speech is inchoate, that is, “vague, patchy, haphazardly expressed, and rife with seeming inconsistency.”⁴⁸ Making sense of inchoate expressions and, for that matter, any expression that is conveyed to a public requires an “interpretive labour.” It is not only critics, or intermediaries, such as journalist and social scientists that can contribute towards this end, as Prescott-Couch rightly argues. Also publics where positive forms of spectatorship exist can be valuable. This characteristic effort to watch to better understand is important to contrast inattentiveness that negative forms of spectatorship typically encourage.

Having an interest in any given political problem and being driven by a desire to better understand, however, leave unaddressed a typical negative element of spectatorship. I refer to the previously examined tendency to think about political problems in isolation, cut off from others. Instead, positive forms of spectatorship are essentially relational in nature. First, as we have seen, the boundaries between actors and spectators are continually crossed as citizens take one or the other position in political life. Also, a deep relation exists between actor and spectator as these roles are effectively interdependent and reciprocal. No party can exist without the other. Knowing they are being watched by spectators affects all political actors’s behaviour. Further, it is worth noting that sharing one’s ideas on a given topic can be an integrating part to the spectatorship experience and this leads to continuously build ever evolving narratives that populate democratic life. To grasp this idea it is helpful to think that, as spectators, we not only, for instance, silently take a seat at a theatre or in front of a screen, alone or in company, and watch a show of choice. We are still spectators when we exchange our impressions about the show with others. The idea here is that positive spectatorship is about citizens relating to one another in a collective or group context, rather than them being in a situation of isolation. Normatively, positive spectatorship affirms the relational and egalitarian nature of democracy. It is rooted in “everyday discourse,”⁴⁹ an integrating part to what Dallmayr calls the “relational praxis”⁵⁰ element of democratic or “the possibility of actively making sense together” that Bickford discussed long ago.⁵¹ This does not mean that positive spectatorship shuns moments of individual reflection. Rather, the point is to acknowledge that for positive spectatorship to occur there should not be only such moments. Spectatorship does not have to be equated with disconnection from others, especially given its fundamentally relational nature (see Table 1).

Table 1. Two types of spectatorship.

Traditional spectatorship	Positive spectatorship
Private interest only	Interest in political problems
Passivity	Effort to understand
Individual	Relational

Importantly, the notion of positive spectatorship might contribute to ideas such as political information,⁵² political knowledge,⁵³ political sophistication⁵⁴ and citizen competence⁵⁵; however, it is different from these. Because of the limited attention given to the concept, to date we have been unable to establish how positive spectatorship might affect citizens' performance in the above respects and, more generally, on the positive role that spectatorship can play in democracy. Positive spectatorship focuses on how ideas about political problems are developed and highlights how political messages conveyed to citizens are not necessarily accepted passively but actively considered. Because of this communicative dimension we might expect that spectatorship influences the capacity to discuss politics in everyday life, for instance, at home, in the neighbourhood, at school or in the workplace. It could also affect our ability to deliberate in more eminently political forums, such as, for example, political group meetings, participatory forums, or deliberative assemblies. Similarly, positive spectatorship might discourage norm conforming attitudes and foster, instead, efforts to engage, for instance, by reaching out to one's political representative, by joining a social movement, a political party, or a union.

My intent to rescue the positive elements of spectatorship can be seen as part of broader ongoing efforts to ascertain the significance and nature of forms of political agency that have been long overlooked. Here, in a necessarily succinct way, I consider listening, and silence, which are similar to yet distinct from positive spectatorship. Comparing spectatorship with each one of these concepts that are receiving renewed attention further helps us grasping the specific features of this form of democratic life.

To begin with listening, its value in democracy is increasingly acknowledged through numerous and subtle analyses.⁵⁶ In contrast, spectating has nowhere received the same attention, let alone any praise. The outright rejection of spectatorship has meant that even if there were anything good to this idea that has not been explored. Instead, scholarship on listening has come to define the role that this phenomenon plays in representative and deliberative accounts of democracy and how it could reorient them, as Dobson shows in his seminal work on this topic.⁵⁷ More recently, Scudder has advanced a "listening act theory" which ties listening to democratic citizenship and provides a realistic account of what listening might or might not do in a democracy.⁵⁸ Also, a listening quality index has been proposed as a measurement informed by deliberative theory.⁵⁹ Among the most interesting forms of listening that have been observed by researchers, Hendriks, Ercan and Duus have highlighted "enclave," "alliance," "adversarial" and "transformative" listening practices.⁶⁰ Like listening, spectatorship shifts the focus from citizens that are actively making a point, for instance "giving reason," to those on the other side of the relationship. Both concepts highlight that successful democratic interaction is never solipsistic but relational in nature, that all parts involved play a role. However, unlike listening, in the economy of the senses spectatorship refers to sight. As such, it is often associated with the state of being present at, looking at, viewing or watching, a spectacle or a show. More than the dialogical, interactive exchange that it can enable, what matters is the quality of the presence with which one follows something that is performed in front of them. Though certainly spectatorship might be a stepping stone towards different forms of engagement, its value is not as much tied to it being a key of deliberative discussions or agonistic engagement. There is no prescriptive view, spectatorship is positive (or not) depending on how one does it not on what one does with it. As we have seen, one

might be a spectator in a context other than a deliberative setting or a political assembly, starting from her own living room. Furthermore, listening is a fundamental channel for rational discussions though clearly it also offers ground to engage storytelling as well as rhetorical and compassionate speech. Besides these elements, the idea of spectatorship puts an emphasis also on the aesthetic dimension of politics, whose importance is recognized in agonistic,⁶¹ participatory⁶² and, more recently, deliberative approaches to democracy.⁶³ As we will see more extensively in the next section, spectatorship also focuses on the spectacular element of politics.⁶⁴ Specifically, on the experience of the citizen being in front of a performance that unfolds before her. This happens, for instance, when watching political activities as diverse as political speeches, debates, ceremonies, or protest events, from parades, to marches and demonstrations.

Second, silence is also attracting growing attention and its role profoundly reconsidered in a way that is today unimaginable for spectatorship. The work of Ferguson has been groundbreaking here.⁶⁵ He argued for the need to go beyond the negative understanding of the concept then dominating political research and to explore the possibilities of political agency silence could have. The flourishing debate that ensued has led to recognize the agentic, performative, embodied dimensions of silence as well as its relations to other forms of political action and in the broader context of representative democracy.⁶⁶ Silence is the object of critical cross-disciplinary reflections rethinking the way this concept has been used and exposing the vilification of silence and the domination that “silent” citizens have been subject to.⁶⁷ Similarly to what we have seen for “listening,” also distinct categories of silence have been envisaged, including: affective, demonstrative, compliative, and facilitative communicative forms of silence.⁶⁸ Moreover, Jungkunz’s work has tried to overcome the traditional view of silence as a manifestation of apathy or submission to show the existence of four types of “insubordinate silences.”⁶⁹ These silent practices can have a role in empowerment, as well as protesting, resisting, and refusing power in democratic societies. Like these silent practices, spectatorship is a form of political life that shapes democracy without being centred around someone’s vocal means of expression. Hearing and seeing are of primary importance for spectators. Also, like silent practices spectatorship can be not only detrimental but also positive for democracy. Nevertheless, a key difference between positive spectatorship and silent practices is that the latter, unlike the former, can be intended as a form of mobilization on a specific political contention. For instance, it can be used as a means to highlight, contest or redress injustice.⁷⁰ More precisely, silent practices are oriented towards political problems in a way that spectatorship is not.

As the case of listening and silence shows, there is great value in rethinking concepts neglected in political theory. In this article, I make the case that a similar effort to think more systematically about how spectatorship relates to other forms of democratic life is possible and indeed desirable. For example, such an effort could help understanding whether and to what extent the worrying tendency to seek engagement that reinforces our views and shuns differences can be related to the idea of spectatorship. Then, it would be possible to explore ways in which positive forms of spectatorship could be promoted in different contexts to address this problem.⁷¹ Without denying the negative aspects of spectatorship, but in contrast to existing conceptualizations, I shed light on the concept’s agentic dimension, its relational and proactive aspects and the power of careful observation.

Before concluding, in the next section I argue that claiming the democracy enhancing value of spectatorship is also important because of another reason. It invites us to start reconsidering the unduly neglected theatrical metaphor of politics. Despite being rooted in ancient Greek thought and, thus, being as old as democracy itself, this metaphor tends to be overlooked in democratic theory.⁷² This is striking since talk of *political actors* and *publics* is widespread in everyday discussions and academic exchanges on politics. At any rate, current scholarship, rather, by and large focuses on other ancient metaphor to approach democracy, for instance, the *agon* or more modernist ones, for example, the *system*.⁷³

Reconsidering the theatrical metaphor

To date, most analyses using the theatrical metaphor, have investigated, somewhat indirect and from different traditions, how the theatrical side of politics is used to produce political power.⁷⁴ Though valuable, this way of seeing spectacles pose the risk for democratic theory that, as Curato evidences, one overlooks the agency of people populating different publics.⁷⁵ Perhaps unsurprisingly, the theatrical metaphor, in particular, is of paramount importance in the tradition of thinking the citizen as a spectator or, more specifically, as being made into one by the very structure of representative government.⁷⁶ Here, I take a different perspective. Actually, at the very least there is an interesting flipside to the theatrical metaphor: theatre cannot exist without an audience. Understanding the role of spectators in an integrating part to reflecting on the theatrical metaphor and envisaging spaces for democratization of politics.

I build, in particular, on the work of Rancière and his eminently political critique of the theatrical spectacle. Instead of engaging with the extensive production on the topic, here, more modestly, I aim to show that his approach helps us to make a case for the independent value of active spectatorship in democracy. Also, I claim that this long-lived metaphor could be used to originally approach contemporary democratic theory.

Rancière's work is interesting as it endeavours to reconstruct the "network of pre-suppositions" underpinning the question of the spectator. In particular, he points out to what he names "the paradox of the spectator":

there is no theatre without a spectator ... But ... being a spectator is a bad thing for two reasons. First, viewing is the opposite of knowing: the spectator is held before an appearance in a state of ignorance about the process of production of this appearance and about the reality it conceals. Second, it is the opposite of acting: the spectator remains immobile in her seat, passive. To be a spectator is to be separated from both the capacity to know and the power to act.⁷⁷

One conclusion that can be drawn from this diagnosis consists in the rejection of theatrical spectacle framework altogether and abolishing the "illusion and passivity" it fosters "in favour of what it prohibits knowledge and action."⁷⁸ I find this view consistent with the participatory and deliberative democratic approaches. As I discussed above, their criticism of representative politics places an emphasis, instead, on action alone (participation) and on action generating reflection about politics (deliberation). Theorists, thus, envisage ways for citizens to cease being spectators and becoming agents of collective practice. That is, citizens should have the means to act (participation) or to gain critical distance and evaluate political decisions (deliberation). Thus, action and political knowledge are something that citizens acquire in their position as participants or deliberators. That is what Rancière sees as a positional understanding of democratic virtues.

A problem with the positional understanding, however, is that it does not recognize that knowledge and (action) are “collections of fragments,” to use the image of Rancière.⁷⁹ Crucially, citizens know or do something that is politically relevant as they go about their life. That is, citizens think and act in ways that are less straightforwardly political and less sophisticated than what they would do *qua* citizen deliberators or citizen participants but much more widespread in the public. Insisting upon the inability and limitations of lesser forms of knowledge and, confirming, the positional inequality is wrongheaded.⁸⁰ This does not mean, of course, all knowledge and political experience is equal but that “There are no two sorts of intelligence separate by a gulf.”⁸¹ As Rancière argues, one could say that these might be “lesser” forms of political knowledge and action, but they are not “the opposite” of knowledge and action. In sum, taking spectatorship seriously enables us to see that democracy should be understood also as a way to deal with the ordinary ways of thinking about politics and living in a democratic society and not only or mainly as a matter of bridging the former experience, on the one hand, and, on the other, the not-so-ordinary experiences of deliberation and participation.

A related point concerns theorists’ take on the citizenry. Arguably, democratic theorists today are wary of grand theories. That is, they are beware of accounts wanting “to explain to their audience the truth of social relations,” in the words of Rancière. Nevertheless, current theorizing seems to hold the idea that citizens will know what is to be done as long as they are given the right space to participate and/or deliberate. Going back to theatrical metaphor as interpreted by Rancière I argue that that resembles the pedagogical attitude of theatrical reformers that expect that “perhaps the [spectator] will know what is to be done, as long as the performance draws them out of their passive attitude and transform them into active participants in a shared world.”⁸² The “gulf” separating activity from passivity, understanding from ignorance needs to be bridged. But this desire to abolish the distance creates it. Distance and difference are normal conditions of any communication, particularly democratic and we should deal with it carefully. This distance thrives on the distinction between the passive spectator and the active actor, this equates to an “*a priori* distribution of the positions and capacity and incapacities attached” to them, they are “embodied allegories of inequality.”⁸³ “[V]iewing is an action that conflicts or transform this distribution of position.”⁸⁴ The citizen *qua* seeing spectator is not doing nothing, she is making sense of the world. Spectatorship, at a minimum, invites us to reflect on the idea that citizens in their everyday life, not only in their position as deliberators or participants, lay at the centre of democracy.

For this reason it is fundamental to acknowledge that spectatorship is not a monolithic, uniformly negative state in which citizens are relegated. “Being a spectator is not some passive condition that we should transform into activity. It is our normal situation.”⁸⁵ As I tried to show, spectatorship is an integrating part of democratic life and it can take forms that are more or less desirable for democracy. Drawing this distinction is vital to refine our understanding of spectatorship and start understanding its place in democracy.

Conclusions

Spectatorship has long been understood as a problem for democratic life. I have reviewed the many reasons why this viewpoint is essentially correct, but I have also argued that it is still possible to envisage positive forms of spectatorship. The act of spectating is too widespread in our democracies to conceive of this phenomenon

only as a negative one. In doing that, I have questioned the simplistic dichotomy between the passive spectator and the active actor. I have, thus, characterized positive forms of spectatorship as those that occur when citizens show an interest in one or more political problems and, together with others, strive to understand them better. If spectatorship is seen as a demeaning form of political life, we are overlooking the opportunity to foster democratically enhancing spectatorship wherever it is possible and appropriate to do so. I have reconsidered the theatrical metaphor of politics to show that a proper understanding of spectatorship can help theory building about the democratization of our societies.

Although positive spectatorship has an evident normative appeal, further work is necessary to establish how it could serve the desirable normative goals of democracies.⁸⁶ Future theoretical analyses could further refine the concepts I presented. Also, the three characteristics of positive spectatorship I introduced (or the ones typical of traditional spectatorship) could be the bases to empirically investigate this phenomenon. Towards this end, quantitative and qualitative research methods from experiments with participants in different spectatorial contexts, to surveys, interviews, focus groups and real-life observations could be envisaged. Plausibly, a complex picture might emerge with citizens behaviours varying within and across different contexts. Empirical research is necessary to understand this phenomenon and its drivers and how positive spectatorship relates to democratic life at large.

As we will come to better understand the role that positive spectatorship might play in forging a vibrant democratic society, the very idea I label as “positive spectatorship” might be found insufficiently nuanced a way to capture all that which occurs in this context. Here, however, I have tried to show that the dominant negative understanding of the concept is far from being the only possible one and starting to systematically research the democratic potential of spectatorship might contribute envisaging new spaces for democratizing our societies.

Notes

1. As explained by Gerbaudo, “The Indignant Citizen.”
2. As showed, for example, by Galston, “Populist Resentment, Elitist Arrogance.”
3. Dalton, “Citizenship Norms.”
4. Andersen and Torpe, “The Concept of Spectator”; Maleki and Hendriks, “The Relationship Between Cultural Values and Models of Democracy.”
5. Amnå and Ekman, “Standby Citizens”; see also Smith, *Democratic Innovations*, 113–15.
6. Gray, “Mapping Silent Citizenship,” 474.
7. Achen and Bartels, *Democracy for Realists*.
8. Illés and Körösenyi, “From the Theater to the Hippodrome.”
9. See Maloy, *Democratic Statecraft*.
10. Hooghe et al., “A Comparative Analysis of ‘Good Citizenship.’”
11. Fitzgerald, “Is There a Role for Spectators,” 302.
12. Gray, “Mapping Silent Citizenship,” 476.
13. Pateman, *Participation and Democratic Theory*.
14. Bachrach and Botwinick, *Power and Empowerment*.
15. Gould, *Rethinking Democracy*.
16. Barber, *Strong Democracy*.
17. Gutmann and Thompson, *Why Deliberative Democracy*, 60.
18. Niemeyer, “Deliberation in the Wilderness,” 325.
19. Fung, “Varieties of Participation,” 68.
20. See Landmore, review of “The Eyes of the People.”

21. Dobson, *Listening for Democracy*.
22. Hendriks, "Democratic Innovation Beyond Deliberative Reflection."
23. Hendriks, "Unraveling the New Plebiscitary Democracy."
24. Green, *The Eyes of the People*, 6.
25. *Ibid.*, 4.
26. *Ibid.*, 32.
27. *Ibid.*, 6.
28. E.g. Parvin, "Democracy Without Participation."
29. See also Dobson, *Listening for Democracy*.
30. Cf. Chambers, "Truth, Deliberative Democracy and the Virtues of Accuracy."
31. Yar, "From Actor to Spectator," 14.
32. *Ibid.*, 17.
33. Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*.
34. Zerrilli, "We Feel Our Freedom," 179.
35. Lenderman, "The Actor Does Not Judge," 730.
36. *Ibid.*, 731.
37. Marden, *The Authoritarian Interlude*, 6.
38. Battistoni et al., "Benjamin Barber and the Practice of Political Theory," 2.
39. E.g. Bächtiger and Hangartner, "When Deliberative Theory Meets"; Bächtiger and Parkinson, *Mapping and Measuring Deliberation*.
40. Morrell, "Listening and Deliberation." See Bickford, *The Dissonance of Democracy*. However, recently this is changing see e.g. Dobson, *Listening for Democracy*; Scudder, *Beyond Empathy and Inclusion*.
41. Dryzek et al., "The Crisis of Democracy."
42. Manin, *The Principles of Representative Government*.
43. Keane, *Monitory Democracy*.
44. Rosanvallon, *Counter-democracy*.
45. Dobson, *Listening for Democracy*, 19.
46. Cf. Moe, "Distributed Readiness Citizenship."
47. Goodin and Niemeyer, "When Does Deliberation Begin?"; Dahl, *On Democracy*.
48. Prescott-Couch, "Deliberation Through Misrepresentation?" 1.
49. Mansbridge and Flaster, "The Cultural Politics of Everyday Discourse."
50. Dallmayr, *Democracy to Come*.
51. Bickford, *The Dissonance of Democracy*, 173.
52. Wolfsfeld et al., *Political Information Repertoires*.
53. Galston, "Political Knowledge, Political Education."
54. Kölln, "Political Sophistication."
55. Elkin and Soltan, *Citizen Competence and Democratic Institutions*.
56. E.g. Beausoleil, "Listening Obliquely."
57. Dobson, *Listening for Democracy*.
58. Scudder, *Beyond Empathy and Inclusion*.
59. Scudder, "Measuring Democratic Listening."
60. Hendriks et al., *Listening in Polarised Controversies*.
61. E.g. Mouffe, *Agonistic*.
62. E.g. Stoehrel, "The Regime's Worst Nightmare."
63. E.g. Mendonça et al., "More than Words."
64. E.g. Edelman, *Constructing the Political Spectacle*.
65. Ferguson, "Silence: A Politics."
66. See Vieira et al., "The Nature of Silence"; Vieira, "Representing Silence in Politics"; Vieira, "Silence in Political Theory and Practice."
67. See Dingli and Cooke, "Political Silence"; Rollo, "Democratic Silence."
68. Gray, "Towards a Democratic Theory."
69. Jungkunz, "The Promise of Democratic Silences."
70. See also Teo, "Silent Citizenship"; Hatzisavvidou, "Disturbing Binaries."
71. E.g. Mutz, *Hearing the Other Side*.
72. See Halpern, "Theater as a Democratic Thought"; Stern, *Philosophy and Theater*.
73. E.g. Mouffe, *On the Political*; Parkinson and Mansbridge, *Deliberative Systems*.

74. See Apter, “Politics as Theater.”
75. Curato, *Democracy in a Time of Misery*.
76. Wiles, *Theater and Citizenship*; Green, “Analyzing Legislative Performance.”
77. Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 2.
78. *Ibid.*, 2–3.
79. *Ibid.*, 9.
80. See also Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*.
81. Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 10.
82. *Ibid.*, 11.
83. *Ibid.*, 49.
84. *Ibid.*, 13.
85. *Ibid.*, 17.
86. See e.g. Parkinson and Mansbridge, *Deliberative Systems*.

Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to Sofie Marien and all the members of the Democratic Innovations & Legitimacy Research Group for their valuable support and for our discussions. I am also grateful to John Dryzek, Markus Holdo, and Graham Smith, for their thoughtful comments on earlier drafts of this paper. Thank you to Giulia Cragnolini for discussing extensively some of the topics in this paper and to colleagues at the Center on Social Movement Studies in Florence.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the European Research Council [grant number 759736].

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